SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Serious youth violence

While crime has fallen rapidly over the last 20 years[i], serious youth violence (hereafter referred to as SYV) is a growing concern in England and Wales. SYV – defined by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) as 'any drug, robbery or violence against the person offence that has a gravity score of five of more' – has been rising with figures showing that both perpetrators and victims of these offences are getting younger[ii]. Indeed, despite a substantial reduction in violent crime since the mid-1990s, levels of serious violence between children and young people (hereafter referred to as children in line with the UNCRC definition of a child[iii]) remains 'stubbornly high'[iv]. The recent increase in levels of SYV is reflected in the rising economic and social cost of SYV. According to the Youth Violence Commission Final Report[v], SYV in England and Wales generated a total economic and social cost of £1.3 billion in 2018/19; a rise of over 50 per cent since 2014/15.

It has been argued that the proportional rise in SYV is a result of the diversion and subsequent reduction of children in the youth justice system with lower-level needs and less entrenched offending[vi]. This has resulted in those children 'left behind'[vii] in the system being typically more vulnerable and disadvantaged, with more complex needs and disproportionate adverse childhood experiences (hereafter referred to as ACEs)[viii]. Since the mid-1990s, research has consistently found that a significant proportion of children in the justice system have experienced ACEs[ix]. However, as noted by the Youth Violence Commission, it is only in the last few years that ACEs have become part of the 'mainstream conversation' about SYV[x].

1.2 Adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed practice

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)[xi] , ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood. ACEs include, for example: experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing domestic violence; bereavement; substance misuse within the family; mental health problems within the family; parental separation; or having a family member in prison. The *CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study* originated in Southern California in the late 1990s. To this day, this study remains one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect and household challenges and later-life health and well-being. The original study used a 10-point scale[xii] to investigate the prevalence of three main types of ACEs[xiii] **(see Figure 1 overleaf)**.

ACEs have been shown to have lasting, negative effects on health, well-being, and opportunity. They have also been shown to have an impact on the likelihood of both future violence perpetration and victimisation[xiv]. There has been a growing awareness in recent years of the importance of being trauma-informed when dealing with children who have a history of ACEs. This is especially the case with those agencies who work with justice-involved children[xv].

Being trauma-informed means recognising and acknowledging the impact that ACEs can have on an individual and providing appropriate support to that person. In essence, a trauma-informed approach necessitates a change of perspective from 'What's wrong with you?' to 'What happened to you?'[xvi]. As one of the practitioner's guides from the *Beyond Youth Custody* programme summarises[xvii]:

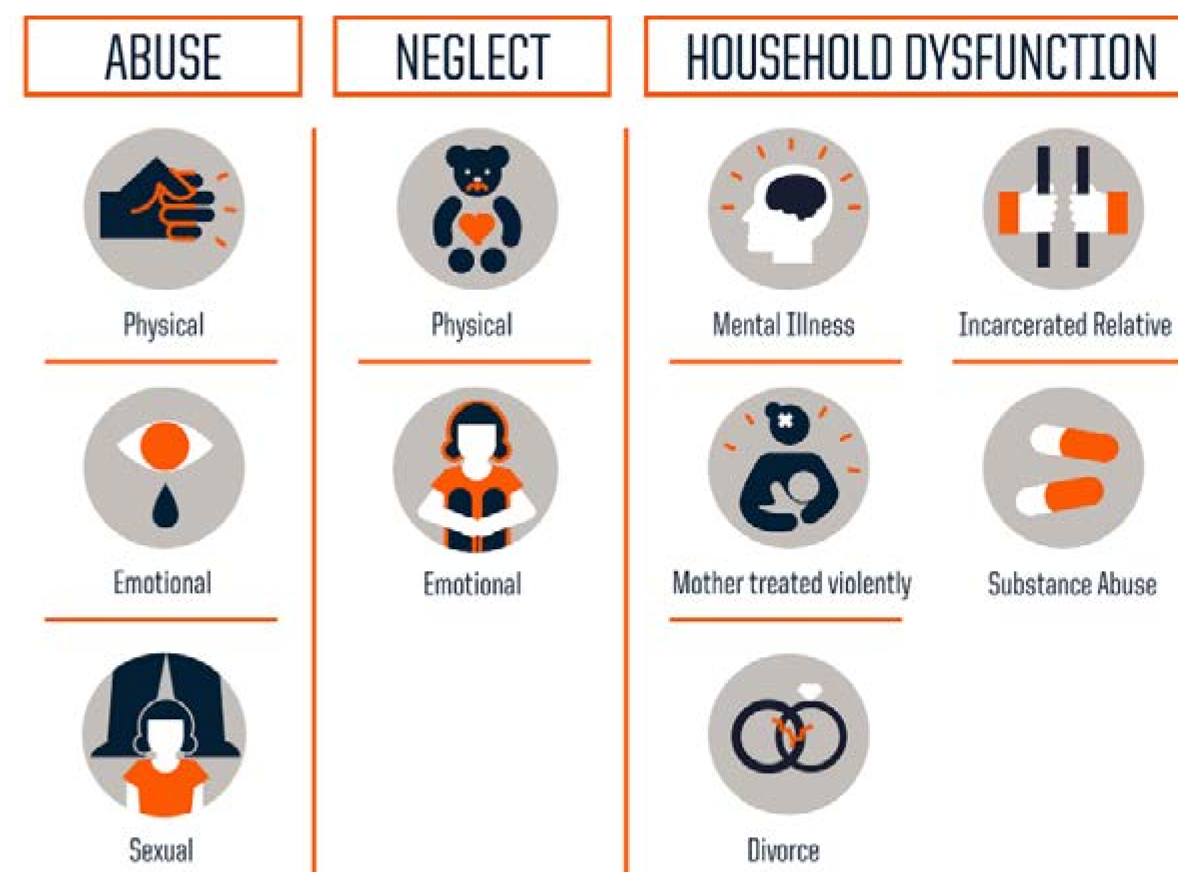

Figure 1: Types of ACEs

"Trauma-informed practice may involve awareness raising and training, the provision of safe environments, reducing the scope for re-traumatisation and the coordination of provision designed to increase resilience and support. Trauma-informed approaches can be thought of as incorporating three key elements: an understanding of the prevalence of trauma; recognition of the effects of trauma both on those affected and on those who work with them; … and the design of services which are informed by this knowledge"

1.3 Youth participation

Alongside the current focus on SYV, ACEs and trauma-informed practice, is the growing call for the participation of justice-involved children in the development of youth justice policy and practice. Participatory working is fundamental to the principle of Child First. Indeed, in *Positive Youth Justice: Child First, Offenders Second*, 'children are part of the solution, not part of the problem'[xviii]. Research evidence indicates that when participation, engagement and inclusion processes are co-created between children and practitioners, this can produce effective practice relationships[xix]. Indeed, the Greater Manchester Youth Justice University Partnership[xx] successfully engaged justice-involve children in a participatory action research study that resulted in the co-production of a framework of principles termed 'Participatory Youth Practice' (PYP)[xxi]. The PYP framework represents a formative step in the process of creating a justice system that respects and acknowledges children's rights and enables them to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes.

When it comes to policy, in 2016, the YJB published their *Participation Strategy: Giving young people a voice in youth justice*[xxii]. In line with Article 12 of the UNCRC[xxiii], the strategy commits to 'embedding young people's participation' at all stages of the YJS and giving young people much more say in youth justice decisions that affect them[xxiv]. According to the strategy, participation is 'an active, informed and voluntary process where they [children] are able to express views and make decisions on issues that affect them'[xxv]. More recently, YJB policy has consistently reflected a commitment to participatory practice. For example, the revised *Standards for children in the youth justice system*[xxvi] directs that the planning of all work must be undertaken in participation with the child and their family. Similarly, in the *YJB's Business Plan for 2020-2021*, it is stated that the 'experiences of children and the voice they bring is paramount to all that we do'[xxvii].

1.4 Research objectives

Responding to SYV is a key priority area for the YJB. Indeed, one of the five strategic objectives in the YJB's *Business Plan for 2020-2021* is to see a 'reduction in serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation'[xxviii]. Through the SYV pathfinder projects the YJB wants to develop our understanding of the drivers of SYV. To this end, this research aims to bring together the four areas outlined above – SYV, ACEs, trauma-informed practice, and youth participation – to investigate the complex relationship between SYV and ACEs. By working in close collaboration with justice-involved children and youth justice workers in Manchester, this research aims to meet the following five objectives.

RO1: To gauge the nature and prevalence of ACEs among justice-involved children in Manchester.

RO2: To explore children's own articulations of the causes and drivers of SYV.

RO3: To develop a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between SYV and ACEs.

RO4: To explore children's experiences of current youth justice practice, in particular their experiences of trauma-informed practice.

RO5: To co-create a resource to be used by justice-involved children, youth justice professionals, and policymakers.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

This research was commissioned by Manchester City Council's Youth Justice Service and funded through the Youth Justice Board's *Reducing Serious Youth Violence (Reference Group) Pathfinder* programme. It was conducted over a 15-month period between January 2020 and March 2021. The research was originally a 12-month study (due to be completed in December 2020) but due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns and restrictions, a three-month extension was agreed to enable the research team to undertake the necessary fieldwork and data collection (see Chapter 3). Ethical approval for the research was granted by Manchester Metropolitan University's Arts and Humanities Research Ethics and Governance Committee.

To meet the five research objectives (RO1 to RO5), a mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative, qualitative, and participatory elements was adopted. The quantitative element of the research focussed on data collected using a bespoke ACEs assessment tool that was developed specifically for the project. The qualitative element had two strands: semi-structured interviews with youth justice workers and narrative interviews with justice-involved children. The participatory element of the research was a series of creative workshops involving justice-involved children, the research team, drama therapists and a sports coach. Each of these elements will be discussed in turn.

2.2 The ACEs assessment tool

To enable the research to meet the first research objective it was necessary to assess the prevalence and nature of ACEs among justice-involved children in Manchester. To achieve this, an ACEs assessment tool was developed in partnership with colleagues at Manchester Youth Justice. The tool itself (**see Figure 2 overleaf**) was based largely on the 10-point scale used in the original *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study* that was conducted in Southern California in the late 1990s[xxix].

Between 11/1/20 and 10/1/21, a total of 200 children were assessed using the ACEs assessment tool. The assessments were undertaken by youth justice workers, on behalf of the young people on their caseload. The workers used the information routinely collected for AssetPlus to complete the ACEs tool. Crucially, the ACEs tool was a 'live' document that could be updated as and when a youth justice worker found out more information about a child. This was a particularly important feature as it allowed for a more accurate assessment of ACEs. As will be discussed in the next chapter (**see Section 3.4.2**), it can often take a significant period of time to build a trusted enough relationship for a child to start to disclose ACEs. With this in mind, it was essential that the ACEs tool was not simply completed at the initial assessment point. At the end of the 12-month data collection period, the ACEs assessment tool data was exported to *IBM-SPSS Statistics* for analysis[xxx].

The ACEs assessment tool was only completed for those children who were open cases between 11/1/20 and 10/1/21. In this instance, this not only meant new cases that started between these two dates, but also those cases that had started before 11/1/20 but finished between the two dates. Data provided by Manchester Youth Justice showed that between 11/1/20 and 10/1/21 there were a total of 424 open cases, thus indicating that the ACEs assessment tool was completed for just under half (47 per cent) of all the available open cases.

ACEs Trauma Portfolio
Total Number of 'Traditional' ACEs *(associated with the case)* → **0**

Case ID	Chronology	Offence Details
CV ID Numver: Age: Court Order Team Locality: Gender: Ethnicity:	Date of Screening:	

ACEs Intelligence Portfolio

Source of Information: Description:	Emotional Abuse No	Mental Illness within the Family No	Source of Information: Description:
Source of Information: Description:	Physical Abuse No	Family Member in / Been in Prison No	Source of Information: Description:
Source of Information: Description:	Sexual Abuse No	Parental Separation / Loss No	Source of Information: Description:
Source of Information: Description:	Emotional Neglect No	Substance Use by Family No	Source of Information: Description:
Source of Information: Description:	Physical Neglect No	Witnessed Domestic Violence No	Source of Information: Description:

Further Notable Information:	Prevalence	Source of Information	Description
	No Known Prevalence		
	No Known Prevalence		
	No Known Prevalence		

Figure 2: The ACEs assessment tool

		All open cases (n=424)	ACEs assessment cases (n=200)
Age	Under 15	18%	10%
	15	19%	14%
	16	28%	27%
	17	31%	35%
	18	4%	14%
Gender	Male	90%	90%
	Female	10%	10%
Ethnicity	White	55%	54%
	Black	19%	22%
	Mixed	15%	16%
	Asian	7%	6%
	Other	4%	2%
SYV offence	Yes	44%	49%
	No	56%	51%

Table 1: Comparison of all open cases and ACEs assessment cases

To check that those children for whom an ACEs assessment was completed were representative of all open cases during the data collection period, a comparison was made between all of the open cases and the ACEs assessment cases. As can be seen (**see Table 1 above**), the sample of children who had an ACEs assessment carried out were broadly representative (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, committed a SYV offence) of all of the cases that were open between 11/1/20 and 10/1/21. This was particularly important in relation to the proportion of children who had committed a SYV offence as this study did not want to over represent the prevalence of ACEs in the Manchester youth justice cohort (**see Section 3.1.1**).

2.3 The qualitative interviews

2.3.1 Interviews with youth justice workers

To meet the third research objective – 'to develop a more in-depth understanding of the links between ACEs and SYV' – semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a range of youth justice workers. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, all of the interviews were undertaken remotely using MS Teams rather than face-to-face as originally planned. During June and July 2020, 10 interviews were undertaken with youth justice workers. In addition, interviews were undertaken with two drama therapists from the emotional trauma support team at One Education (**www.oneeducation.co.uk**). As will be discussed later in the report (**see Section 3.4.4.**), these therapists have been commissioned by Manchester Youth Justice Service (part-time for three days a week) to deliver clinical interventions to justice-involved children in Manchester. In total, 12 interviews were undertaken. These ranged in length from 54 to 109 minutes. All of the interviews were digitally recorded, fully transcribed, and analysed in NVivo[xxxi] using template analysis[xxxii].

2.3.2 Narrative interviews with justice-involved children

There is a growing body of research around life stories and narratives. The components of this work include life narratives, thought to be constructed to convey meaningful perceptions of self, identity, and reality. It is therefore likely that concepts of identity are embedded within narrative discourse[xxxiii]. Narrative identity is the story of the self that weaves together the reconstructed past, the perceived present, and the imagined future, providing an individual with a sense of unity and meaning[xxxiv].

Narratives are not simply converging measures of identity; narratives are constitutive of identity, in that how we make sense of our experiences and who we perceive ourselves to be are reciprocally related across development[xxxv]. Life narratives are unique because they show the relationship between life events and the development of the storyteller's personality, including how the individual makes life decisions according to central values[xxxvi]. A person's internalised and evolving life story integrates the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose[xxxvii]. The McAdams Life Story Interview[xxxviii] is a methodological concept which helps us to understand narrative identity. It is a tool that has been widely used in psychology that emphasises narrative and the storied nature of human conduct. Narratives allow researchers to ethically and meaningfully understand lived experiences in context[xxxix]. Because of this, the McAdams Life Story approach is particularly suited to this research with its focus on ACEs and their relationship to SYV. Furthermore, it was felt that the McAdams approach would better enable the research to meet the research objectives than a more traditional semi-structured interview.

The research team are very experienced in delivering narrative interviews with justice-involved children[xl]. However, due to the COVID-19 restrictions during the second lockdown, the research team were not able to undertake these interviews as originally planned.

To ensure that justice-involved children could still be interviewed it was decided that the research team would train youth justice workers to deliver the interviews on our behalf. The training was promoted to workers and 14 signed-up. The general feeling was that learning these interviewing skills would help their personal development and potentially improve their practice. In July 2020, a two-hour training session on narrative interviewing was delivered via MS Teams to 14 youth justice workers. To give the workers the skills and confidence to deliver the interviews on our behalf, the training included the underlying theory behind the McAdams Life Story Interview method, how to deliver the method in practice, a Q&A around the interview guide, and a discussion around ethics and informed consent. Ongoing post-training support was offered to all of the workers.

Between, July 2020 and January 2021, a total of nine narrative interviews were carried out by youth justice workers (**see Table 2 below**). Despite the workers engaging with many children during this period, a large proportion of the children either did not want to be interviewed, did not want to have their interview recorded, and/or did not want to partake in the interview remotely. This final issue was exacerbated by the COVID-19 restrictions that limited the amount and type of face-to-face contact that workers could have with the children on their caseload. As a result of these factors, many children did not consent to be interviewed. The nine interviews that were undertaken were all transcribed and analysed thematically in NVivo using template analysis[xli].

ID	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Offence	ACEs
CH1	17	Male	White	Section 18 GBH	9
CH2	17	Male	White	Robbery	6
CH3	17	Male	Mixed	Robbery and Section 18 Wounding	6
CH4	17	Male	Black	Robbery and Possession of a Firearm	6
CH5	17	Male	White	Section 18 GBH & Attempted Kidnapping	5
CH6	15	Male	Mixed	Attempted Section 18 Assault	8
CH7	15	Male	White	Possession of a Knife and Pubic Order	N/K[1]
CH8	17	Male	Black	Violent Disorder	0
CH9	17	Male	White	Possession of a Knife	6

Table 2: Narrative interview participants

1 An ACEs assessment tool was not completed for this child.

2.4 The participatory workshops

2.4.1 Designing the workshops

The research team have considerable experience of using participatory research methods to work with children in the youth justice system. Our work across the Greater Manchester region has led to transformative action in practice[xlii], demonstrated through the co-creation with justice-involved children of the PYP framework **(see Section 1.3)**. PYP is now embedded into youth justice service provision and is producing positive outcomes for children[xliii]. Underpinned by the PYP framework, the research team set about organising the participatory workshops. Between November 2020 and March 2021 four participatory workshops were delivered. Due to COVID-19 and the social distancing restrictions, the first and second workshops were held at Manchester Metropolitan University's Platt Lane Sports Complex. These facilities were COVID-19 secure and, importantly, enabled us to incorporate sport-based activities into workshops. The third and fourth workshops were conducted online via MS Teams.

With our youth justice colleagues, the team identified and subsequently invited children who, at the time of the project, were working with the Manchester Youth Justice services for SYV offences. Using the participatory principle of the adult facilitator acting in a 'support role'[xliv], the team identified professional facilitators for these workshops. Working very closely with three drama therapists from One Education **(www.oneeducation.co.uk)** (two of whom are commissioned by Manchester Youth Justice – **see Section 3.4.4**) and a professional sports coach from Manchester Metropolitan University, the research team designed and delivered the first two participatory workshops. This is the first time in the UK that drama therapy and sport have been used together with justice-involved children.

The drama therapy element of the first and second workshops was storytelling. The drama therapists often use storytelling as a technique in their work. Given the sensitive nature of the research – i.e. SYV and ACEs – the decision was taken use storytelling techniques in the participatory workshops, specifically the 6-Part Story Method (6PSM)[xlv]. The 6PSM is an approach in which a patient, in a therapeutic setting, creates a story which is used to elicit further discussion[xlvi]. Storytelling is viewed as an effective approach to concentrate on fictional, third-person accounts and provide metaphors rather than a description of actual lived events[xlvii]. This was felt to be a particularly appropriate method for discussing the issue of ACEs and being a perpetrator and/or victim of SYV. As one of the drama therapists noted: 'The six-part story method creates distance between the young person and the material being explored and therefore provides safety to work with trauma and painful narratives'. The six elements of the 6PSM[xlviii] involve creating:

1. A main character in some setting
2. A task for the main character
3. Obstacles in the main character's way
4. Things that help the main character
5. The climax or main action of the story
6. The consequences or aftermath of the story

Based on our previous research experience the team decided that in addition to the storytelling, sporting activities would be incorporated into the workshops to engage the children, specifically basic rugby skills. Within a contemporary UK context, it is well documented that sport in general is readily accepted as a tool for engaging children, in particular boys already involved in, or at risk of involvement in criminality and violence[xlix]. The research team have used sport in a number of previous research projects working with justice-involved children – including the co-creation of the PYP framework[l] – and are currently involved in a large Comic Relief funded project offering rugby to justice-involved children across Greater Manchester. Given this project's success, and the skills and expertise of our professional sports coach in engaging children with the sport, the team invited him to take part in designing and delivering the workshops. To further engage the children, each child who attended the workshops received three AQA qualifications. These were for 'group work', 'basic rugby skills' and 'strength and conditioning activities'.

2.4.2 Delivering the workshops

The first and second workshops (undertaken in November and December 2020) commenced mid-morning with some very informal sporting activities run by the sports coach. This was followed by a discussion about who everyone was, the aims of the project and the purpose of the workshop. After introductions, everyone embarked on some 'ice-breaker' activities and some more sporting activities. The group then sat in a horseshoe shape to begin the storytelling process. The drama therapists explained the storytelling approach and how they would support the children in producing their story. In both workshops, the storytelling was divided into two one-hour sessions with a lunch break in the middle. The first session was for the creation of the six-part story. Working through the six elements of the 6PSM described above, the children were encouraged and supported to develop their story. Rather than develop a linear story, they were presented with the ending of the story first: a child had been the victim of a serious violent assault. Throughout the storytelling process, one of drama therapists illustrated the various parts of the story. These illustrations were produced in parallel with the storytelling and it was observed that they provided the children with a focal point when they did not want to make eye contact with either the research team or each other.

Following lunch, the second session was used to discuss the story with the children. The story was used as a resource to elicit further discussion[li] about the children's own experiences and views of SYV. This included, for example, discussions as to why children might become involved in SYV, the impact of perpetrating a SYV offence, and their experiences of ACEs. After each of the two sessions, the children were also actively encouraged to take part in the sporting activities run by the sports coach so that they could obtain their AQAs. It was observed that taking part in the sporting activities provided the children with a release from the sensitive material that constituted the six-part stories. The first and second workshops ended with a reflexive discussion with the children about their involvement in the workshop and checking-in with them to make sure that they were not adversely affected by the workshops. It was emphasised to the children that they could contact the drama therapists and/or their youth justice worker if they needed to speak to anyone about the issues and experiences that had been raised in the workshops.

2.4.3 Workshop participants

Prior to the workshops, the research team provided promotional materials to the youth justice workers so that they could gauge the interest of the children they work with. Eight children showed an interest in the first workshop and were signed-up by their youth justice worker to attend. However, on the day, only five attended (**see Table 3 overleaf**). This is despite the research team arranging taxis to take the children to and from the workshop. Eight children were also signed-up to attend the second workshop. However, on this occasion, only two attended on the day (**see Table 4 overleaf**).

ID	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Offence	ACEs
Participant 1	18	Male	White	Section 18 GBH	9
Participant 2	16	Male	White	Robbery	6
Participant 3	17	Male	Mixed	Possession of a Knife	5
Participant 4	16	Male	Black	Robbery and Possession of a Knife	6
Participant 5	16	Male	White	Section 18 GBH and False imprisonment	5

Table 3: Workshop 1 participants

ID	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Offence	ACEs
Participant 1	14	Male	White	Assault	3
Participant 2	18	Male	Mixed	Robbery	6

Table 4: Workshop 2 participants

2.4.4 The six-part stories

The six-part stories from the first two workshops have been used to co-create a short animation for justice-involved children, youth justice professionals, and policy-makers (**see Section 2.4.5**). With this in mind, only brief overviews of the stories are provided below.

Story 1:

Paul, aged 15, is being offered £2,000 to rob someone by an older who he looks up to. Paul accepts the task because he wants the money, and he sees it as a way to increase his reputation and status. Paul goes to the local park at 9pm and sees his victim, Jack who is 16 years old. Paul does not know Jack. Paul, who is carrying a knife, approaches Jack and asks for his phone. Jack refuses to hand it over and hits Paul. Paul was not expecting Jack to fight back and he retaliates by stabbing him in the shoulder. When Jack continues to fight back, Paul stabs him again, this time in the leg. Jack still is not going down, so Paul stabs him in the head and this time Jack falls to the ground. A dog walker in the park has seen the fight and called the police. The police arrive and Jack gets medical attention. Although Paul ends up being convicted of a Section 18 assault, he gets the money and his reputation is increased.

Story 2:

James and his best friend Liam, both aged 20, have been paid by James' family to kidnap and assault a 15-year old called Joe. James' family have a problem with Joe. This is not the first time that James and Liam have kidnapped someone. To help them with the kidnapping, they go to a local shop and recruit two randoms. The randoms are each paid £10,000 by James' family. Joe is kidnapped, put in the boot of a stolen car, and driven to the moors. Once there, the men drag Joe out of the boot and 'absolutely batter him'. They leave him on the moors and drive back to Manchester. One of Joe's family calls the police to say he has gone missing. After a search, the Police find Joe. He has a bleed on the brain and is unresponsive. He is taken by ambulance to hospital where he remains in intensive care for a week.

2.4.5 Analysing the emergent themes from the first two workshops

The discussions from the two workshops were digitally recorded and transcribed. Other documentation in the form of flip-chart exercises and the illustrations produced by the drama therapist were also collated to assist with the analysis process. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown in December 2020 and the subsequent challenges of arranging to meet with the children, the initial stage of data analysis was completed by the research team, rather than in partnership with the children as originally planned[lii]. The materials from the two workshops were analysed thematically[liii] and a set of emergent themes identified.

The second stage of the analysis took place approximately three months after the original workshops. During this time, and with the support of our youth justice colleagues, the research team remained in touch with the participants from the first two workshops. They were all invited to partake in a third workshop to help analyse the findings from the first two workshops. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 and the restrictions during the third lockdown, the third workshop had to be delivered remotely. Due to evolving circumstances that some of the children found themselves in and/or a reluctance to take part remotely, the majority of children turned down the invitation to participate in this stage of the project. Only one child from the first workshop agreed to be involved in the third workshop.

Using MS Teams, the research team met with him and shared the emergent themes. It was heavily emphasised that these themes were just for consolidation, and open to challenge and change. Working together with the team, he ranked the themes in order of importance, while changing and challenging some of them. The full set of emergent themes are presented in the short animation that has been produced (**mmu.ac.uk/mcys/current-research--activities/serious-youth-violence**). Similar to the positive outcomes of using methods such as Photovoice[liv], the research team wanted to use animation and narration to provide the children with an opportunity to personalise their stories and experiences. In a fourth workshop, the research team worked with a professional animator to animate the two stories created by the children in the first two workshops, with the aim being to produce a tangible resource to be used by justice-involved children, youth justice professionals, and policy-makers.

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

3.1 Serious youth violence

3.1.1 Level and type of serious youth violence

> There has always been some level of serious youth violence [in Manchester] but it certainly seems that there is more now. (Youth justice worker 3)

As already mentioned (**see Section 1.1**), the YJB define SYV as 'any drug, robbery or violence against the person offence that has a gravity score of five of more'. While overall crime continues to fall, SYV has been rising in England and Wales with figures showing that both perpetrators and victims of these offences are getting younger, with self-reported violence peaking at age 15[lv]. In July 2019, the YJB released a SYV toolkit that presented data on all proven offences[lvi] committed by children. The toolkit presented data for the 13 Youth Justice Service teams that form the SYV Reference Group, of which Manchester is one[lvii]. The provisional data for Manchester showed that the number of SYV offences in Manchester has risen by over 200 per cent between 2016/17 and 2018/19. Alongside this, the rate of SYV (per 10,000 10 to 17-year olds in the general population) has risen dramatically in Manchester in the past year, with Manchester having the highest rate of SYV in 2018/19 within the Reference Group. Indeed, a fifth of all Manchester offences in 2018/19 were SYV, with the most common SYV being robbery, followed by violence, and then drugs.

As outlined in the Methodology (**see Table 1, Section 2.2**), the findings from the ACEs assessment tool showed that almost exactly half (n=99) of the 200 children who were assessed between 11/1/20 and 10/1/21 had committed an SYV offence[lviii]. The high proportion of SYV cases was also highlighted in the interviews with youth justice workers.

> **[I[1]: What percentage of your caseload right now are SYV?]** I think at least 40 per cent. I'm trying to work it out. … Yes, 40 or 50 per cent, like half. (Youth justice worker 9)

In addition to the high levels of SYV, a number of workers commented on the fact that more first time entrants (FTEs) appeared to be coming into the youth justice system with SYV offences, as opposed to the more minor offences that were previously associated with FTEs.

> Back in the day, the first-time offence would be something quite minor. These days, you're getting really, really young people … coming through the system for the first time with really serious offences [like] kidnap. (Youth justice worker 1)

> **[I: Are you getting many first-time entrants with robberies?]** Yes, I can think of at least two on my caseload who are first time robberies. (Youth justice worker 9)

The observation that more FTEs appear to be coming into the youth justice system for SYV offences is reflected in the *Youth Justice Statistics 2019/20*[lix]. According to the statistics, the offences that have seen the largest percentage point increases over the last ten years are possession of a weapon offences, drug offences, violence against the person, and robbery.

When it comes to the types of SYV offences that were committed in Manchester, in line with the data from the SYV toolkit, of the 99 assessed children who had committed a SYV offence, over two thirds (n=67) had committed robbery, over a fifth (n=23) a violent offence, and just under a tenth (n=9) a drugs offence. This was reflected in the interviews with youth justice workers.

> I've got quite a few on my caseload … for robberies with an offensive weapon, … [and] Section 18 assaults. (Youth justice worker 9)

> **[I: What are some of the offences that children are presenting with?]** Knives is probably the highest one at the moment. Dealing Class A drugs is creeping up as well. Robbery is [also] high. (Youth justice worker 4)

1 I = Interviewer.

In terms of any differences in SYV in relation to different areas of Manchester, one of the youth justice workers observed that while the south of Manchester appeared to be characterised by robberies, the more ethnically diverse areas in central Manchester appeared to be characterised by territorial violence. This is concerning as Manchester has a long history of using the term 'gang' to label groups of BAME young people[lx]. This has led to the over-policing of certain geographical areas, including the disproportionate use of stop and search tactics[lxi]. Notwithstanding this worker's observation, the analysis of the ACEs assessment tool data revealed that there were no statistically significant differences between ethnicity and prevalence of SYV, or area [lxii]of the city and prevalence of SYV.

3.1.2 Reasons for serious youth violence

The issue of territoriality was highlighted by a number of workers as a key reason for SYV in the city. These 'postcode rivalries' appeared to come to the fore when children had to travel across the city.

> There's a lot of the postcode rivalries. … The whole 'Where are you from?' is a massive factor in Manchester. … I do think that does influence the violence. (Youth justice worker 4)

> Young people quite openly talk to me about feeling cautious or worrying about travelling to certain parts of the city. (Youth justice worker 6)

> One of my young people was passing [through an area] on a bus. He knew he shouldn't have been going through that route, so he was sat on the top deck with his hood on, [but] three people from that area got on the bus and stabbed him. They said 'You're in the wrong area. You shouldn't be here'. (Youth justice worker 4)

Despite these territorial rivalries having existed between some of these areas for many years, one of the workers felt that the current rise in social media use among children was exacerbating existing rivalries through the facilitation of disagreements or 'beef'.

> Territory and areas has always been there, … [but] I just think things are exacerbated through social media. I feel that a lot of the beef is happening because people are chatting on social media, because they can say what they want, and then when they see that person [face-to-face], then we're seeing the violence. (Youth justice worker 7)

The use of social media was also reported as a tool through which fights – often filmed on smart-phones – could be promoted. Both workers and children talked of people uploading footage of fights to YouTube, TikTok or Snapchat[lxiii].

> I had a guy yesterday who was telling me 'I had a fight in Tesco carpark, it's on YouTube, and he showed it to me on Facebook'. (Youth justice worker 3)

The issue of filming fights was also highlighted in the first participatory workshop. When discussing Paul, the lead character in the six-part story, and his previous experiences of humiliating and filming victims, the children stated the following:

> Paul is aware that robberies can happen for a number of reasons. Sometimes it can be to humiliate another young person. He has been involved in these tasks and has stripped victims of their clothes and filmed them. He knows that the stripping is the humiliation, and the victim has to live with that every day, night and day. It will go everywhere. TikTok, Snapchat. There is no coming back from it. It is violation on the highest level.

The idea of the filming being primarily to humiliate the victim/s is an interesting finding. As part of the third participatory workshop, where the emergent themes from the first two workshops were ranked in order of importance, to 'humiliate someone else' and to 'have power over someone else' were the top two most important reasons as to why children perpetrate violent offences. A finding that is reflected in research on those who perpetrate violent offences and robberies[lxiv]. As will be discussed in the following section (**see Section 3.1.3**), the ever present possibility of having robberies and/or fights caught on camera and then uploaded to social media, often resulted in children making the decision to carry a weapon (primarily a knife). While this was principally to protect themselves from being physically hurt, it was also to avoid the potential humiliation of being victimised, having it filmed, and having that film 'go everywhere'. While the vast majority of social media usage among children is unrelated to SYV, there are instances where it is used for retaliatory and humiliation purposes. This has been exacerbated by the growth of smart-phone accessibility among children, which provides an unlimited opportunity for rivals to antagonise each other on a large scale and for a prolonged period of time[lxv]. This arguably leads to cycles of retaliation and posturing among children at risk of SYV[lxvi], and evidence suggests that rival groups are using social media to promote violence and incite harm[lxvii].

As evidenced in the participatory workshops, children appeared to be fully aware of the harm that being victimised could potentially have on their reputation. As noted in the first workshop, if this occurs, 'there is no coming back from it' for the victim[lxviii]. Indeed, the notions of reputation and respect are so important to these children, that they will often perpetrate a SYV offence to either increase their reputation among their peers, or conversely, to avoid losing their reputation. Research has shown that if children fight back against those who have shamed them through victimisation, revenge becomes an act of justice and a reassertion of selfhood and pride[lxix].

> Rather than financial gain, it [committing a robbery] is as much about gaining respect amongst your friends. (Youth justice worker 3)

> **[I: Why do you think respect is so important to these children?]** It's about their own identity. Having a place. If you're disrespected, you don't have a place. Maintaining respect gives them a place within their group. It shows their ranking. (Youth justice worker 5)

As the quotes below highlight, for those children who are victimised, swift retaliation is imperative to avoid a loss of reputation and respect. Indeed, for the child in the second quote, being stabbed outside school appeared to make him angry rather than scared. It is likely that this was due to him being humiliated in front of his peers outside the school gates, and the consequent negative impact this is likely to have had on his reputation and status.

> The young person who committed the stabbing [offence] had been a victim of stabbing himself a couple of months back. (Youth justice worker 3)

> **[I: Where were you stabbed?]** It was outside of school. … They [some boys] were screaming stuff from across the road at me so I ended up approaching them and then they started to push me and circle me. …. **[I: What happened next?]** We were in a fight for a little bit and then one of them grabbed a knife out and stabbed me. … **[I: That sounds like a really scary experience…]** I was mostly just angry. I'm still pretty angry. (Child 7)

Interestingly, during the third participatory workshop, the theme of 'wanting to be someone – status and reputation' was ranked as the second most important reason as to why children might become involved in violent crime. This echoes other research that highlights how violence is often employed to solidify identities of toughness and reputations for violence[lxx]. This issue was highlighted in the first participatory workshop, when the children were discussing Paul's decision to commit the robbery.

> Paul has been tasked with robbing a random by an older. It is an opportunity for him to become someone and if he backs out he will lose all credibility and his reputation. Paul keeps getting asked to do things by the heads and the olders, and he is keen to climb the ranks.

The topic of reputation elicited much discussion in the second participatory workshop. The children in the workshop spoke of children as young as 11 years old 'getting involved in shit to get a name' because 'everybody wants a name for themselves'. The possible relationship between ACEs and an emphasis on status and reputation will be returned to later in this chapter (**see Section 3.3.4**). The children went on talk about how 'some people don't give a shit. They just go out and do all sorts for a reputation'. However, alongside this, they made it very clear that 'reputations can change' and status and respect can be lost. As highlighted above regarding Paul's decision to commit the robbery, backing out would have resulted in him losing 'all credibility and his reputation'. Indeed, when it comes to the consequences of refusing to be involved in a violent offence, the emergent themes from the first two workshops included 'humiliation' and a 'loss of respect – people lose respect for you as an individual'. Importantly, the number one ranked consequence of refusing to be involved in a violent offence was the potential risk of 'becoming the victim' yourself. The children agreed that if this happened, 'there's no point even turning back up to the estate'.

3.1.3 Reasons for carrying a knife

Bearing in mind the reasons for SYV outlined above, it is perhaps less surprising that children are carrying knives and/or other offensive weapons. Indeed, the high prevalence of possession of a knife or other offensive weapon was identified in the ACEs assessment tool data. Out of the 200 children who were assessed, three tenths (n=60) had been charged with 'possession of a knife/bladed article'. As highlighted below, for some children, being armed with a knife made committing crime easier.

> One young man I work with said 'A knife is a very good way of getting what I want without having to say anything'. He would just show his knife and say 'Give me your phone', and the phone would be handed over. So for him, it was a very straightforward quick way of getting what he wanted. (Youth justice worker 6)

However, for the majority, their decision to carry a knife or other weapon/s appeared to be governed by fear of victimisation and, as discussed earlier, humiliation and 'violation on the highest level'.

> They're scared of being attacked. They're scared of being humiliated. … And the knock-on effect is … children are carrying knives and weapons, through fear of other children carrying knives and weapons. (Youth justice worker 7)

> A recent case [of mine] was picked up [by the police] … with an axe in his bag … and a ten-inch knife as well. … What has come out of his case is [that] he doesn't feel safe going from one place to another. (Youth justice worker 2)

The role of fear in a child's decision to carry a knife was repeatedly highlighted by the youth justice workers. Nearly all of the workers interviewed reported children on their caseload carrying knives because they were scared and wanted to be able to protect themselves. This is supported by recent research that found children often start carrying knives to avoid becoming a victim[lxxi]. Other research has found that children view knife-carrying as a legitimate response to potential threats[lxxii]. In this instance, carrying a

knife is constructed as harm prevention and being streetwise. Indeed, to not carry a knife is deemed irresponsible[lxxiii].

> They're very casual about it. … They'll just say 'If I don't carry a knife, I'm just not going to be safe. I'm putting myself in danger. Someone will pull a knife on me'. (Youth justice worker 4)

> I had one young lad who said 'Everybody carries knives nowadays, and if you get into an argument, they'll just whip a knife out. So, I'd rather have one too.' (Youth justice worker 8)

> I do get a lot of them carrying knives. … They say 'Everybody's doing it, … so therefore I'm doing it. If I have a fight with somebody at least I'm tooled. At least I can defend myself.' (Youth justice worker 5)

This view that 'everybody' is carrying a knife was supported by the children in the second participatory workshop. Discussion organically turned to the subject of carrying knives and their views on why children carry knives. As evidenced in the dialogue below:

> I started carrying knives in Year 9. But now you see kids in Year 7, never been in trouble in their lives, carrying a knife because they see other people carrying them. They're thinking 'If they're carrying one, then it must be important for me to carry one'.

> People have different opinions on it. I know people who won't carry a knife at all, because they would rather fight with their fists, but then other people won't leave their house without a knife … out of fear and revenge.

> Or you might carry one because someone you know who has a beef with you is carrying one [and] you just want to use it on him, and that's just how it is.

It would appear that the carrying of a knife or other offensive weapon has become almost normalised among justice-involved children. As noted by a number of the workers, carrying a knife has become a habit for many children.

> Some of them just see it [carrying a knife] as a normal behaviour. Once you get into a routine, it's hard to break. If you're used to carrying a knife, you're not going to not carry a knife are you. (Youth justice worker 10)

> It [a knife] is something that they will just pick up, as if I would pick up a pair of headphones to go out. If they're going out, they'll just pick up a knife. It's so normal to them. (Youth justice worker 4)

Unfortunately, justice-involved children do not appear to fully appreciate the risks associated with carrying a knife. The first risk relates to being an unintended perpetrator or victim of a stabbing, as the situation/confrontation they might find themselves in quickly escalates. In the first six-part story, this was the case for Paul when Jack, his intended victim, did not hand over his phone as requested. The situation quickly escalated to a point where Paul ended up stabbing his victim in the head.

> Paul is carrying a blade and approaches Jack and asks for his phone. Jack refuses to hand it over and slaps Paul. Paul wasn't expecting Jack to be a fighter and he retaliates by stabbing him; first in the shoulder and when Jack fights back, he stabs him again in the leg. Jack still isn't going down, so Paul stabs him in the head. It was one or the other. Paul had no choice. He knows that in these situations it's kill or be killed.

As demonstrated in the quotes below, this inability to think through the implications of carrying a knife was also highlighted by a number of the workers. In their experience, children do not fully appreciate the risks associated with carrying a knife. Not only, in terms of becoming a perpetrator/victim of a stabbing at the time of the offence, but also the risk of being stopped and searched by the police and being found in possession of a weapon. As the final quote below highlights, this is often the case in instances of CCE; an issue that will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter (**see Section 3.3.4**).

> They don't think past carrying that knife. … In their head, it's just there for self-defence. … 'I want to make sure that I've got one in case someone pulls one out on me. It might scare them off and then everything will be okay'. They don't see past that pulling out of the knife. (Youth justice worker 5)

> I've had a few young people through that have been carrying knives. … They've had the knife for protection, but they haven't recognised … the implications of carrying a knife and the risk that it carries for them. (Youth justice worker 10)

> Often, if you're being criminally exploited, the exploiters will tell you to carry a weapon in case anything goes wrong. So, I have had kids disclose that have been given a machete and … the drugs to sell. It [the knife] would come part and parcel. … [But] when kids are getting stop [and] searched, they [the police] are finding drugs and weapons together. (Youth justice worker 4)

The lack of consequential thinking was also discussed by the children in both of the participatory workshops. They spoke of an 'in the moment' mentality towards violence, which is a common feature in psychodynamic approaches to violence[lxxiv], whereby an inability to mentalise[lxxv] and think empathically and rationally within a given situation can lead to incidences of spontaneous and destructive violence. The children in the second participatory workshop talked of how 'you don't think about' the consequences 'when you're a kid. It's only when you start to get older'. This was reflected in the first six-part story about Paul.

> It [the stabbing of Jack] happened on impulse. People either go for it or don't go for it, but if you're going to have a fight, be 100 per cent in it. Paul didn't think it through at the time, that came later. He thinks about the consequences now, but it's after [the stabbing] and that's the regret.

In addition to the 'regret', the children in the first participatory workshop talked of Paul worrying about reprisals following his stabbing of Jack. They said how he would be feeling 'paranoid', 'consumed by fear', and 'alert all of the time'. The issue of reprisals was also discussed in the second participatory workshop. It was felt that being a perpetrator of a SYV offence, particularly a stabbing, made it more likely that you would be a victim of a stabbing yourself at some point; thereby reinforcing the need to carry a knife. As one of the children noted:

> If you stab someone, it's likely that it's going to happen to you. It might not happen the next day or the next week, but at some point in your life, it's probably going to end up coming back on to you. That's why most people nowadays will get about with a knife.

3.2 Adverse childhood experiences

3.2.1 Prevalence of adverse childhood experiences

All of the youth justice workers interviewed for this research noted the high prevalence of ACEs among the children they work with. They noted how rare it was for a child to have only one or two ACEs, with most children having many more.

> Looking at my cases, … most of them have more than four or five individual trauma. (Youth justice worker 6)

> I think I've had one [child] with two [ACEs], but that's it. The rest of them are quite high, sixes and sevens. (Youth justice worker 5)

> All my young people … have experienced ACEs. All of them have had at least eight or more. (Youth justice worker 10)

The interview findings were supported by the data from the ACEs assessment tool. As can be seen in **Figure 3**, two thirds (66 per cent, n=132) of the children who were assessed had five or more ACEs. Indeed, over a fifth (22 per cent, n=43) had eight or more ACEs, and three children had all 10 ACEs. Only two children had no recorded ACEs. When considering the findings from the ACEs assessment tool, it is important to consider the cumulative effect of ACEs. A study of over 100,000 secondary school pupils in the US found that each additional ACE was significantly associated with an increased risk of violence perpetration[lxxvi].

Despite the high prevalence of ACEs identified among this cohort of justice-involved children, a number of workers felt that this was still an underestimate of the actual number of ACEs that the children had lived through. This was largely due to the worry that what children disclosed was just the 'tip of the iceberg', and actually there was much adversity that children chose not to disclose (**see Section 3.4.2**).

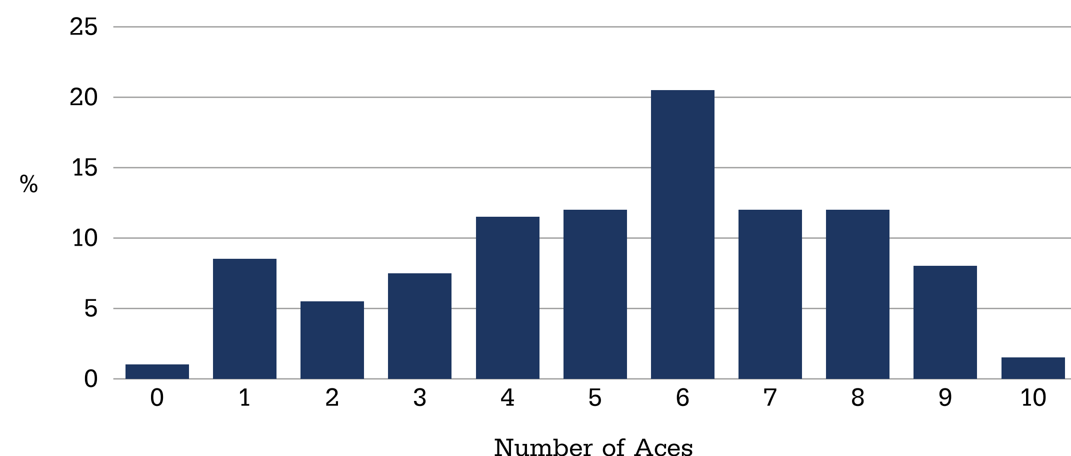

Figure 3: Number of ACEs (n=200)

> I think we're just scratching the tip of the iceberg. … We only know about what [ACEs] they tell us about, and that really worries me. (Youth justice worker 6)

> The sad thing is, … what we know of [in terms of ACEs] we know from records … or even what the young person might be telling us. [But] it's the tip of the iceberg. There's so much buried down that they're not going to talk to us about, that we don't know about, that might have gone on hidden before services became involved. (Youth justice worker 2)

Alongside the high prevalence of ACEs among justice-involved children, there also appeared to be a dearth of positive influences in their lives. For example, when the interviewed children were asked to talk about 'the single person, group or organisation that has had the greatest positive influence on your life story', four of the nine children could not identify any positive influences in their lives.

> I don't think that there has been one to be honest. (Child 6)

Similarly, when the interviewed children were asked, 'Can you describe a scene or a moment in your life that stands out as being especially positive, a really good moment for you', three of the children were not able to recall any previous or current positive moments.

> There isn't really one. **[I: There must be some good moments in there…]** I can't think of any. (Child 3)

> I don't know really. … I can't think of much. **[I: Is there something that you're doing in your life at the moment that gives you a sense of happiness?]** Not right now, no. (Child 7)

> Not really. Something happens every so often, every year at least. **[I: What do you mean by something…]** Some shite. Can't [I] just have a year where nothing happens and it's just a good year? (Child 5)

3.2.2 Types of adverse childhood experiences

Notwithstanding the potential issue of under-reporting of ACEs by children, when it comes to the types of ACEs that were identified using the ACEs assessment tool, **Figure 4** overleaf shows that the most commonly identified ACE was 'parental separation/loss'. This ACE, evident in over four fifths of the children (84 per cent, n=167), was highlighted by both the workers and the children who were interviewed. Furthermore, during the third participatory workshop, when the childhood experiences of those who become involved in SYV were discussed, experiencing 'bereavement' was ranked as the second most common experience.

> There's a lot of parental separation. I think that is really high. Yes, I'd say that is probably the highest. (Youth justice worker 4)

> **[I: Thinking back over your entire life, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point]** My dad. … He left and then came back, and then left [again]. I [last] spoke to him when I was 13. He said that he didn't want me. That's what he said, he didn't want to talk to me. That was the last time [I spoke to him]. (Child 3)

> **[I: Thinking back over your entire life, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point]** When my mum and dad split up when I was young, eight or nine. I didn't understand. It happened so fast. I didn't have a choice who I was going to live with. They didn't sit me down and talk about it. We just moved … [and] I was in a new house with my mum and her new partner. I found it hard to sleep at night because I was thinking about it. (Child 9)

Parental separation/loss was also identified as particularly common in Boswell's study of 200 children serving custodial sentences for Section 53[lxxvii] offences[lxxviii]. This study found that 57 per cent of the children had experienced significant parental loss of contact or bereavement. While this figure is lower than the 84 per cent stated above, the fact that Boswell's study relied solely on officially recorded data makes it likely that the 57 per cent was an underestimate.

'Substance use within the family' was identified in around two thirds of the assessed children (68 per cent, n=135). As one worker noted, 'substance misuse amongst the family is massive' (Youth justice worker 4), while one of the children talked of their step-dad's drinking being problematic. As was the case with 'bereavement', when the childhood experiences of those who become involved in SYV were ranked in the third participatory workshop, 'familial drug use' was ranked as the third most common experience.

> **[I: Can you think of a single person or a group or an organisation that's had the greatest negative influence on your life?]** My step-dad. … Growing up he started being a problem because he was always drinking and that. … I'd come home from school and he was sat there drunk, … doing my head in [and] saying stuff to me that really got under my skin. (Child 3)

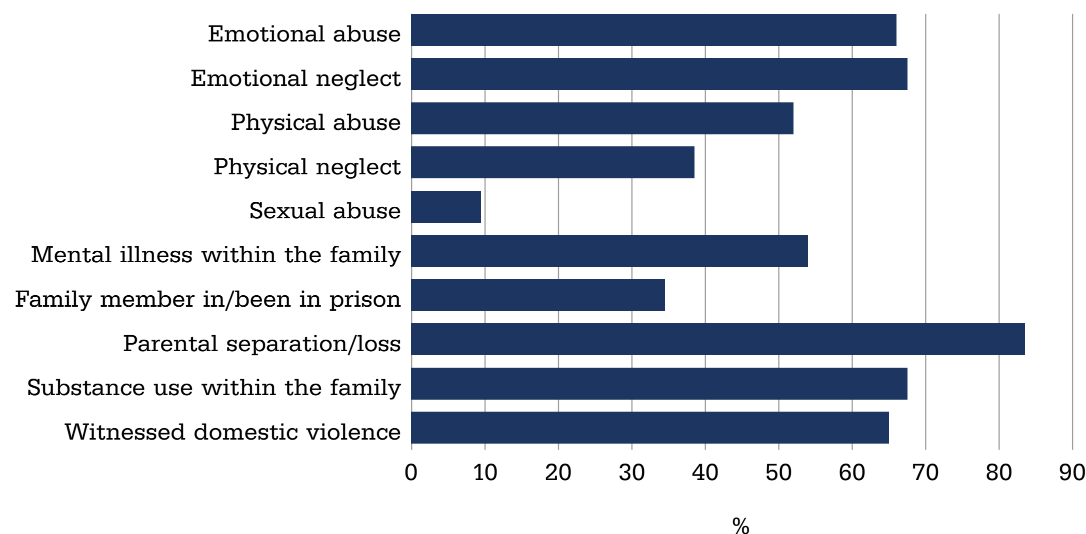

Figure 4: Types of ACEs (n=200)

Like substance use, 'emotional neglect' (68 per cent, n=135) and 'emotional abuse' (66 per cent, n=132) were also identified in around two thirds of the children. These two ACEs were often identified together, with over half (56 per cent, n=111) of the assessed children experiencing both 'emotional neglect' and 'emotional abuse'.

> When I did the [ACEs] screening for my caseload, I think every single one had emotional abuse and neglect. (Youth justice worker 2)

While not as common as emotional abuse and neglect, just over half (52 per cent, n=104) of the children had experienced 'physical abuse', and just under two fifths (39 per cent, n=77) had experienced 'physical neglect'.

Exactly three quarters of the assessed children (75 per cent, n=150) had experienced some form of abuse (either emotional, physical and/or sexual) and 71 per cent (n=142) of the cases had experienced some form of neglect (either emotional and/or physical). Shockingly, three fifths (60 per cent, n=121) of the cases had experienced both abuse and neglect. While this is a lower percentage than that found in Boswell's study[lxxix], where just under three-quarters of the sample had experienced some form of abuse and neglect, it is higher than that found in a 2010 Prison Reform Trust study of 200 children in custody[lxxx], where around two fifths of the children had experienced abuse and neglect. It must be noted, however, that the Prison Reform Trust study, like Boswell's, relied solely on officially recorded data and as such, it is likely that this figure is an underestimate. Of the 200 children who were assessed using the ACEs tool, just over half (55 per cent, n=109) had experienced what Boswell refers to as the 'double child trauma'[lxxxi] of abuse/neglect and loss. While this is higher than the 35 per cent that Boswell found in her study, we need to be mindful of the issue of under-reporting mentioned above.

The other ACE that was identified in nearly two thirds of assessed children (65 per cent, n=130) was 'witnessed domestic violence'. Mindful of the issue of under-reporting, this is much higher than that found in the Prison Reform Trust study where 28 per cent had witnessed domestic violence[lxxxii]. This particular ACE was often identified alongside 'physical abuse'. Indeed, nearly two thirds (65 per cent, n=85) of those children who had 'witnessed domestic violence' had also been victims of 'physical abuse'. This is significant when one bears in mind that research has shown that witnessing or experiencing domestic violence can have long lasting effects on young people's predisposition to engage in violence[lxxxiii]. The high prevalence of domestic violence among justice-involved children was identified by all of the workers and therapists that were interviewed.

> A lot of the time, the first thing that I'll pick up on is there's been domestic violence. You can almost pretty much guarantee it at youth justice. (Drama therapist 2)

> Witnessing domestic violence … [and] being exposed to violence themselves … are probably the most common ones [ACEs] that I come across. (Youth justice worker 6)

> The majority of them have domestic violence at home. They've either witnessed it or experienced it. … There's a lot of that kind of violence going on. (Youth justice worker 5)

During the third participatory workshop, 'Witnessing of domestic abuse in the family home' was also identified as the most common childhood experience of those who become involved in SYV. Indeed, during the creation of the six-part story in the first workshop, domestic violence featured heavily in the life of the perpetrator Paul.

Paul was a very happy child and then in Year 5 everything went pear-shaped. His dad had an affair and is inflicting domestic violence on his mum. Paul sees everything at home. He sits at the top of the stairs. He feels weak, helpless and everything is getting worse. … Paul is traumatised by his childhood experiences. … He wasn't ready for it. No one's ready for that, witnessing the fighting between parents. He thinks that the world is shit, and he's given up. He knows that running from home is creating other problems and he's trying very hard, but survival is fight or flight.

Before moving on to look at the youth justice workers' views of the ACEs assessment tool, it is important to note that a number of the workers felt that poverty and deprivation played a key role in some of the children's offending behaviour. It is worth noting that Manchester has one of the highest rates of child poverty by local authority area with over a third of children (under 16) living in poverty[lxxxiv]. The relationship between ACEs and socio-economic deprivation has been noted in other research[lxxxv]. While not one of the ACEs on the assessment tool, as the quotes overleaf illustrate, poverty can clearly play a role in some children's offending behaviour. As noted in the *Youth Violence Commission Final Report*[lxxxvi], growing up in poverty can lead to children feeling rejected by society. This rejection can elicit feelings shame and humiliation, which in turn elicit feelings of anger; anger which often manifests itself in violence[lxxxvii].

They [the family] were completely poverty-stricken. You know some of his low-level offences were shoplifting [because] he was living hand-to-mouth. (Youth justice worker 2)

One of my young men … was starving so he went stealing from cars to get money so he could buy some food. (Drama therapist 2)

Mum has barely any money to support him and his reason [for committing crime] when I first interviewed him was 'I don't want to stress my mum out and ask for money. I just figured that … this was a way for me to earn money on my own'. … Obviously it wasn't right, but we need to think about the positions that these young people are in, the choices that they make. (Youth justice worker 9)

One young man, … mum lost her job, they had no money and she couldn't wash their clothes because she had no money to get washing up stuff, and she just broke down. I remember him saying, 'My mum broke down because we had no money, and I'd never seen my mum break down before. And something clicked in me and I said "This is enough". I just got so angry at why this was happening to us and I just went out and I stole a phone off somebody, and it was really easy, and that was it, it just snowballed and I just stole loads of stuff'. Yes, I think they get pushed to the limit and they break. (Drama therapist 2)

Interestingly, during the second participatory workshop, the children talked of children 'out there doing stuff cos they haven't got food on the table and stuff like that'. Indeed, they felt that these children 'actually have a reason' to be committing crime. Money also featured heavily in the six-part stories that were created during the first and second workshops. In the first workshop, the children talked of Paul 'buzzing' at the thought of making £2,000, while in the second workshop, the children talked of James offering two random people £10,000 each to help kidnap and assault the victim Joe.

Paul has been tasked with robbing a random by an older. The older has offered him £2,000 to do it and he is buzzing with the thought of the instant money.

James is the one in charge and Liam, his best mate is in the passenger seat. James and Liam have kidnapped before. … The other two in the back seat are randoms, … picked up from a local shop and paid £10,000 each. … The randoms are just doing it for the money. … They are motivated by the money.

When it came to the third workshop, the theme of 'money' was ranked as the number one reason as to why children might become involved in perpetrating SYV offences. The considerable amounts of money that children can make from illicit activities is often a draw that is hard to resist, particularly for those children living in poverty[lxxxviii]. At the same time, though, these activities significantly increase the risk of children becoming involved in SYV, both as a perpetrator and/or a victim. The allure of money and its relationship to CCE and SYV will be returned to later in the chapter (**see Section 3.3.4**).

3.2.3 Using the ACEs assessment tool

When asked to give their views on the ACEs assessment tool and their experiences of using it in their everyday practice, the youth justice workers and therapists unanimously agreed that, when it came to assessing a child's ACEs, it was as one worker noted, 'good to see it quantified' (Youth justice worker 6). Furthermore, some of the workers also felt that completing the tool was particularly useful for, not only helping them to better understand a child's behaviour, but also helping them to more clearly identify that child's specific needs.

[I: Do you think it's a useful tool?] Yes, I do. … I think it creates an awareness and a better understanding of behaviour. (Drama therapist 2)

[I: How are you finding using the ACEs tool?] I find it keeps my head in a space of thinking of what the child might have experienced, before I start thinking about what we can do. … I actually look at each [ACE] and think 'Are we addressing that or is somebody [else] addressing that?' while I'm making the plan. I find it really useful. (Youth justice worker 5)

[I: How have you found using the ACEs screening tool?] The screening tool is so helpful because, even though I knew that my young people had been through trauma, actually putting it in and going 'He's got seven ACEs, … that's a lot of things going on that I really need to take that into account'. … I'm like 'I need to be aware of all these complex things working together to help this young person more'. (Youth justice worker 9)

3.3 Relationship between serious youth violence and adverse childhood experiences

When you're looking at serious youth violence … you've got to understand where it comes from, how it comes about, and how it manifests. (Youth justice worker 2)

The preceding two sections have outlined the prevalence and nature of both SYV and ACEs among justice-involved children in Manchester. This section now moves on to investigate the complex relationship between SYV and ACEs. Before doing so, it is important to note that not everyone who experiences ACEs has a negative outcome[lxxxix]. However, ACEs have been found to be strongly associated with a range of 'problematic behaviours' including aggression, violence and criminal behaviour[xc]. Indeed, it has been argued

that people with ACEs make up almost the entire criminal justice population[xci].

3.3.1 Impact of adverse childhood experiences on thinking and emotions

All of the youth justice workers that were interviewed felt that ACEs have a detrimental impact on the thought processes and emotional well-being of the children they work with. Indeed, some of the workers talked of how being continually exposed to ACEs has affected the mental health of some of the children they work with, while others discussed the impact of ACEs on how well the children were able to manage their emotions. Both of these observations are supported by research that has investigated the effects of ACEs on mental and emotional health[xcii].

> I never knew that some kids lived in such chaos. Their lives are anxious [and] stressful. They wake up stressed [and] they go to bed stressed. There's no sense of peace for them. … It doesn't surprise me that having ACEs has an effect on their mental health. (Youth justice worker 5)

> When you've got that layer after layer, you know, poly-trauma, … it just disrupts your thinking processes completely. (Youth justice worker 2)

> It [ACEs] changes you from such a young age. It changes your way of thinking [and] it changes how you handle your emotions. (Youth justice worker 4)

It was also noted how an individual child struggling to handle their emotions can impact upon those around them; in terms of how they might respond to various social interactions and/or situations they find themselves in. As the two quotes below highlight, the inability to manage their emotions can manifest as anger and aggression in some children.

> Their emotions are so blurred. They're all confused, and it all seems to come out as anger or aggression because they can't recognise what it is that they're feeling. (Drama therapist 2)

> I had my nan's funeral and then two days after, this shit [the SYV offence] happened. … Shittiest week ever. **[I: Do you think that your nan passing away impacted your behaviour?]** It could have done because I was angry with everyone and I was losing my shit with everyone. Because my mind was just fucking, I don't even know what was up with my brain. (Child 5)

3.3.2 Experiences of domestic violence

This increased tendency to respond to situations through anger and/or aggression appeared to be exacerbated by the domestic violence that many of the children had witnessed and/or experienced as victims. As mentioned earlier (see **Section 3.2.2**), domestic violence was one of the most common ACEs identified by the assessment tool. As outlined above, experiencing ACEs can affect how children respond to the situations in which they find themselves. However, as the quotes below highlight, with domestic violence, the effect is a tendency to react to confrontational situations with violence. Either through children socially learning to use violence, or violence becoming normalised for them[xciii].

> The majority of them have domestic violence at home. They've either witnessed it or experienced it. … [But] if that's the solution as to how to deal with a problem that you've learnt, then you're going to take that as a solution to deal with a problem outside your household. They don't think about any other way to deal with something because they've always been met with violence. (Youth justice worker 5)

> [Young] people that have witnessed severe domestic violence at home, … we find that they're more inclined to go out and act out that behaviour in society. (Youth justice worker 1)

> So many of them have been around so much violence … they're desensitised to it. It's normalised isn't it. (Youth justice worker 2)

However, in addition to becoming 'desensitised' to violence, the omnipresent threat of domestic violence can result in children feeling generally unsafe.

> A lot of my young people … will talk about being in a house full of weapons. So there is a sense of not being safe. … There is always that threat around them. (Drama therapist 1)

3.3.3 The need to feel safe

This feeling of 'not being safe' does not apply to just those children who have witnessed and/or experienced domestic violence, or been exposed to the threat of violence. Neurodevelopmental research has shown that ACEs in general can result in children being on constant alert for danger and quick to react to threats via the fight, flight, freeze survival responses, even when there are no threats present[xciv]. In line with this, a number of the workers and drama therapists talked of the children they work with being predominantly in the fight response to keep themselves safe/feeling safe, both in the home and on the streets.

> That trauma response is to fight, flight or freeze. The serious youth violence is those young people who have developed this real in-depth need to fight in order to keep themselves safe and to survive. (Drama therapist 1)

As previously highlighted, the notion of fight or flight was also evident in the six-part story from the first participatory workshop, when the children talked of the domestic violence that the perpetrator Paul had witnessed and how, for him, 'survival is fight or flight' (**see Section 3.2.2**). In addition to activating these survival responses, a number of the workers felt that the need to feel safe was also directly linked to children carrying knives or other weapons (**see Section 3.1.3**).

> If violence has been dominant in your childhood, then you can completely understand why people feel like they need to protect themselves. (Youth justice worker 2)

> There's a reason why they are carrying knives. … A kid must have suffered some form of trauma, or some form of threat, for them to want to carry a knife. (Youth justice worker 8)

3.3.4 The relationship between adverse childhood experiences and the need for belonging

The workers also talked of ACEs resulting in children seeking out opportunities, or behaving in particular ways, that gained them praise and/or acceptance from their peers. Not only because this might have been largely absent in their home lives, but also as a direct response to the negative feelings and emotions that ACEs can engender.

> If you're not accepted within your family or you've experienced a lot of abuse or neglect or negativity, you're going to want to do something that's going to make you be accepted by somebody else. (Youth justice worker 10)

> A lot of our young people don't get positive feedback from parents. They get a lot of shouting, a lot of arguments, … [but] they don't get that praise. Their peers will praise them, but it's not necessarily for doing good things. (Youth justice worker 5)

> If you're suffering trauma, loss, rejection, fear, [then] you're going to want to find a group that's going to accept you, and you're also going to want to do stuff … which will make you be more accepted by that group. (Youth justice worker 10)

However, it is important to note that praise and/or acceptance is not just sought from peers. Nearly all of the workers that were interviewed felt that the need to feel belonging and acceptance can make children with multiple ACEs particularly susceptible to becoming victims of CCE. Indeed, research on belongingness has shown that people are 'fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong'[xcv], and those who are socially deprived are more easily 'pressured to commit violent acts … to be accepted by and to demonstrate commitment to the group'[xcvi].

> A lot of our young people are seeking relationships elsewhere because they're not getting what they need at home. … Unfortunately, the exploiters pick up on that and give them what they've always wanted. (Youth justice worker 4)

> The majority of the young people that we come across are all very vulnerable … and they're all at risk of being exploited, some more than others. (Youth justice worker 1)

Many of the workers talked of the children they work with describing those that exploit them as family. As one worker described, exploiters are often talked about as 'my brothers, … my family on the road' (Youth justice worker 4). As highlighted in the quotes below, children often viewed their exploiters as someone who was 'always there' for them. Someone who would, for example, give them money for food.

> They will talk about them [the exploiter] like they're an amazing role model. 'They gave me this. They gave me that. They really care for me. They're always there for me'. (Youth justice worker 4)

> **[I: Do you think there's a relationship between ACEs and CCE?]** Oh, yes, without a doubt. … When someone's offering you money and a sense of belonging it's a bit of a no-brainer. … That kid that I just mentioned, … he was a 14-year old who was involved in a gang manslaughter with older men. I said to him 'The main guy that was involved in that, when you first saw him, what did you think of him?' And he said 'I was scared. He was a really big scary man and he was standing there in the rain' – he described something out of a horror film – 'but then he came up to me and said "Here you are kid, there's twenty quid to go and get yourself a bite and some chips" and I thought, yes, he's alright'. (Youth justice worker 6)

As the above quote highlights, the possibility of a real sense of belonging combined with the prospect of financial gain and the concomitant status and respect, makes children – particularly those who have multiple ACEs – vulnerable to exploitation. As one worker succinctly noted, 'where we say exploitation, the vast majority of children are saying it's opportunity' (Youth justice worker 7). Unfortunately, as highlighted earlier (**see Sections 3.1.2** and **3.1.3**), the outcome of the exploitation is that vulnerable children end up committing SYV offences.

> These kids … haven't got the family support. … They're seeking that family dynamic and they [the exploiters] are there: 'We'll embrace you; we'll take you in. But go and do this first'. And the kids will just do it. (Drama therapist 2)

> Paul keeps getting asked to do things by the heads and the olders, and he is keen to climb the ranks. He has a strong loyalty to a few select heads.

3.4 Trauma-informed practice

> There is that real balance within the youth justice [system] about understanding that we're working with victims as well as perpetrators, and we need to tackle both. (Drama therapist 1)

Since the mid-2010s, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of delivering trauma-informed practice with justice-involved children[xcvii]. Bearing in mind the prevalence of ACEs (**see Section 3.2.1**), and the complex relationship between ACEs and SYV (**see Section 3.3**), it is clear that a trauma-informed approach is essential when working with young perpetrators of SYV.

> They [the youth justice system] have actually got loads better at trauma-informed practice. … There's now that awareness that they [children] have possibly suffered some ACEs. (Drama therapist 2)

Despite the growing awareness within the youth justice system of ACEs and the need for a more trauma-informed approach, the actual delivery of trauma-informed practice with justice-involved children can be challenging. As will be discussed in this section, these challenges include, for example: a child not wanting to talk about their ACEs; a child's inability to see any relationship between their ACEs and their offending behaviour; the time required by workers to build a trusted enough relationship with a child that they might consider disclosing their ACEs; partner agencies lack of awareness of the effect of ACEs and trauma; and, youth justice workers needing additional training and support to work in a trauma-informed way. Before moving on to discuss these challenges, this section will firstly look at the strengths of this approach.

3.4.1 Strengths of a trauma-informed approach

When the youth justice workers were asked to give their understanding of the term trauma-informed practice, responses ranged from being able to recognise how ACEs might impact upon children's 'everyday lives and the way they react to things' and their physical and emotional 'development', through to how workers engage and work with traumatised children.

> It's being able to recognise the significant trauma that these young people have been through, and how much that will affect their everyday lives and the way that they react to things. (Youth justice worker 9)

> It's having an understanding about why a young person does what they do. … It's also having an understanding of the impact that they [ACEs] have on the young person's development. (Youth justice worker 10)

> We need to work on the assumption that bad things have happened … and think about how you interact and communicate with [young] people based on that. (Youth justice worker 6)

For the workers that were interviewed, the ability of a trauma-informed approach to increase the 'understanding about why a young person does what they do' was felt to be the major strength of the approach. As one of the workers noted:

> Without understanding all of the trauma that these kids have been through, you can't explain why they've done what they've done, why they're here. … None of that [their offending] makes sense if you don't understand their experiences and their lives. (Youth justice worker 4)

Indeed, it was felt that it was only once a worker knew a 'young person's whole story' that they could 'come up with a bespoke intervention plan for them that fits their needs' (Youth justice worker 8). This desire for youth justice workers to better understand the reasons why a child may have committed a crime was also highlighted in the participatory workshops. During the third participatory workshop, the two themes, 'Someone to understand the reasons why you have done what you have done' and 'Someone to understand your background', were ranked as the second and third most important types of support that a justice-involved child needs. Alongside this, it was felt that a trauma-informed approach, with its emphasis on better understanding what a child has been through, helps to build relationships between workers and children, thereby facilitating the disclosure of ACEs (**see Section 3.4.3**). As evidenced below, this was evident in both the worker interviews and the six-part story from the first participatory workshop.

> It [a trauma-informed approach] creates better relationships with the young people. It helps to build trust [and] I think the young people are more willing to come in and see the staff. There's just that better communication … [which] I think does benefit the young person very much so. **[I: Do you think it makes it easier for children to disclose their ACEs?]** Yes. … It just creates that space for them to tell you about them. (Drama therapist 2)

Paul keeps getting asked to do things by the heads and the olders, and he is keen to climb the ranks. He has a strong loyalty to a few select heads.

3.4.2 Barriers to delivering a trauma-informed approach with children

Notwithstanding the strengths of a trauma-informed approach outlined above, all of the workers were conscious of the barriers to implementing trauma-informed practice with justice-involved children. As already mentioned at the start of this section, these included children not wanting to engage with youth justice workers, children not wanting to disclose or discuss their ACEs, and the challenge of building a relationship that is trusting enough for a child to feel comfortable disclosing their ACEs. Each of these barriers will now be discussed in turn.

All of the workers were fully aware that, even with the best support plan in place, they could not 'force' a child to engage. This view was further supported by the findings from the participatory workshops. As one of the children noted, 'until a person is ready [to engage] forget about it. They have to be ready to engage'.

> We can have a brilliant plan and support mechanisms … in place for the young person, but it's only going to be effective if the young person engages with it. (Youth justice worker 1)

> There's only so much I can do. … It's up to them if they want the support. I can't force it on them. I can't tell them that they have to change. They need to want to make that change in their lives. (Youth justice worker 8)

This issue of not being able to 'force' children to engage is even more evident when it comes to supporting children to disclose their ACEs. As one of the workers noted, 'we only know about what [ACEs] they tell us about' (Youth justice worker 6) (**see Section 3.2.1**). There are multiple reasons as to why a child may choose to not disclose their ACEs. Research has shown that ACEs can lead to high rates of non-engagement because they tend to blunt children's 'cognitive readiness'[xcviii]. ACEs can also result in a general lack of trust of adults[xcix]. Alongside this, it has been found that children simply want to avoid thinking about, or discussing, painful experiences and events[c], with justice-involved boys often wanting to present themselves as 'super-masculine' and invulnerable[ci]. Whatever the reason for a child choosing not to disclose any ACEs, the result is generally the same: an 'unwillingness or refusal to talk with staff about their … history'[cii]. This was evidenced by both the children who were interviewed and the workers.

> I said I was fine and just denied everything. **[I: Why did you deny everything?]** I just didn't want to speak about everything. (Child 5)

> **[I: Can you describe your biggest life challenge to date?]** There have been a lot of challenges, not just one, [but] I don't talk about things like this. I usually keep them to myself. I would rather not say. I don't want to talk about the past. … I can't go there. (Child 6)

> It's hard to talk about your trauma and hard to talk about things that have been done to you, and they don't always want to do it. … I think they'd rather be angry and shouting and have that confrontation, than feel exposed and vulnerable. (Drama therapist 2)

In addition to the reasons outlined above (as to why a child may choose to not disclose or discuss their ACEs), is the simple fact that children are often not able to see any link or connection between their ACEs and their offending behaviour. As a result, they do not see the relevance or value in talking about ACEs: which, as noted above, they would rather not talk about anyway. On top of all of these barriers is the stark realisation that many justice-involved children are simply not aware that they have been exposed to any ACEs during their lives. For these children, a childhood characterised by ACEs is sadly 'just life'.

> I was trying to explain to this young lad that all this [his ACEs] was trauma [and] he was like 'No, it's not. That's just life. Everybody has that'. (Youth justice worker 8)

> They don't think it is an adverse childhood experience. They just think it's their childhood experience and that's the norm. (Drama therapist 2)

> Trauma is not a word that would come out of their mouth. … To them, it's their life, that's how it is. (Youth justice worker 5)

Alongside these barriers is the time it takes to build a trusting relationship between a child and their youth justice worker. For many years, research has highlighted the importance of building an effective working relationship when it comes to helping children to desist from crime [ciii]. Indeed, historically, the essence of much youth justice work has been to 'provide a supportive relationship, based on the assumption that this relationship would be influential and would facilitate change'[civ]. This is especially the case when it comes to discussing ACEs. As one of the workers noted, 'if you're going to talk about trauma, … you [need to] build a trusted relationship' (Youth justice worker 7). This view was supported by all of the workers that were interviewed.

> Having those kind of conversations, those discussions [about ACEs], … is about building up that relationship with them. (Youth justice worker 10)

> You have to build that trusting relationship before you start tapping into young people['s ACEs]. (Youth justice worker 5)

However, all of the workers were also acutely aware that building a trusted relationship takes time and is not something that can be rushed; especially if the discussion is around ACEs.

> Young people find the conversations [about ACEs] very difficult. … They need time to be able to trust the person they're talking to. … It could take a young person a long time to be able to trust their officer [enough] to have those actual conversations. (Youth justice worker 1)

> Not everyone is comfortable talking about it [ACEs], and that makes it difficult. It does take a long time. (Youth justice worker 4)

As noted, the time required to build a trusted enough relationship to start broaching the issue of ACEs is a key factor when it comes to the logistics of implementing trauma-informed practice. As shown below, while some of the workers felt that three months might be a sufficient period of time for a child to feel comfortable enough to disclose/discuss ACEs with their worker, others felt that you needed at least six months. This is particularly problematic if a child is on a short order.

> A kid might have got a six-month order [but] it takes you three months to build that relationship. (Youth justice worker 8)

> I'd say most of your meaningful work doesn't get done until after six months' worth of trust. … I mean, you can touch on stuff [earlier] but there is a point when you can tell that they trust you and they feel that they can speak [about ACEs]. (Youth justice worker 4)

> Something like that [discussing ACEs] takes time. We might only be involved for six months and that kind of process, that journey that the young person needs to go through, sometimes takes longer than the time that you've actually got to work with that young person. (Youth justice worker 1)

3.4.3 Support/guidance/training needed

It has been acknowledged that the delivery of trauma-informed practice within the justice system involves equipping youth justice workers with knowledge about ACEs and their effects, while also supporting them in their work with potentially traumatised young people[cv]. With this in mind, one of the primary aims of this research was to investigate whether youth justice workers need additional support and/or training to deliver trauma-informed practice to justice-involved children. During their interviews, workers highlighted a range of support/training needs that they felt need to be addressed if they are to deliver effective trauma-informed practice. While workers acknowledged that they had received training on trauma-informed practice, thus giving them an awareness of the prevalence and effect of ACEs on justice-involved children, what they felt was lacking is specific training in how to actually work through a child's ACEs in a more therapeutic way[cvi].

> We've had a lot of training on it [trauma-informed practice], but I think what's missing is how we respond to that [ACEs] with the kids. … Because I'm always conscious that I'm going to say something that's going to trigger some kind of horrible memory for the young person and make them … go home feeling worse than when they came in. … We're not trained therapists or anything like that. (Youth justice worker 4)

> Going into an interview with a young person that was just about to disclose to me an ACE, I could honestly say I wouldn't know where to start, … because it isn't something that we've necessarily got expertise in. (Youth justice worker 1)

It is clear that, despite having an awareness of ACEs and trauma-informed practice, feeling confident adopting a more therapeutic approach was an area in which many of the workers wanted additional training. Indeed, as evidenced in the quotes below, due to the issues around trusted relationships and disclosing ACEs outlined above (**see Section 3.4.2**), it would make sense to train youth justice workers to deliver more therapeutic work with those children with whom they already have a trusted relationship. This is evidenced by one of the children who was interviewed. When asked for his views on the drama therapist that he had been referred to, he responded: 'I don't know him [and] I don't trust him. I won't say anything to him' (Child 1).

> **[I: Do you think YOT staff would benefit from more therapeutic training?]** Yes. Definitely. … Because so many [young] people will just not engage [with other workers]. … They don't want to talk to somebody [else], … but they'll talk to us. But we haven't got the skills. That's not our area. … [But] if we all had this bag of skills, … we could do more intensive work with people. (Youth justice worker 2)

> They've got Eclypse, CAMHS, drama therapy involved [but] a lot of my young people will turn around to me and say 'I don't want to go to those individuals, but I'll come to you'. (Youth justice worker 8)

It is important to note, however, that this desire for more therapeutic training was not a universally held view among youth justice workers. For example, one worker felt that youth justice workers taking on multiple roles might be confusing for children.

> **[I: Do you think there's merit in giving staff therapeutic training?]** Personally, no I don't. … I think it's about being really clear [to children] about what your role is, and I think if you started training staff up to do counselling and [therapeutic] interventions it becomes quite confusing for a young person. (Youth justice worker 6)

3.4.4 Implementation of drama therapy into everyday practice

Using therapy to support children to acknowledge their emotional needs and talk about their ACEs has been identified as a key stage on the therapeutic journey towards recovery[cvii]. For the last three years, two drama therapists from the emotional trauma support team at One Education (**www.oneeducation.co.uk**) have been commissioned by Manchester Youth Justice Service (part-time for three days a week) to deliver clinical interventions to justice-involved children in Manchester. As one of the therapists explained:

> The case managers … do their interviews and … if there's significant trauma … [or] if there's any ACEs, … they tend to get referred to us straight away. … If the young person's willing to come and meet us, … we'll arrange maybe five sessions to give it a try and see if they engage. (Drama therapist 2)

Importantly, the therapists are mindful that the term 'drama therapy' might discourage justice-involved children from engaging with the service. As such, when they are initially explaining the service to those children referred to them, they tend to use the more generic term of 'creative therapy'.

> In youth justice, I tend not to say drama therapy straight away because as soon as they hear the word 'drama', they panic, and they're like 'I'm not doing any drama'. So, I tend to use either creative art psychotherapy or just explain that it's a creative process and … essentially, it's about their needs and what they want to work on. If there are any issues that they have, or anything that they're struggling with. (Drama therapist 2)

The youth justice workers were particularly appreciative of the drama therapists. As one of them noted, 'I think they're amazing at what they do. … I do feel that we don't have them enough in our service' (Youth justice worker 8). As previously mentioned (**see Section 3.4.3**), the youth justice workers were mindful that working in a trauma-informed way increased the likelihood that might unwittingly 'trigger some kind of horrible memory for the young person and make them … go home feeling worse than when they came in' (Youth justice worker 4). However, by having skilled therapists on hand to work through children's ACEs in a clinical way, as opposed to expecting youth justice workers to do it, means that the chances of workers unintentionally triggering any negative emotions when discussing ACEs – emotions that they as workers may not have to skills to properly resolve – are reduced. As one of the workers noted:

> It can't be [the] YOS opening a can of worms and then letting that young person leave. Maybe it could be all these [young] people see a therapist … to talk about those ACEs and then they [the therapist can] close that door so the young person can leave in a good space and hit the streets in a good place. Rather than them going out really upset and doing something stupid because they don't understand the emotions that they're going through. (Youth justice worker 5)

While the two drama therapists have been commissioned to deliver a service to those children with ACEs, the fact remains that some workers find working in a trauma-informed way 'emotionally hard'. Yet, if the expectation is that youth justice workers are to deliver trauma-informed practice, it is clear that they should be 'assisted in building their own psychological resilience – mapping out their own vulnerabilities and strengths and protecting themselves against vicarious trauma'[cviii]. They should also be able to 'disclose and explore their emotions in a supportive environment in order to manage their feelings effectively'[cix].

> It's emotionally hard. When I think about some of my cases, I've gone home and cried because it's just so distressing, and you've got to be able to process that yourself haven't you, and my God that's hard. … [Yet] we're putting people in this position and giving them no outlet. (Youth justice worker 6)

To directly address this issue, the two drama therapists have now also been commissioned to provide clinical supervision to any worker who feels they may need it.

> Because they're working in a more trauma-informed way, … they're carrying a lot more, … [and] so they need that emotional help to look after themselves, to keep up that self-care. (Drama therapist 2)

While for some, learning about the impact of dealing with ACEs and clinical supervision should be integral to any training around trauma-informed practice. For others, the preference was for clinical supervision to be available as and when a worker may need it.

> I think any form of [trauma-informed practice] training needs to come along with … good quality clinical supervision for the staff too, to think about how they process and think about the hideous trauma stories that they're hearing. (Youth justice worker 6)

> I got allocated a case a while back and … it was just overwhelming, … really heavy. … So I spoke to management … and I've been offered … sessions with the drama therapist as a debrief so that I can kind of get rid of it. And I think it's needed because it's hard, hard stuff. (Youth justice worker 2)

3.4.5 Wider barriers to implementing trauma-informed practice

> **[I: Are you aware of trauma-informed practice?]** I think definitely in youth justice we are, and I think we have a good understanding of it and the impact it has on our young people. But I don't know whether outside of that [youth justice], whether they [other agencies] understand it. (Youth justice worker 10)

As previously mentioned, since the mid-2010s, there has been an increased awareness of the link between ACEs and offending behaviour[cx]. While the youth justice service has arguably 'got loads better at trauma-informed practice' (Drama therapist 2) over the last five years, all of the youth justice workers that were interviewed for this study felt that the same could not be said for the partner agencies that they work with. As one worker noted, 'youth justice are trauma-informed, but court aren't [and] Police aren't' (Youth justice worker 8).

> They [the courts] are coming round to it a little bit more, … but it's definitely a work in progress. It [ACEs] is something that we're just introducing to the courts and getting them to think differently in terms of the way they're sentencing young people. (Youth justice worker 1)

> A police officer said to me [as] I was telling him about trauma, 'If you're saying that he's suffered this, this, and this' – he was talking about a particular kid who was really violent – 'does that not make him more risky? He should go to prison'. So it's about that lack of understanding. (Youth justice worker 7)

If youth justice workers are frequently coming up against this 'lack of understanding' of ACEs and the detrimental impact they can have on justice-involved children, then it would indicate that some of the youth justice service's partner agencies require additional training around ACEs and trauma-informed practice. As neatly summarised by one worker:

> We should all now be working from the same hymn book, … have the same training, [and] be aware and understand ACEs. … If everybody was trauma-informed it would make everything a lot easier. (Youth justice worker 8)

As recommended in the recently published evaluation of the enhanced case management project[cxi], to ensure a consistent delivery of trauma-informed practice, all agencies dealing with children who have a history of ACEs 'should consider training to improve their understanding of the impact of ACEs and trauma on the child's behaviour'[cxii].

CHAPTER 4: RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

4.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings described in the preceding chapter, this research makes the following recommendations:

Support children to meaningfully participate

Children should be supported and encouraged to participate in the development of trauma-informed responses to SYV. Encouraging and supporting children to tell their stories and describe their experiences and opinions, provides an opportunity for professionals to co-create personalised responses to SYV. The PYP framework co-created with justice-involved children across Greater Manchester should be embedded in youth justice practice to support children's meaningful participation in decision-making and service design and delivery[cxiii].

Avoid quantifying ACEs as a measure of risk

Simply quantifying ACEs and interpreting them as a measure of risk of becoming involved in SYV (either as a perpetrator or victim) is at odds with trauma-informed approaches to working with children. Instead, the advancement of high-quality trauma-informed policy and practice should rely on the identification of ACEs and an understanding of the impact ACEs might have on individual children. This knowledge and understanding should then be used to co-develop with children, personalised approaches to addressing their involvement in SYV which consider both socio-cultural and psycho-social factors.

Recognise that children are traumatised by their involvement in SYV

Youth justice workers need to recognise that children can be traumatised by their involvement in SYV, both as perpetrators and victims. This secondary trauma needs to be acknowledged as an ACE and personalised approaches should be co-designed with children to ensure that it is addressed.

Deliver training around implementing trauma-informed practice

While youth justice workers acknowledged that they had received some general training on ACEs and trauma-informed approaches, what they felt was lacking was more specific training on how to implement trauma-informed practice in a more therapeutic way. Training to address this need should be provided by qualified professionals[cxiv].

Provide clinical support to those children who need it

Clinical support around trauma should be readily available to those children who may need it. The responsibility for the delivery of this support should not lie with youth justice workers. This has the potential to be harmful to both youth justice workers and children. Instead, as is the case in Manchester, clinical support should be delivered by qualified professionals based within youth justice services. The commissioning of this support is something that should be considered by Health Services.

Offer clinical supervision to youth justice workers

To protect youth justice workers from vicarious trauma, the opportunity for clinical supervision with a qualified professional should be made available to all youth justice workers who are expected to work in a trauma-informed way. This provision should be in addition to any other existing supervision procedures that youth justice services currently offer.

Deliver training across the youth justice system

Funding should be made available for qualified professionals to deliver training on ACEs and trauma-informed practice to other bodies in the youth justice system, such as the courts, the police, and the secure estate. This will help to embed an awareness of ACEs and trauma-informed practice throughout the justice system. This systemic approach is necessary to ensure that children receive a consistent trauma-informed service, irrespective of which stage of the system they are at.

Develop a systemic approach to trauma-informed practice

The identification of ACEs and subsequent delivery of trauma-informed interventions should not be the sole responsibility of the youth justice system. Children should receive trauma-informed intervention/s at the point of the adverse experience/s. Schools, Children's Services, and Health Services should be adequately funded and equipped by central government to embed trauma-informed practice into their services and organisations. If offered at an earlier stage in a child's life, this could potentially reduce the number of children presenting to youth justice services for SYV offences and reduce the 'staggering' total economic and social cost of SYV[cxv].

Give Violence Reduction Units the time and funds to develop appropriate responses to SYV

We concur with the recommendation of the Youth Violence Commission Final Report[cxvi] that Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) should not have to resort to 'quick-fix' activities as a consequence of funding stipulations. If given the time and space to develop long-term strategies, VRUs have the potential to create holistic, community-led, child-focused, therapeutic approaches to addressing the causes and the consequences of SYV. Genuine participatory and co-produced initiatives take time and money, and the Home Office and local government need to recognise this. According to the Violence Commission report, running the 18 regional VRUs for 10 years would cost £350 million: a fraction of the estimated £11 billion that SYV across England and Wales has cost over the last 11 years[cxvii].

Adopt a public health approach to address the causes and consequences of SYV

We favour the Youth Violence Commission's recommendation that tackling the root causes of SYV requires the adoption of a public health approach. From the Commission's perspective, this approach involves three main stages: understanding the nature of the problem by gathering and analysing sufficient data; doing what works by developing and implementing policy and practice informed by the best available theory, data, and analysis; and learning from experience by robustly evaluating and subsequently improving policy and practice[cxviii].

4.2 Next Steps

While this research has contributed to the evidence base in relation to the relationship between SYV and ACEs, and the importance of trauma-informed practice with justice-involved children, the research team recognise and acknowledge that the research did have a number of limitations.

Firstly, the children involved in the project were all boys. This reflects the small number of girls involved as perpetrators of SYV in the Manchester Youth Justice Service's case files. However, the research team do recognise that girls can be affected by SYV in other ways. For example, the Getting out for Good (GOFG) project in Greater Manchester works with girls that are involved in, or seriously at risk of becoming involved in, gang-related CCE and/or CSE. An evaluation of the project[cxix] found that the girls entering the GOFG project were twice the national average when it came to clinical measures of vulnerability[cxx]. The evaluation also found issues pertaining to poor mental and emotional wellbeing, bullying, social isolation, and school exclusion. All factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood of girls being vulnerable to exploitation[cxxi]. Furthermore, as noted by Ebinehita Iyere in the Youth Violence Commission Final Report[cxxii], girls very often provide protective and nurturing roles to boys involved with SYV, including family members and friends, but are rarely given the space to grieve and heal. She highlights the need for funding in this area to ensure that girls who have experienced violence, either physically or vicariously, receive the support and therapy they require. It is clear that further research that focusses specifically on the relationship between ACEs and SYV among girls is essential.

Secondly is the issue of race. The Black Lives Matter movement and the protests held over the summer of 2020, led to a focus on the issue of structural and systemic racism. For instance, BAME children are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than those from a white family . When it comes to school exclusion rates, research has found that exclusion rates for black Caribbean students in English schools are up to six times higher than those of their white peers in some local authorities[cxxiii]. This is particularly worrying when one considers the clear relationship between exclusions and involvement in SYV as a perpetrator and/or a victim[cxxiv]. Within a youth justice context, the disproportionality of BAME children in the system remains pronounced. For example, stop-and-search rates in BAME communities remain depressingly high when compared with white communities, and BAME children make up half of all children in custody[cxxv]. It has been argued that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will further increase racial disparity in the youth justice system as it fails to introduce measures to effectively address child criminal exploitation and violence, which disproportionately impacts BAME children[cxxvi]. There is clearly much more work to be done to address racism and its impact on justice-involved children. In any future debate or discussion about SYV and how to respond to it, there must be a focus on race.

Finally, it would be remiss not to be mindful of the wider context of COVID-19. As previously discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns necessitated some adaptations to be made to the original research methodology (see Chapter 2). However, more importantly, anecdotal evidence suggests that COVID-19 has had a disproportionately negative impact on vulnerable children: in particular, justice-involved children. For example, the fact that domestic violence has increased during the lockdowns[cxxvii] is significant when one considers that witnessing or experiencing domestic violence can have long lasting effects on a child's predisposition to engage in violence[cxxviii]. Alongside this, the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on children's mental health has been well documented. For example, a survey by Young Minds found that 80 per cent of children agreed that COVID-19 had made their mental health worse[cxxix]. Indeed, it has been argued that the COVID-19 pandemic itself should be considered an ACE[cxxx]. The impact of COVID-19 on children at risk of becoming involved in SYV clearly warrants investigation. The research team are currently leading an 18-month ESRC-funded project exploring the wider impacts and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system and justice-involved children.

These recommendations and next steps are largely dependent on the post-COVID-19 economic situation. Many families are currently experiencing financial hardship, and pre-existing societal inequalities have been exacerbated and laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing (March 2021), there is uncertainty as to whether or not the country will enter a period of austerity similar to the one that followed the global financial crisis in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The majority of the recommendations in this chapter are predicated on government funding to support the design and delivery of a robust package of support for justice-involved children. While the identification of ACEs and concomitant delivery of trauma-informed practice will have longer-term benefits for children and society as a whole, these benefits will only be achievable with a commitment from central government to sustainable investment and funding.

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