

## **ANTISOCIAL SHIFTS IN SOCIAL POLICY AND SERIOUS VIOLENCE BETWEEN YOUNG PEOPLE: EVIDENCE FROM THE CROSS-PARTY YOUTH VIOLENCE COMMISSION**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, public spending cuts and regressive reforms to a number of social policies in England and Wales have had a disproportionately adverse effect on those young people already most vulnerable and marginalised, thereby contributing to the recent rise in rates of serious interpersonal violence. To support this argument, we draw on data generated by six evidence sessions held on the Parliamentary Estate as part of the recent work of the cross-party Youth Violence Commission. In particular, we contend that cuts to education budgets and perverse school inspection framework criteria, counterproductive funding structures and cuts to youth services, and the increased use of discriminatory policing practices such as stop and search, all provide examples of antisocial shifts in social policy. We argue that if levels of violence are to decline in the coming years, it is imperative that governments develop and implement social and economic policies that include rather than exclude young people, that safeguard dignity rather than foster anxiety, and that enable all young people to feel cared for, valued, and hopeful for their futures.

### **Keywords**

Violence, social policy, inequality, political marginalisation, young people

## **Introduction**

In recent years, serious violence has attracted heightened attention from a range of individuals and groups, including politicians, senior professionals across numerous occupations, and the mainstream media. Stories in the latter have alerted the public to the supposedly 'shocking scale of youth knife crime' (Camber, 2019) and a 'Wild West' of violence in the UK (Dearden, 2018). Underneath the sensationalist headlines, however, floats a raft of statistics that reveal a more complex and nuanced picture. We provide a brief overview of these statistics in the following section, suffice to say that the best available data suggest that while current levels of serious interpersonal violence in England and Wales are considerable, they remain relatively low when compared to other countries around the world, and relatively stable when considered historically. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that such violence blights the lives of certain groups of people far more than others, and causes immense pain, misery and trauma to the families and friends of those affected.

In this article, we argue that recent reforms to several key social policies have exacerbated the disproportionate impact of serious interpersonal violence on certain social groups, and contributed more broadly to the rise in such violence since 2014. Our arguments are based on evidence provided to the cross-party Youth Violence Commission (YVC)<sup>1</sup>, to which one of the present authors provides academic support. The YVC was set up following a debate on serious youth violence in the House of Commons on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2016, led by MPs Vicky Foxcroft, David Lammy and Chuka Umunna (Hansard HC Deb). The primary purpose of the YVC has been to seek cross-party consensus on evidence-based policy aimed at reducing levels of serious interpersonal violence between young people. To this end, the YVC conducted a series of six expert evidence sessions held on the Parliamentary Estate: the first on the topic of youth services and community work; the second on mental health and a public health approach to violence; the third on early years, education and employability; the fourth on housing and communities; the fifth on media, music and role models; and the sixth on policing and criminal justice.

In this article, we explore some of the evidence provided to the YVC across these six evidence sessions. Instead of attempting a comprehensive overview of all of the evidence gathered by the YVC, we provide a more detailed examination of three key areas of social policy, namely, education, youth services, and policing. We argue that rising school exclusions and cuts to education budgets, cuts to youth services and counterproductive funding structures, and the police's fervent use of stop and search, constitute forms of what Carlen (1995: 213) has termed 'antisocial control'. Recent changes implemented in these three areas of social policy have served to heighten levels of relative deprivation and social marginalisation, disproportionately affecting those who are young, poor, male and Black.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The YVC is comprised of MPs from each of the three major political parties in the UK and has received academic support from The Open University, the University of Warwick's Policy Lab, and London South Bank University.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term 'young people' in this article to reflect the fact that serious interpersonal violence can affect any young person, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity and class. It is important to note, however, that the vast majority of young people to

By intensifying the levels of shame, humiliation and anger felt amongst this particular subsection of the population, we argue that the public spending cuts and regressive social policy reforms explored in this article are acting as significant drivers of serious interpersonal violence.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we provide a backdrop to our analysis of the YVC evidence sessions by considering both recent and historical data on serious interpersonal violence in England and Wales, as well as the socioeconomic drivers of such violence. Second, we outline our methodology. Third, we divide our analysis and findings into three sections that focus on different areas of social policy: education; youth services; and policing. Finally, we end with a discussion and conclusion that presents and summarises our main arguments.

### **Serious interpersonal violence in England and Wales**

Accurate historical trends in serious interpersonal violence are obscured by changes in the recording practices of various groups and institutions including the police and the National Health Service, as well as the extent to which these crimes are (under)reported by members of the public. Arguably the best available insight into trends in serious violence is provided by homicide rates, which do not suffer from the same limitations. Adopting a long-term lens, the murder rate in England and Wales has fluctuated between 6 and 17 murders per million people over the last century. More precisely, the murder rate rose steadily from its lowest point of 6 murders per million people in 1961, to its peak of 17 murders per million people in 2003. After this time, the murder rate fell until 2014 (9 murders per million people) before rising again to 11 murders per million people in 2018 (Ashby, 2019).

While some of the analysis in this paper applies equally to other areas of England and Wales, its focus is predominantly on London. This city has often been the primary centre of attention in media reports, policy papers and public statements from politicians and senior professionals, largely because the absolute volume of serious violence has been highest in England's capital. In London, the number of murders per year has varied considerably in recent decades. In the 1990s, the average annual number of murders was 184; in the 2000s, this dropped to 171, and in the 2010s, it dropped even further to 116. Since 2014, however, mirroring patterns in the national murder rate, this downward trend has reversed, with the number of murders increasing from 90 in 2014, to 107 in 2016, to 149 in 2019 (Metropolitan Police, 2020).

There are also some important demographic factors to note in relation to the profile of those killed. First, young people are at a much greater risk of being killed compared to children and adults. In London, teenagers aged 17-19 are most likely to be murdered, with a rate of 50 murders per million people – over three times the rate of adults aged 35-44. Second, the vast majority of young people killed are male, with young men aged 15-25 over six times more likely to be killed than young women of the same age. In London, there is also a significant degree of racial disproportionality. Between 2008 and 2018, young people

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which this article refers are working class (and disproportionately BAME) young men and boys.

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between the ages of 11 and 20 who were identified as Black/Black British made up more than two-thirds of murder victims, despite accounting for fewer than 1 in 5 residents in this age group (Agar, 2018). While data on class are more difficult to obtain, mapping of murder locations clearly shows that it is areas of high socioeconomic deprivation in which murders are most likely to take place (ibid., 2018). Considered historically, and in relation to other countries around the world which harbour much higher rates of violence, levels of serious interpersonal violence in England and Wales are both relatively low and stable (Currie, 2016). Nevertheless, serious interpersonal violence blights the lives of a considerable number of people, disproportionately affecting individuals with certain demographic characteristics far more than others.

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the risk factor prevention paradigm (RFPP) has exerted a strong influence over explanations for youth crime. The RFPP locates the antecedents of criminality in an individual's balance of 'risk' and 'protective factors', typically divided into the five categories: neighbourhood and community factors; socio-economic deprivation; family background; individual factors; and academic and school factors. One of the main concerns raised about the RFPP has been its potential to underpin policies and practices that stigmatise, marginalise and criminalise young people through risk-based targeting (Case, 2006). Moreover, it has been criticised for driving crime-prevention approaches that focus the spotlight squarely on supposedly risky individuals, rather than on inequality and injustice-creating political and economic structures, which are often left untouched or even strengthened (O'Mahony, 2009).

In this article, we seek to redirect the spotlight back onto social policies that we argue are fundamental to understanding the recent rise in serious interpersonal violence between young people. Our motivation for doing so is closely related to ideas developed by academics such as Currie (1984) and Lea and Young (1984) over three decades ago. These thinkers addressed the question of why rising living standards and declining levels of absolute poverty had not led to lower levels of crime. They argued the problem was not with the idea that crime has socio-economic roots, but rather with the manner in which these roots had traditionally been understood. They suggested that crime was not a result of poverty or poor living standards per se, but rather, relative deprivation and its associated political marginalisation.

By political marginalisation, Lea and Young (1984) were referring to the lack of influence that certain groups were able to exert on the political process, not simply periodically through the ballot box, but more broadly through ongoing political representation in forms such as trade unions or community pressure groups. They argued that long-term employment discrimination and police harassment had left poor, Black young men largely disenfranchised and alienated from the political process, and that these were crucial factors in making sense of increasing crime rates – arguments that are firmly supported by empirical data showing that levels of serious interpersonal violence are highest in societies characterised by political marginalisation and severe levels of socioeconomic inequality (Currie, 2016). Framing serious violence between young people as closely connected with relative deprivation and political marginalisation throws into sharp relief how regressive reforms to social policy can act as drivers of serious interpersonal violence.

As many witnesses in the YVC evidence sessions pointed out, recent social policy reforms in England and Wales have disproportionately affected social groups differentially along the lines of class, age, gender and ethnicity. In the last 10 years, deep cuts to public spending and regressive criminal justice policy reforms – framed (at least initially) as a supposedly unavoidable response to the global financial crisis – have had a particularly devastating effect on the lives of many young people already living in poverty. Young people living in poverty *and* from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds have been particularly badly affected. The children and young people of middle class, professional and wealthy families, on the other hand, are largely insulated from the effects of public spending cuts, while an even smaller proportion have directly and dramatically benefitted. Yet, despite all this, England and Wales remain societies that are supposedly based on the principles of meritocracy and social mobility, which imply that with enough drive and determination, all young people can achieve social and economic success. This creates a problem for many who are born into socioeconomically deprived and politically marginalised families and communities. As the YVC evidence sessions illustrate, recent regressive social policy reforms in the areas of education, youth services and policing serve as significant barriers to the opportunities available to many young people across our society, as well as the development of healthy levels of well-being and security. By exacerbating levels of shame, humiliation and anger amongst a particular sub-section of the population, we argue that these public spending cuts and regressive social policy reforms are acting as significant drivers of serious interpersonal violence.

## **Methodology**

The data we analyse in this article has been taken from the transcribed audio-recordings of six evidence sessions that the Youth Violence Commission (YVC), conducted as part of its brief to consider evidence-based solutions to serious violence between young people. These sessions took place at Portcullis House in Westminster and were conducted from October 2017 to May 2018. Each session gathered the opinions of young people and a range of adult professionals on one of six key topics: youth services and community work; mental health and a public health approach to violence; early years, education and employability; housing and communities; media, music and role models; and, policing and criminal justice.

As well as those invited to give their opinions, each session was attended by the Commission Chair, Commissioners from the major UK political parties in rotation, and representatives from the academic institutions supporting the Commission's work (for further information, see Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020; Youth Violence Commission, 2018). Each session had between six and nine contributors, who were invited to speak at length in discussions that lasted approximately 90 minutes. Sessions followed the same basic format with the Chair introducing each topic and briefly outlining the agenda for the meeting, before inviting contributions from each of the witnesses, before a final period of questions from the Chair and other Commission members.

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We analysed the evidence session transcripts using the software-package, Nvivo 11. First, we created a thematic map based on the topic structure of the sessions themselves, before identifying additional themes during the coding process. The themes we identified typically cut across multiple evidence sessions. For example, contributors to the session on policing and criminal justice spoke in detail about ‘stop and search policing’ (one of our themes), but they also spoke about the linked impact of cuts to education and youth services. There are clear illustrations of the overlapping and connected nature of various social policies in the following sections, each of which present witness testimony from multiple evidence sessions. In the following sections, we add a descriptor to each extract of witness testimony to indicate the main topic of the evidence session from which the quote was taken.

## **Exploring recent regressive reforms to three areas of social policy**

### ***Education***

Previous studies have indicated that young people’s exclusion from mainstream education can act as a catalyst for their involvement in serious violence, and suggest that young people’s engagement in education can serve as an important protective factor against such violence (Ang et al., 2015; Hawkins et al., 2000). There are clear reasons for these links. First, the experience of being excluded from mainstream school can have a damaging effect on young people’s self-identity. Those excluded are more likely to go on to embrace antisocial norms, shunning mainstream values and internalising a deviant self-identity. Secondly, in practical terms, exclusion from mainstream schools typically results in young people spending an increased amount of unstructured time on the streets, exposing them to greater opportunities to become involved in risky activities such as drug dealing and violence (Irwin-Rogers, 2019). Conversely, higher levels of engagement in education help to maintain the prospect of a future spent in legitimate and gainful employment, staving off feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness.

The latest available data show that the UK is one of the top twenty richest countries in the world (Focus Economics, 2019). With such spending power, UK schools should be providing a high-quality education for all children and young people, promoting healthy levels of pupil engagement and low rates of exclusion. Numerous witnesses, however, provided evidence to the YVC highlighting the criminogenic effects of recent educational reforms, in particular focusing on: i) declining school budgets; and, ii) rising rates of off-rolling<sup>3</sup>, fixed-term and permanent exclusions.

While the (then) Prime Minister, Theresa May, made repeated claims in 2017 about the Department for Education’s ‘record levels’ of school funding, Government spokespeople have continually neglected to acknowledge trends in how much money is being spent by schools per pupil (McNally and Gorard, 2017). School spending per pupil is, of course, a key figure that underpins the quality of, and care provided by, children and young people’s education. On this issue, the trend is unequivocal: total school spending per pupil in England

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<sup>3</sup> Off-rolling is a term used to refer to the practice of removing a pupil from a school’s roll without using formal exclusionary processes, when such a removal is primarily in the best interest of the school rather than the pupil.

has fallen by 9% in real terms between 2009-2010 and 2017-2018 (The Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018). At the same time as many working class young people have seen the quality of their education decline as a result of cuts to public funding, significant numbers of middle-class and wealthy parents have been able to shield their children from the damaging effects of public spending cuts by sending them to private, fee-paying schools. By providing an education delivered by subject-experts in relatively small class sizes, as well as enabling the establishment of personal and professional networks that are often crucial in securing work experience and job opportunities, independent fee-paying schools bestow huge advantages on their pupils relative to those attending under-funded state schools (Independent Schools Council, 2019).

Sizeable cuts to school funding have inevitably led to restructuring, redeployment and reductions in state school staffing. Government figures show that staff numbers in secondary schools have fallen by 15,000 between 2014-15 and 2016-17, despite an increase in pupil numbers (National Education Union, 2018). This equates to an average of 5.5 fewer staff members in each secondary school in England and Wales. The consequences of staffing reductions were made clear in the YVC evidence sessions:

It's really hard, and the reason is because the staff there, they're scurrying around. They're like headless chickens...too busy...and that's what makes it tough.

Housing and communities

All schools in this country are cutting, cutting, cutting the whole time, and having to...it's just an impossible situation. And that means for a start in terms of education funding the wraparound services, the pastoral services, the soft skills are the ones that you can't afford.

Housing and communities

[Children] had said their teachers had dismissed the abusive behaviour that was happening in school between 8:30-15:00, when they are under the care of the institution...because the school just doesn't have the time to deal with it. So we're overlooking behaviours, and we're just pushing it aside, and then people are being killed at a young age.

Housing and communities

These concerns were echoed by evidence from a young man who had been excluded from mainstream education and ended up with a criminal record for serious violence:

I definitely feel like if young people had a mentor to give them that consistent support, or someone they could talk to, it would prevent them from going down the path that I did. And I think that the support they need, it needs to

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be a specific mentor; a teaching assistant cannot provide that kind of support.

Early years, education and employability

The reality of our current educational landscape is that marginalised young people can only gain access to the kind of enhanced support described above *after* they have been excluded from mainstream education. The number of children subjected to fixed and permanent exclusions from mainstream education has been rising since the 2012-2013 period (Timpson, 2019). In 2013/14, 6.62% of pupils in state-funded secondary schools were subject to fixed-term exclusions. By 2018-19, this had risen to 10.75%, equating to 199,765 pupils in total. Similarly, statistics show that the rate of permanent exclusions from secondary school increased from 0.12% in 2013/14 to 0.2% in 2018/19 (Department for Education, 2020).

Witnesses to the evidence sessions explained how exclusion affects young people differentially on the grounds of gender, ethnicity and class. First, boys are more likely to be excluded from school than girls. In 2017-18, the fixed-term exclusion rate for 14 year old boys (the age at which young people are most likely to experience exclusion) was 19.88%. For girls of the same age, the rate was 10.92%.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, exclusion rates are far higher for pupils from certain ethnic backgrounds. White British pupils across state-funded primary, second and special schools were excluded at a rate of 7.78%, close to the national average of 7.23% (Department for Education, 2019). Pupils identified as Black Caribbean, and White and Black Caribbean, however, were excluded at rates approximately double the national average (15.17% and 14.46% respectively). Thirdly, socioeconomic deprivation is one of the strongest predictors of fixed-term exclusions. The rate of exclusion in state-funded secondary schools (those aged 11-16) and eligible for free school meals in 2017-18 was 28.12%, compared to 7.57% for pupils who were not eligible. In short, male pupils from socioeconomically deprived communities and certain ethnic backgrounds are far more likely to be excluded from mainstream education compared to peers with different demographics.

Witnesses explained that once excluded from the mainstream and placed in a Pupil Referral Unit, our education system throws sizeable sums of money at children in an attempt to salvage what are usually very difficult situations. Following a written question directed to the Department for Education by MP Vicky Foxcroft, the YVC discovered that the per pupil cost of Alternative Provision schools<sup>5</sup> is estimated to be somewhere between £17,000 and £18,000 per year (Gibb, 2019). This is over £11,000 more than the average amount spent per pupil in mainstream secondary schools (The Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018).

One of the main reasons for the higher per pupil cost in Alternative Provision is the lower student to teacher ratios in these schools. Depending on a child's precise circumstances,

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<sup>4</sup> The Department for Education calculates the rates provided in this paragraph by dividing the number of exclusions by the total number of pupils.

<sup>5</sup> Alternative provision is a term that refers to institutions tasked with educating young people who have been excluded from mainstream schools in England and Wales.



they will often receive one-to-one support, or at the very least be taught in small groups of around four to six pupils. Such enhanced levels of support have the potential to enable better relationships between adult professionals and pupils, as well as reducing the propensity for children to rail against the classroom environment (Irwin-Rogers and Harding, 2018). Despite this, outcomes for pupils in AP are poor. In 2015-16, only 18% of children who were subjected to multiple fixed term exclusions, and just 7% of children who were permanently excluded, went on to achieve good passes in their English and Maths GCSEs (Timpson, 2019). One witness provided a particularly damning indictment of our current approach:

Once pushed out, these young people are placed into alternative schools of varying quality. Shorter contact hours...their teachers are twice as likely to be unqualified and temporary...They are basically holding pens before [children] move onto the street. Almost none of them will gain GCSEs.

#### Policing and criminal justice

Evidence sessions witnesses argued that one of the major problems with our current approach to exclusion is that by the time children are placed in AP, they will already have undergone many months (and in some cases years) of feeling as though they are failing to fit into the mainstream mould. This sense of failing to conform and live up to the norms and standards of one's peers can do enormous damage to a young person's sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Often craving any form of adult attention – positive or negative – many children who are ultimately excluded from mainstream education will 'act out' in large classrooms of 30 or more pupils in order to attract their teacher's gaze (Trotman et al., 2015).

Some witnesses indicated a need for additional support in mainstream schools to replicate the level of enhanced support young people receive in AP, albeit before they have been excluded from the mainstream:

There needs to be allocation of funding for more specialist workers in schools to take the weight off the everyday teachers. Because in referral units it's one to four students, but in the mainstream it's one teacher to 30 or more, or one head of year to 150 students. So people are being missed, issues are being missed and overlooked.

#### Housing and communities

Zero exclusion I think is a policy to aim for. The thing is it's not going to work at the moment without substantial extra resources available in the schools to cope with those children.

#### Early years, education and employability

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In addition to extra resources, several witnesses highlighted the potential role and influence of Ofsted, which is a non-ministerial department responsible for inspecting schools in England. More specifically, these witnesses were critical of the fact that Ofsted failed to place sufficient emphasis on, and hold schools to account for their use of, fixed-term and permanent exclusions:

At the moment schools are only held to account on their examination results. Ofsted [are not] going in and holding schools to account on permanent exclusions as they used to ...they don't [do that] anymore.

Early years, education and employability

Recent reports have drawn attention to a practice known as 'off-rolling', through which schools remove a child from the school roll without implementing a formal, permanent exclusion, or by encouraging or coercing parents to remove their child when this is in the best interests of the school rather than the child (Hutchinson and Crenna-Jennings, 2019; Timpson, 2019). As with permanent exclusions, witnesses suggested that some schools are off-rolling pupils in order to achieve the requisite examination scores and attendance statistics to ensure they achieve a positive Ofsted rating and inspection report. Far from Ofsted serving to restrain bad practice around exclusions and off-rolling, therefore, inspections that focus overwhelmingly on metrics around progress scores and examinations results may have contributed to increased off-rolling, fixed terms and permanent exclusions.

One of the most concerning consequences of resource-poor and overly stretched mainstream schools, as well as a poorly and/or cynically implemented exclusion process, is that a significant number of children and young people are disengaging from one of the most integral societal institutions for buttressing young people's pro-social attitudes and behaviour. Supporting the findings of previous research (Ang et al., 2015; Hawkins et al., 2000), witnesses argued that the marginalisation and alienation felt by those young people excluded from mainstream education serves a key driver of levels of serious youth violence.

**Youth services**

Since 2010, the UK government's sustained fiscal austerity policy has decimated local authority budgets with serious costs to education, mental health, policing and youth services. These austerity cuts have fallen disproportionately on the youth sector, as councils have sought to prioritise and protect 'essential services':

It's not just little salami slices; that used to be the case – whole youth services are disappearing; whole areas don't have youth workers. This is dangerous.

Youth services and community work

While councils saw their budgets slashed by up to 50% between 2010 and 2018, local government spending on youth services in England fell by 62%, equating to over £750m in

cuts (YMCA, 2018). From 2010 to 2018, 600 youth clubs closed nationally, 3,500 youth workers lost their jobs, and 139,000 places on youth programmes were axed (ibid.). As well as losing the support and guidance of youth workers, this has meant that sports initiatives and other activities that often act as an effective outlet for young people's time and energies have become prohibitively expensive:

Even the parks are being taken over. Companies have come in and run the football and the sports spaces now. And I live in this community – the kids used to go and play football there. Now you have to pay to go on there, because it's a MUGA, multi-games area, and it's all booked out to corporates, so kids get squeezed out.

#### Housing and communities

There has been wide variation in cuts to the provision of youth services across the country, with some councils estimated to have cut youth budgets by as much as 91% (APPG on Knife Crime, 2019). Across all of the evidence sessions, Commission witnesses linked the scale and impact of youth service cuts to escalating violence between young people:

When I was younger, youth club was a way for me to get out my aggression – it was a way for me to express myself and whatnot. There's no more youth clubs. From the day a young person is born to the day a young person picks up a knife, something clearly went wrong in that young person's life, and there's no youth workers dealing with the mental health of that young person.

#### Media, music and role models

The chair of the APPG on Knife Crime, MP Sarah Jones, recently reported that the areas hit by the greatest cuts to youth services in recent years and have also been the areas subject to some of the greatest increases in serious violence between young people (see Thapar, 2019). The top four areas for cuts to youth services – City of Wolverhampton (91%), City of Westminster (91%), Cambridgeshire County Council (88%), and Wokingham Borough Council (81%), saw rises in knife crime of 87%, 47%, 95% and 99% respectively.

Commission witnesses commented at length on the radical restructuring brought about by austerity in youth services and how this has affected the support and guidance given to young people at-risk of being drawn into serious violence. They discussed a shift in priority from early stage intervention to late-stage, and short-term crisis intervention, accompanied by short-term funding cycles:

For me the teachable moment is an incredibly short window when young people, young men and young women are suddenly aware, often for the first time, of their vulnerability. They have had to create bravado, this mask while they are at home or on the streets, having grown up undoubtedly with incredible adversity through their childhood. So there's definitely a teachable moment.

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Public health and mental health

The ‘teachable moment’ mentioned above refers to the unique opportunity afforded by a crisis in a young person’s life, such as an incident of hospitalisation following a stab wound. Against a backdrop of funding decimation, significant cash injections have been made in youth organisations operating in hospital accident and emergency departments, to enable youth workers to engage young people who have been on the receiving end of serious violence (Home Office, 2019a). While such teachable moments might constitute important opportunities to connect with young people and provide much needed support, witnesses stressed that it should not come at the cost of long-term early intervention, which attempts to support young people before they are involved in weapon carrying and serious violence:

It’s almost like until the kid’s in trouble then we won’t do anything; so let’s do the prevention work as well.

Housing and communities

This type of proactive youthwork that involves ongoing support and guidance is increasingly scarce in the current austerity climate:

What’s happened since 2010 has been the dismantling of youth services across the country. We know from reports that were released last year that over £300 million has disappeared, possibly more since then. And what that has created is a fractured approach across the country.

Youth Services and community work

Witnesses described youth services as being characterised by short-term and inconsistent funding and planning cycles, which follow agendas set by electoral politics and a small number of influential funding bodies. This hampers the ability of youth services, and particularly grassroots organisations, to engage in long-term, early stage intervention that builds consistent relationships and trust with vulnerable young people:

Because we’re running back-to-back project, project, project, there’s no sustainability...the real work happens in those one-to-one relationships that are built, and the trust that is built within those. And that’s something that for the last five years I’ve not seen.

Youth services and community work

Another issue raised by witnesses was the extent to which significant resources in the youth sector were being spent not on frontline provision, but on highly bureaucratic and professionalised bid writing and back-end programme evaluations (see further de St Croix, 2018). This has led to small grassroots local charities being squeezed out by larger national organisations that have sufficient resources to employ dedicated teams of bid-writers that can out-compete smaller charities, at least on paper. While larger organisations have

become savvy to the nuances of successful bid writing, witnesses warned that in practice the services they deliver often rely on the exploitation of smaller charities:

We've got really large organisations that don't have any connection with the local communities that get funded to do the work, and they don't help the young people. And then they try to come to organisations like mine to say, 'where are the young people?'. But we don't have any resources to undertake the work.

#### Youth services and community work

One witness argued that if the shortcomings of the current provision of youth services are to be addressed, then long term strategies need to be developed that are independent of and immune to, the whims of short-termist political cycles:

I'm making a plea for a 20-year plan. And it needs to be a 20-year plan that is immune from electoral cycles, and is immune from politics big and small 'p', where funding and leadership and strategy are guaranteed and sustainable. Because when you're dealing with issues that have a generation or more in the making, barring miracles, pretending that they're going to take less than a generation to fix is just a fool's errand.

#### Public health and mental health

### **Policing**

Although many young people will never directly interact with the police, those with particular demographic characteristics are far more likely to experience negative contact. Police resources are often concentrated squarely on young men and boys living in socioeconomically deprived and concentrated Black communities. This can involve disproportionately high rates of stop and search – a controversial tactic that has undermined the very legitimacy of the police in the eyes of many young people, particularly in certain areas of London (see Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that of the issues discussed across the six YVC evidence sessions, stop and search was among the most controversial. Some witnesses argued vociferously in favour of stop and search:

I believe that stop and search is a vital police tactic that saves lives. In the past 12 months, 4,200 weapons have been taken off the streets of London through the use of this tactic...who knows how many more families would be grieving the loss of a loved one had these 4,200 weapons not been removed from our streets.

#### Policing and criminal justice

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Accompanied by a straightforward rationale – the removal of potentially lethal weapons from the streets – these stark statistics were offered up as firm support for the continued use of stop and search. Quantitative studies on stop and search, however, provide little support for the idea that this practice is effective in reducing violent crime. In 2009-10, when the rate of stop and search in London was relatively high (25 per 1,000 people), there were 130 murders in the capital. By 2014-15, when the rate of stop and search in London had fallen to 10 per 1,000 people, the capital saw *fewer* murders: 84 (Full Fact, 2018; Home Office, 2019b). In other words, murders in London were falling at the same time that the use of stop and search was significantly declining. A similar pattern has been seen in other cities across the globe. In New York, for example, stop and search underwent a dramatic decline between 2011 and 2016, from 685,724 to just 12,404 (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2019). If stop and search was an integral component of violence-reduction strategies, we would have expected homicides in New York to have risen significantly as its use plummeted. The opposite, however, is true: homicides in New York declined from 769 in 2011 to 630 in 2016 (Disaster Centre, 2019).

One can identify other periods during which stop and search has declined and murder rates have gone up, and vice versa. Owing to the significant limitations associated with relying on such simple correlations, researchers have conducted more sophisticated quantitative analysis using a decade's worth of data on crime rates and stop and search in London. The authors concluded: 'claims that [stop and search] is an effective way to control and deter offending seem misplaced (Tiratelli et al., 2018). One potential contributing factor to the seeming ineffectiveness of stop and search in deterring weapon possession and violence, is that objective shifts in rates of stop and search may not translate straightforwardly into young people's subjective experiences and perceptions:

Despite the huge drop we've had in stop and search over the last few years, only 16% of young BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] people think that stop and search is being used less than it was five years ago...and nearly two fifths thought it was actually being used more.

#### Policing and criminal justice

Even assuming that young people typically engage in relatively rational decision-making – accurately weighing up the costs and benefits of each potential course of action – if they are unable to detect shifts in the levels with which police officers are conducting stop and searches in their area, this would significantly undermine the potential of this tactic to operate as an effective deterrent. Moreover, several witnesses offered explanations for why the use of stop and search could be counterproductive. First and foremost, these witnesses highlighted the potential for stop and search to alienate young people, and particularly (BAME) young people, from the police:

What do we know about stop and search?...the huge impact that it has on young people's trust in the police, and particularly young BAME people...we conducted a range of interviews with young BAME people who have been stopped and searched, and they reported feelings of victimisation, humiliation and harassment.

Policing and criminal justice

[Stop and search] alienates Black and ethnic minority youth from the police, when they are precisely the sorts of young people that police need to give them information, to support them in their job. So that's why it's I think very dangerous.

Policing and criminal justice

I made reference to cannabis use as a gateway drug - it's a gateway into the criminal justice system for Black and Asian young men. Essentially, they smoke cannabis, there's a stop and search, 'oh and by the way we found X, Y and Z' - these become the strategies by which we pull [BAME] individuals into the criminal justice system.

Policing and criminal justice

Studies have shown that if trust, confidence, and perceptions of police legitimacy decline as a result of intensified stop and search, this can have a marked effect on people's willingness to cooperate with the police and obey the law (Myhill and Quinton, 2011). For this reason, it is worth putting levels of stop and search in a historical context. Between 1972 and 1976, the number of stop and searches conducted by the Met jumped from 41,980 to 60,898 each year. Commentators described the increase as a move towards militarised policing (Lea and Young, 1984). In 2018-19, the Met conducted over 240,000 stop and searches - four times the rate of 1976, despite there having been only a minor increase in London's population. As witnesses discussed, if the ultimate goal is to reduce levels of violence, the likely effect of stop and search on perceptions of police legitimacy should be factored into any decisions about the use of this police tactic. Take, for example, the enduring legacy of the high number of stop and searches that were carried out under the 1980's sus law (Scarman, 1981). The damage done to police legitimacy during this time generated a legacy that endures to this day, severely hampering the ability of the police to protect affected communities.

A number of witnesses suggested that there were better ways of gathering intelligence and reducing the risk of violence between young people than stop and search. Some, for example, highlighted the importance of identifying positive spaces of interaction between young people and the police:

Now our school in Haringey has got an absolutely outstanding PCSO who's been there for a couple of years, forged really positive relationships with the young people. They go to him now if there's an issue on the street. They go to him now with intelligence if they need to. He acts as a mentor to them. He gets them signed up to Arsenal Football Club's training schemes and things like that. So that mentoring role is a really important role in the lives of these young people

The most recent and robust research indicates that stop and search is of limited use in reducing rates of violent crime (Tiratelli et al., 2018). At the same time, high rates of stop and search disproportionately affect Black young men from socioeconomically deprived communities. Many young people who share these demographic characteristics (rightfully) feel discriminated against and violated by an institution that supposedly exists to help people to feel safe and protected. Differential use of stop and search, therefore, exposes a gap between the democratic principle that everyone is treated fairly and equally before the law, and the reality faced by a small and vulnerable sub-section of the population that is explicitly and continually targeted by law enforcement.

## **Discussion**

### **Antisocial social policies?**

Over two decades ago, Carlen (1995) noted that there are two different types of social regulation in modern capitalist societies. One form of social regulation is all those formal practices, established within law and social policy, that, while setting down limits on the behaviour of individuals, also function in the collective interest. In the UK, the social policies that once formed the relatively comprehensive post-war Keynesian welfare state were, at least in rhetoric and intention, forms of social regulation that were created to benefit the collective. They sought to ensure that every individual, no matter what their individual social and economic circumstances, was provided with the basic necessities (education, housing, food, healthcare, income) that would enable them to be productive and full members of society. In contrast, Carlen noted another category of social regulation which she called 'antisocial control'. She defined it as:

A generic term for a variety of malign institutionalised practices that may *either* set limits to individual action by favouring one set of citizens at the expense of another so as to subvert equal opportunities ideologies in relation to gender, race and class (or other social groupings); or (in societies without equal opportunities ideologies) set limits to individual action in ways that are antisocial because they atrophy an individual's social contribution and do so on the grounds of either biological attributes or exploitative social relations (Carlen, 1995: 213-214).

In the sections above, we have charted the damage done to many young people's lives by reductions in public spending and regressive reforms to social policies that we would argue function as forms of 'antisocial control'. Such reforms not only impact negatively on some young people's lives, but disproportionately affect those young people who are already most disaffected. A recent report by the IPPR (2019) revealed that £1 in every £7 of the money that has been cut from Government public health grants to local councils in England over the last five years has been taken from the budgets of the poorest 10 areas of the country; the 10 wealthiest areas have lost the equivalent of £1 in every £46. Similarly, the reforms and cuts to social policy discussed above have imposed the greatest hardship on some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society.



Cuts to school budgets and reforms to national funding formulas have shifted resources away from the most deprived pupils (Education Policy Institute, 2017). And as we outlined above, exclusions from mainstream education – which result at least in part from severe stress on school staffing levels and perverse inspection and performance frameworks – have disproportionately been imposed on poor, Black Caribbean, as well as White and Black Caribbean, young men. Deep cuts to the funding of youth services have led to the withdrawal of support to some of the most socioeconomically deprived and marginalised young people in England and Wales. As with school exclusions, hostile police stop and search tactics, particularly in London, have disproportionately targeted poor, Black, young men.

While one of the central arguments that we make in this article is that recent spending cuts and reforms to social policy have adversely affected those already most vulnerable and marginalised, it is similarly important to recognise – as did Lea and Young (1984) more than three decades ago – that a rationale can be offered in defence of each of these policy shifts. For example, police spokespeople and official public statements often claim that the reason for disparities in the gender, age and ethnicity of those stopped and searched is due to legitimate concerns around ‘gangs’ and ‘specific crimes’ (Metropolitan Police, 2017). Likewise, school leaders have claimed that aggregate rates of exclusion reflect differences in the behaviour of different groups of pupils from different ethnic backgrounds (see Paton, 2013).

Academics providing any credence whatsoever to such arguments have been greeted with accusations of racism (see Bridges and Gilroy, 1982). Our position is that there is likely to be some difference between the behaviour of different groups on the basis of gender, ethnicity and class. For example, the statistics outlined at the outset of this article highlight the stark disproportionality on the grounds of gender, age, class and ethnicity concerning murder rates in England and Wales, and London in particular. These do not constitute a complete fabrication, socially constructed by racist agents of social control. Instead, these disproportionate rates of violence reflect the harm that has been inflicted on many of the most vulnerable and marginalised individuals and communities, by long-term and continuous discrimination and neglect (Solomos, 2003; Wallace et al., 2016).

Any differences between the outcomes of different social groups, however, are likely to be exaggerated and misrepresented by those harbouring malign, racist political ideologies (see Christian, 2005), or those seeking to make profits from populist media outlets. Once these differences are ossified into stereotypes about certain groups, they are also liable to be reinforced by shifts in social policy. So, for example, as we have discussed above, stop and search tactics that disproportionately target poor, Black, young men might have been based – at least in part – on differential rates of violence affecting this social group, but far from serving to support and protect the young people concerned, a ramping up of these tactics is likely to exacerbate levels of hostility, fear and alienation, adding further fuel to an already toxic situation (Youth Violence Commission, 2018).

Likewise, it is feasible that schools may be excluding poor, young Black Caribbean, and White and Black Caribbean boys at higher rates *in some part* because of differences in the behaviour of pupils from different ethnic backgrounds; see, for example, Strand and

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Lindorff (2018) for an outline of differential rates of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties by ethnicity. But of course, such differences in behaviour are also likely to be the result of various forms of racist discrimination that young Black boys face in wider society (Christian, 2005; Deuchar and Bhopal, 2017). We would emphasise in the strongest terms the potential for unconscious bias to exert an influence on the perspectives and decisions made by frontline professionals, as well as the potential for behaviour policies to operate in a discriminatory manner (London Assembly Education Panel, 2019; Majors et al., 2001; Okonofua and Eberhardt, 2015). Crucially, however, whatever the underlying drivers of school exclusion, the process of excluding disproportionately high rates of poor, young, Black Caribbean, and White and Black Caribbean boys itself serves to exacerbate social problems rather than solve them. Instead of injecting much needed investment into mainstream schools so that they are in a position to provide adequate support and nurturing environments for all of their pupils, successive governments have cut per pupil spending in state-funded education, while senior inspectors have presided over narrow and perverse inspection criteria that have incentivised short-termist and exclusionary policies and practice.

In short, the antisocial social policy reforms discussed in this article have adversely affected the most socioeconomically deprived and marginalised young people in England and Wales, pushing the gap between these young people and their (middle class, wealthy, white) peers even wider. By doing so, they have injected further insecurity into many young people's lives and further embedded an already simmering sense of shame, humiliation and anger. Witnesses to the YVC argued that far too often, those involved in serious incidents of violence were (over)reacting to what many would consider relatively trivial or minor instances of disrespect, with extraordinary levels of violence. As is well established in the literature on interpersonal violence, one of the primary reasons for such overreactions are precisely these deep-seated feelings of shame, humiliation and anger that are inextricably connected to the experience of growing up surrounded by gross levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, discrimination, and political marginalisation (Gilligan, 1997, 2003; Thomason, 2015; Walker and Knauer, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

While populist media reporting is prone to exaggerating the scale of serious interpersonal violence between young people, this does not preclude the argument that too many young people's lives are being cut short by violent crime in England and Wales, leaving deep and enduring scars on the families and friends closest to those killed. We have argued that by further disadvantaging and marginalising those young people already disadvantaged and marginalised, cuts to public spending and recent reforms to various social policies have exacerbated levels of serious violence. More precisely, cuts to education budgets and perverse inspection framework criteria, cuts to youth services and changes to the associated funding structures, and discriminatory policing practices including stop and search, have disproportionately and adversely affected those who are young, poor, Black and male, further alienating an already alienated section of the population.

Some might argue that the regressive social policy shifts seen in recent years are predictable features of neoliberal capitalist societies running their inevitable course towards greater levels of inequality, individualism and division, and that only through radical political reform

and the adoption of new economic models (for example those based on modern monetary theory) can such trends be reversed (see Winlow and Hall, 2018). Alternatively, the recent reforms to social policy discussed in this paper might be regarded as temporary features of back-to-back right-of-centre governments, which could be reversed and overcome in the event of a left-of-centre government taking power and increasing public spending, without fundamentally altering the central tenets of our existing political and economic systems. Whatever one's position on this issue, it is clear that recent cuts to public spending and reforms to numerous social policies have further intensified the shame, humiliation and anger, felt by those young people already most marginalised in England and Wales.

If levels of violence are to decline in the coming years, it is imperative that governments develop and implement social and economic policies that are pro-social rather than antisocial – policies that include rather than exclude, that safeguard dignity rather than foster anxiety, and that enable all young people to feel cared for, valued, and hopeful for their futures.

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