

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

3rd Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), Wednesday  
21 February 2024

## PE1947: Address Scotland's culture of youth violence

<b>Lodged on</b>	8 August 2022
<b>Petitioner</b>	Alex O'Kane
<b>Petition summary</b>	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland.
<b>Webpage</b>	<a href="https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1947">https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1947</a>

### Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [Wednesday 22 November 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee took evidence from Dr Fern Gillon, Research Associate and Dr Susan Batchelor, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, both from the University of Glasgow.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,811 signatures have been received.
4. On Monday 22 May, members of the Committee met with a group of young people at 6VT, a youth café in Edinburgh. On Wednesday 24 May, members of the Committee met with the petitioner and families impacted by youth violence in Milton, Glasgow. A note of the session with 6VT can be found at **Annexe C** and a note of the session with the petitioner and families can be found at **Annexe D**.
5. The Education, Children and Young People Committee held a roundtable on [Wednesday 14 June 2023](#) in Violence in Schools. The key issues presented in the petition were not directly addressed. However, the session raised issues such

as school reporting and holistic, community-wide approaches to reducing violence.

6. At today's meeting, the Committee will hear evidence from –

- Emily Beever, Senior Development Officer, No Knives, Better Lives
- Will Linden, Deputy Head of Unit and Head of Analysis, Scottish Violence Reduction Unit
- Jonathan Watters, Community Policing Inspector, Police Scotland

## **Action**

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

**Clerk to the Committee**

## Annexe A

### PE1947: Address Scotland's culture of youth violence

#### Petitioner

Alex O'Kane

#### Date lodged

8 August 2022

#### Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland.

#### Previous action

I have contacted Glasgow politicians, including Paul Sweeney MSP to express my concerns. I have started an awareness campaign on the No1seems2care social media page to try to warn parents about the dangers which currently exist on the streets of Glasgow city centre, it's also important to let the youth know about the dangers they may face. I have written to the Chief Constable of Police Scotland and have received a response from the relevant Area Commander.

#### Background information

I am the founder of the No1seems2care help group which is based in Glasgow. In recent months I have received dozens of videos, images and first-hand accounts which describe a disturbing culture of youth violence in Glasgow city centre. Children as young as 13 years old have been kicked unconscious and left in pools of blood whilst the incidents are videoed and circulated on social media. Children should be safe in our city.

There are several posts on the No1seems2care Facebook page which show images of some of these violent incidents. The videos are too graphic to show on a public platform. There are also first accounts from people in Glasgow city centre.

## Annexe B

### Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1947 on 22 November 2023

**The Convener:** The first continued petition is PE1947, lodged by Alex O’Kane, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland.

The committee met an Edinburgh-based youth group, 6VT, just off the Grassmarket, and it also visited Milton in Glasgow to meet the petitioner and families with direct experience of the issues that are raised in the petition. I should say that some of the families had come from further afield than the immediate Milton community. Once again, I thank everyone who took the time to speak with us: the young people we met in Edinburgh and, in particular, the people we met in Milton, who, in some instances, were still recovering from really graphic and, in some respects, unbelievable levels of violence. We could sense the parents’ bewilderment and how distraught they continued to be at what they considered to be the inability to secure the on-going environment for their children and any sense of justice. I thank all those who took the time to come to meet me and the committee—Alexander Stewart was my colleague on the committee at the time.

This morning, we are joined by two University of Glasgow academics. I welcome Dr Fern Gillon, a research associate, and Dr Susan Batchelor, a senior lecturer in criminology.

Before I ask a general question, I will give a preamble based on the evidence that we heard. It was interesting that, in Edinburgh, the young people whom we met felt a sense of security from coming together in the 6VT facility to share their experiences. That also allowed them to gain strength, as a group, in being able to withstand the torment or violence that they had previously experienced. They were very keen to be there. Obviously, sitting giving evidence on anything was an unusual environment for them, so we tried to make it a discussion with prompts.

What we heard from the families that we met in Milton—coincidentally, there was a debate on the subject in the Parliament later that day, and it was difficult, although I did contribute on the back of what we had heard—was chilling. We heard about the way in which violence is organised by appointment. People are lured to a place where others are gathered to record on their phones videos of the violence that takes place, and those people post those videos in the perceived knowledge that no recrimination will follow and they can do so with impunity. It was deeply distressing.

Two of the people we met had been left in such an appalling state that those who found them were not sure that they would survive. They did, but not without experiencing enormous trauma. Siblings of those affected felt that they had failed in some way to protect them and that they had a duty to step in and seek restorative justice. Parents felt that they had failed and that, when they had gone looking for

help, the system had then failed them. Although there was lots of sympathy from the authorities, the police and others, the parents did not have any confidence that, at the end of the day, any intervention by the authorities or the police would produce a return because, as they saw it, the system was stacked against action and more towards the perpetrator than the victim. It was a very chilling session.

We heard that evidence in isolation, and we do not want to believe that that is the picture across the whole country, but we do not know. What does the available evidence tell us about the level of involvement of young people as perpetrators of violent behaviour? What is the age demographic? Is it older teenagers who are involved in such behaviour, or is it, as we heard, younger teenagers—younger than I would have thought was possible? The violence that we heard about was perpetrated by girls on other girls, not by boys. Is that typical? Are more boys involved than girls, or is there a much wider problem? Obviously, we will come to the roots of all this, but I am interested in how the evidence that we heard sits in the context of the wider academic understanding of the issue.

**Dr Susan Batchelor (University of Glasgow):** Thank you for that introduction. Before Fern Gillon or I contribute, it would be helpful to say a little bit about the background from which we are speaking. We both have a long history of doing research on young people and violence.

I will let Fern Gillon introduce her more recent research experience, but I have just led a Scottish Government-funded project looking at repeat violence in Scotland. That involved a range of case-study communities in rural areas, towns and urban centres across Scotland. Violence involving young people was explored as part of that, although we were looking at a much bigger picture of violence. That is my most recent experience.

On the basis of that, in response to your first question, I would say that it is important to acknowledge that the vast majority of violence that occurs in Scotland is not perpetrated by children and young people; it is often perpetrated against them, or it is perpetrated by adults against each other. The vast majority of young people do not engage in violent behaviour, although the cases that you have referred to certainly exist. Fern Gillon and I have both been involved in research in which we have heard very similar distressing stories.

I do not wish to minimise the seriousness of the youth violence that occurs in Scotland, but it involves a minority of young people. The research evidence suggests that it is concentrated in particular communities and among marginalised groups. Those are communities where there has been a withdrawal of services, specifically in recent years, and particularly youth services, such as the ones that you have discussed, which are important in addressing violence that affects young people.

On the age range, young people who are involved in violence often become involved around the age of 12 or 13, and that can then escalate. However, the majority of that violence is not serious. The research evidence suggests that girls are more involved in violence at that younger age but, in terms of the age-crime curve, girls and young

women grow out of violent offending much younger than boys and young men, and the violence that girls and young women are involved in tends to be less serious.

**Dr Fern Gillon (University of Glasgow):** The project that I have been working on is a three-year project that looks specifically at youth violence in Scotland. We are taking a longer-term view of youth violence and looking at the reduction that has occurred in violence in Scotland over the past 20 years. We are trying to learn lessons about what has happened over that time and what has contributed to the reduction; to learn lessons about where we are now; and to understand the changing picture of violence.

I am aware of the incidents that the committee has heard about. I work closely with young people who have been affected by violence, including those who have been the perpetrators of violence but who have also been victims of it and of a number of other social harms and vulnerabilities. As Susan Batchelor said, we are not trying to minimise those issues, but the longer-term picture is that violence is stable and low—it is lower than it has been in the past 20 years. Common assault plateaued around the 2000s, and that is not just a recording trend—we are seeing that communities feel safer than they did when violence was at its height, in the early 2000s.

As Susan Batchelor said, the concentration of violence has changed. Glasgow has always had a higher amount of violence. The six police divisions mirror one another in the reduction in violence that they have seen, so the concentration effect is the same. The higher-crime areas have seen a reduction, but that is comparable to the reduction in the lower-crime areas. We therefore have a concentration effect, with particular communities experiencing harm and violence at disproportionate levels.

Violence is concentrated in areas of social deprivation, where young people, communities and families experience a range of other social harms. That concentration is particularly concerning for us.

**The Convener:** The evidence was not just from Glasgow—we heard from a pupil from St Andrews in Fife. Therefore, it seems a bit easy to say—

**Dr Gillon:** It is by no means only a Glasgow problem.

**Dr Batchelor:** We certainly would not want to give that impression. What we are seeing is what the official recorded statistics say. Partly as a result of the different demographic patterns in Glasgow compared with those in other parts of Scotland, it has a history of higher levels of violence. Violence occurs across Scotland, but it is concentrated in communities where there are high levels of deprivation and concentrated disadvantage.

**The Convener:** It is interesting that you talk about the period since 2000. Smartphones and iPads are much more recent than that, really—the first iPad did not appear until 2010. As I said in my opening remarks, in the examples that we heard about, one of the disturbing characteristics was the violence by appointment. We heard about people filming violence deliberately and posting it on social media to allow the perpetrators to self-aggrandise and create reputations for themselves that

were designed to intimidate others. That seems to me to be a new and slightly sinister development. What have you found in relation to that, if anything?

**Dr Gillon:** Changes in youth culture generally—as you say, through technology and access to social media—are changing the dynamic of violence. Rivalries can be extended because of social media. Incidents of violence can be amplified because they are viewed, and that creates a sense that violence is all around and that it is consuming communities. That fear then feeds young people’s perceptions of how they keep themselves safe. They are then more likely to join gangs or groups of friends who feel that they have to look out for each other or potentially carry weapons to keep themselves safe—that is because the perception of violence is amplified.

However, it is more complicated than simply saying that social media is causing violence and that young people are driven by it. That is a feature, but it is a vehicle for violence that we knew took place between young people anyway—the thing that is perhaps changing is how it is presented through social media. The point about social media does not address the underlying causes that lead to young people behaving in this way.

**The Convener:** Does it give them a platform that they did not have before? That is what struck me as alarming. Material can be posted with impunity, because the young people who are perpetrating the violence are not of the age of criminal responsibility and it seems that there is nothing that anybody can do about it. In the knowledge that that is the case, they are repeating their actions. We heard of a series of videos of the same people identifying fresh victims whom they were then able to perpetrate that violence against. In a sense, it advertises the fact.

To give a completely parallel example, there is a quarry in my constituency that is popular with cliff jumpers. Every year, when the summer holidays come, young people come from around the United Kingdom and risk their lives jumping into the water in the quarry. Why? It is because, on social media, they have seen videos of other people doing it. That has advertised the fact and they have thought that it would be a great thing to do. There is no doubt that social media influences behaviours. The question in my mind is whether the impunity that exists and the lack of ability to do anything about the fact that violence is being promoted in that way should concern us.

**Dr Batchelor:** I agree with Fern Gillon that it is important not to see social media as the key issue. It tends to be the same groups of young people who are involved in violence. New forms of media, whether it is newspaper reporting or television, have shaped patterns of youth violence and encouraged young people to amass in certain areas, because they will get publicity for doing so over time. Having said that, there is no doubt that social media, which is so available to people and can be used to broadcast so quickly and widely, is having an impact with regard to organising violence and distributing videos of it.

However, it is important to emphasise that it is not just young people who are involved in that behaviour. We have plenty of evidence from the repeat violence

study about adults consuming and circulating videos of young people who were involved in violence. Also, as adults, we are using social media as a way to organise violence and identify where potential victims are through organised crime, for example. Therefore, it is not a problem that is specific to young people. Is it something that we should be concerned about and address? Yes, it is, but it is not new, and dealing with the underlying causes of violence is more important than being preoccupied with social media.

**The Convener:** One of the examples that the committee heard was of a youngster who was in a shopping centre who realised that violence was impending. They sought support from the security staff and contacted their parents, and the security staff said, "There's absolutely nothing we can do to protect your child until the violence actually occurs." The security staff said that, if they intervened, they would be charged as a result of having intervened, potentially for restraining the individual who was going to perpetrate the violence before the violence had actually been perpetrated. The evidence suggested that the people who were committing the violence were perfectly aware of the fact that nothing could be done to protect that individual. Is there a greater degree of knowledge of the parameters of the system in current society, which people exploit in the knowledge that they can act again with impunity?

**Dr Batchelor:** The only evidence that I have of that is the way in which children and young people are exploited by organised crime groups. There is a concern that, because young people will not be dealt with through the criminal justice system for the same behaviour that they would be as an adult, they might be taken advantage of and pressured to be involved in offending and sometimes violent behaviour. Are young people aware of that? Yes, they are, but I have not spoken to any young people who have deliberately engaged in behaviour because of a sense of impunity.

Your example speaks to the wider issue of a lack of safe spaces for young people. Where are the community services? Where are the free sports facilities in communities? They are all now private shopping centres that young people who look a particular way or behave a particular way are not permitted to access. Where are the spaces in a shopping centre that a child or young person who is frightened can go in order to feel safe? They do not exist and, to me, that is more of a concern.

**The Convener:** Thank you.

How do you gather your evidence from young people?

**Dr Batchelor:** The most recent research that I have been involved in is a qualitative project that was commissioned to look at the concentration of violence in particular communities and among particular groups. There is quantitative official data and police and crime survey data, but we spent time in communities alongside organisations that support people who are involved in violence, speaking to stakeholders to get an overview of the community and then doing in-depth qualitative interviews with people aged 16 to 50 who have experience of violence.

**Dr Gillon:** Our study has been focused in areas that would be considered to be hotspots for violence, so we are very much working in the heart of communities



where that is a real issue. I have particular expertise in and experience of working with young people with justice experience. We have been speaking to the adults who support them. They include front-line staff and workers from a range of backgrounds, such as youth work organisations, grass-roots organisations, police, education and social work—the people who deal with these young people and work with them in communities. We have also been speaking to the young people themselves.

In our project, we have been working with one small group of young men who have been affected by violence for more than a year and a half. We have been co-creating resources and knowledge around their experience. When I say “affected by”, I am referring to young men who have been both perpetrators and victims of violence for more than a year and a half.

**Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** You made a point earlier about recorded crime. We know that recorded crimes of shoplifting, for instance, represent a minority of actual shoplifting. Has any work been conducted to see how recorded and actual crime matches up in this area?

**Dr Batchelor:** The study that I have been involved in does not focus specifically on youth violence, but on violence more generally. The important aspect of qualitative research is that it uncovers violence that is not reported. We know that all crime is underreported in terms of reports to the police and what goes through to the courts system. Arguably, for both children and young people, and adults, repeat violence is more underreported. As violence becomes normalised in a community or in an individual’s life, they are less likely to identify an individual incident and report it to the police.

In the repeat violence study, in which we spoke to almost 100 people, only a handful of people had ever reported their violent victimisation to the police. That involved multiple experiences of violence across the life course, but in different settings: in the home, in the community, in the context of education or special educational provision, in children’s homes and in prisons. Their experiences of violence become normalised and, in that context, people are very unlikely to report. Violence is a highly underreported offence.

**Maurice Golden:** I want to get a feel for the situations where we see violence occur and the types of behaviours that we see in those situations. Do such incidents vary geographically or by age—we have touched on that—or indeed by gender? Kirkton in Dundee has been beset by violence and antisocial behaviour. We have seen that on fireworks nights, but it is on-going and staff at the Asda in Kirkton, for example, have been traumatised by children as young as six coming into their store, causing issues and terrifying lots of people. Historically, there was more of a gang culture in Dundee, and youths would fight across different schemes. In that context, do you have a bigger picture about what is going on and where, across Scotland?

**Dr Gillon:** Our study focused on Glasgow, but the lessons that we can take from it suggest that they can apply across Scotland.

Looking at what has been happening in communities in Glasgow, we realise from speaking to young people and the practitioners who support them that we cannot

untwine the link between interpersonal violence—young people committing violence between each other—and other influences. We use the term “triple violence”. Communities, families and young people are experiencing violence upon them. They are facing structural violence through poverty and inequality, and that is having an impact on the communities and families that young people are a part of. They lack opportunity and hope—including job opportunities. They describe their areas as wastelands or dumping grounds and as having no future. They recognise that social support is retracting in their communities. That covers the informal support that Susan Batchelor spoke about, including from youth centres and the youth work staff who are so vital to creating safe spaces for young people. It also includes formal support—teachers being burnt out, waiting lists for mental health support being extensive, and police just being absent.

Then we have the violence between young people, which is changing. We have seen a change in that territorial violence that was quite typical of Scotland, which you could term as gang violence. In looking at the trends, that is where we have seen the decrease. Young people have reported feeling safer, generally, and being able to scheme hop. In the main, most young people can move about their community without fear of violence.

However, as we said, for that small population—for that concentration of young people—territorial violence will still be an issue. Again, social media plays a part in that. Also, drug markets are having an impact on the violence between young people. Susan Batchelor spoke about that in relation to serious and organised crime and exploitation. Young people are being forced, through the economic hardship that they are facing, to become involved in drug markets and we know that violence is associated with that, either through enforcing debts or being the victim of having drug debts, as well as being under the influence of substances and taking part in violence because of that.

The third kind of violence that we see, which young people and practitioners could not separate from the violence that young people are committing, is the violence within young people—the mental health crisis, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic, when young people were isolated. Young people experienced severe hardship during isolation in the pandemic. The lack of support, the lack of safe spaces, the breakdown of relationships, the lack of routine, the bereavement that they experienced and the trauma that they now feel is manifesting itself in self-violence, so we are seeing self-harm, poor mental health, struggles in education and suicide. It is also playing out as violence to other people. They do not know how to cope with the trauma that they feel and they are taking risks and engaging in violent behaviours towards themselves and other people.

**Dr Batchelor:** I can add a little bit more. I emphasised earlier the limits of looking at youth violence in isolation. Fern Gillon has intimated some of the wider social harms and forms of violence that fit into that, but in terms of the different types and demographics of violence, we had the advantage in the repeat violence study of interviewing a range of ages. Many of the people that we were interviewing aged 35 onwards were the types of people that I would have interviewed 15 or 20 years ago

as young people, which demonstrates the impact of violence in terms of institutionalisation and criminalisation and the impacts on people throughout their life course.

A typical story is that somebody has experienced violence within the home, often domestic violence between the parents, usually perpetrated by a male figure within the family. That young person then gravitates towards the street-orientated peer group and has a lot of trauma and harm in their background. They may become involved in substance use as a means of dealing with that trauma and perhaps then illicit activity to support that drug use.

Young women are much more likely to experience sexual violence within that context, but young men experience very high levels of physical violence and become very anxious, because of the violence that they have perpetrated, that they are going to be attacked. Therefore, they are living in a kind of hyper-alert state. They are then often exploited by organised crime networks into drug selling or drug running.

A lot of the violence that we discovered in our research across the age range was drug debt-related violence. Drug markets are changing and the impacts of crack cocaine in Scotland must not be underestimated. There are the physiological impacts, which are short-term, but the cost of the drug and the need to fund that are shaping patterns of violence.

We are talking about people who, as adults, enter the criminal justice system, where they are exposed to more harms in a prison setting. After being further brutalised, they leave prison and enter homeless accommodation, where there is concentrated disadvantage in the form of lots of other people with the same histories and backgrounds. That accommodation is located in the centres, where young people get drawn in. When it comes to some of the violence that has been discussed in relation to urban centres in particular, we have the concentrated disadvantage of the homeless communities that were located there during Covid. We are talking about unsuitable accommodation in hotels and hostels where there are no support workers, and where there are people with on-going drug issues and a history of trauma. Young people gravitate to those urban centres and are drawn into that economy, so the cycle starts again.

This is an urgent problem that needs to be addressed, but it will not be addressed simply by focusing on the problems that affect young people. Housing is an issue, as are employment and the withdrawal of essential safe spaces and community supports that allow young people to develop relationships with people in their community. Another issue is the need for young people not to be excluded from school through what are referred to as time-limited timetables, which mean that they are actually in school for only half a day a week and are unsafe for the rest of the time. Those are the issues that need to be addressed. It is not simply a case of focusing on the problem of young people.

**Maurice Golden:** Thank you. My final question was going to be about the escalation of violent behaviour and potential interventions, but you have adeptly just answered that.

**Dr Batchelor:** I would like to emphasise the impact of the fear that the men—this affects men, in particular—who become involved in violence experience. They might be involved in committing very serious forms of harm, as a result of which they experience trauma, which they cannot discuss with anybody. There is a lack of services, particularly for men in that position. Men will not identify themselves as victims, because if they did so, that would increase their vulnerability in this context. That means that they are often not identified as victims by support workers—even support workers who understand the trauma that they experience. In dealing with the problem of violence, we need to develop peer-led, community-based support services that specifically tackle the needs of men who are involved in community and drug-related violence.

**Maurice Golden:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** Of course, we are concerned primarily with the petitioner's concerns, which are very much related to young people and, in particular, to the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland. In recent months, the petitioner has received dozens of videos, images and first-hand accounts of the violence perpetrated on young people.

**Dr Batchelor:** I would caution against the suggestion that there is a culture of youth violence in Scotland, because I think—

**The Convener:** I am sorry, but that is the name of the petition.

**Dr Batchelor:** I know, but it is important to emphasise that it stigmatises—

**The Convener:** Our job is to advance the petitioner. I am sorry, but I am not here to criticise the petitioner and neither are you.

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** Good morning. You have answered most of my questions on the reasons why young people get involved in violence. Do the same reasons apply when it comes to young people getting involved in minor criminal offences or antisocial behaviour? Are the causes the same?

**Dr Gillon:** We know that offending is a very normal experience for young people, regardless of whether it is detected. Getting involved in trouble is part of establishing the boundaries and part of growing up. Regardless of whether it is detected, most young people in Scotland will offend in some way.

I am concerned about the use of the term “antisocial behaviour” because, again, it focuses attention on the young person rather than the circumstances that they are in that are driving them or leading them to act in that way. If we acknowledge that, for most young people, there will be some interaction with or involvement in antisocial behaviour or offending, we need to look at providing universal preventative support services in communities, as Susan Batchelor said. That will enable us to address early on the indications of need or support that young people are displaying by exhibiting such behaviour. We need to consider what they are really looking for: is it the case that they need a trusted adult to speak to, are there wider concerns that might require more specialist support or is their behaviour just part of the age and stage of a young person as they grow up?

**Dr Batchelor:** If we look at what we know about those young people who are involved in the more serious forms of offending, the qualitative evidence suggests that they are the ones who have the most significant experiences of harm in their background. That might be what distinguishes them from those who are involved in more general lower-level offending. That is not to individualise the problem; it is simply to emphasise the need for more general support. Those are the young people who have experienced the most severe forms of child sexual abuse or have witnessed severe domestic violence in the family.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** Good morning to both witnesses. I would like your views on current efforts to reduce violence and on the various initiatives that, as I understand it, exist in order to promote violence reduction.

I go back to the rather distant days when I was Minister for Community Safety, working with Kenny MacAskill as the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, when a great deal of effort was put into supporting the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit and Medics Against Violence, along with diversionary activity that was funded by the cashback scheme. The VRU had at its core a belief that violence can be reduced by one-to-one intervention. Medics Against Violence involved doctors volunteering to go and speak in schools and explain to kids the consequences of violence—for example, what happens when someone is attacked with a knife and is left with a facial injury. That showed children at school just how devastating the consequences of violence were.

As I understand it, those were volunteer medics—doctors, nurses and others—who had direct experience of working in places such as Glasgow Royal infirmary on a Saturday night. As I recall from my visit there many years ago, that is not an experience for the faint-hearted.

Are those efforts effective, or do you think that more needs to be done? Do you have any suggestions or thoughts about how those activities and other, similar activities can be beefed up? I get the impression that they have perhaps not been pursued with the same gusto and enthusiasm that I felt was evident in the distant days when Kenny MacAskill and I were at the justice helm.

**Dr Gillon:** It is very hard to say which specific interventions work, because of the complexity of the issue that we are dealing with. Nonetheless, we know that, for many years, the policy and practice around violence prevention, from which the interventions that you mention are drawn, and the support for young people's general wellbeing, has been moving in a really progressive direction. Activities under the banner of public health and a whole-systems approach, involving early intervention and prevention, work. They improve the general wellbeing of young people and, in turn, keep young people safe.

The study looked across all levels at what influenced that change. Improved outcomes are possible, but coherent leadership is needed at all levels. That is what we had at the point when violence reduction really occurred in the early 2000s. There was a single narrative that violence is preventable and not inevitable. That

was the direction of travel at all levels, and those in politics, the media and practitioners got behind that.

We interviewed the former First Minister, Jack McConnell, who said that it was so important, because of the gravity of violence, not to use the issue as a political or a media football, and that the broader whole-systems approach around public health had to be the uniting factor.

We believe that improving young people's wellbeing more broadly will keep young people safe, and that any initiatives under that banner can only do good.

**Dr Batchelor:** The only thing that I would add is that, as part of the multi-agency approach that is required to tackle violence, there is a need for further funding of community-based supports that are run by people with lived experience because in areas of concentrated disadvantage, where violence levels are higher, there is a set of informal rules about no grassing. Due to a perceived lack of support from state institutions, people do not report their victimisation to the police, except in exceptional circumstances. They try to deal with violence themselves and they do not trust state systems. Funding community-based organisations that are staffed by people who are from the community, who have local relationships and connections and who can model good behaviour is what people say that they want and what young people and adults who are involved in violence say will be effective. We have seen a withdrawal of support from that area in recent years.

**Dr Gillon:** Community safe spaces were also picked up in our community work. Those are places where young people feel safe and where they can develop relationships. However, they do not want organisations parachuting in; they want community safe spaces to be of the community and staffed by local people who know the local issues, who have the authenticity that they can relate to and who operate as positive role models. Those are safe spaces that young people can return to in times of crisis or transition. The relationships and opportunities that they provide are integral to their wellbeing and are their routes out of any adversity that they face.

**The Convener:** The 6VT facility that we saw in Edinburgh was very much evidence of that.

The Milton group flagged up the home and family circumstances of the perpetrators of violence. You have spoken at length about the breakdown in the preventative work and agenda that might have been there 20 years ago and which needs to exist in order to try to stave off youth violence at the earliest point. Where that fails and where there is violence, is there a robust police and prosecution response in place to protect young people when others attack them? When it got from whatever we would prefer to be in place to violence having taken place, the people who we heard from felt let down in terms of the ability of the police to respond, the ability of the security guard to intervene or the prosecution response that took place after that.

**Dr Gillon:** We need to be mindful that, in Scotland, we have a long-standing understanding that children and young people who offend are both victims and perpetrators. Victim and perpetrator are one and the same, and making a distinction is perhaps not helpful. Although there are fewer of the young people who commit the

most serious acts of violence, their lives are increasingly chaotic and challenging, and they are increasingly vulnerable to a host of issues. As Susan Batchelor has said, further criminalising them and taking them into justice systems that will only reinforce the trauma and are less likely to support the healing and the addressing of trauma that they need to do will only go on to create more victims.

When we speak to young people about restorative justice, there are mixed feelings. Although they want to know the outcome of what happens, they are also aware that, for perpetrators of violence, there are circumstances for offending. They perhaps do not always feel safe to report crime in the first instance, because we do not have an institutional or cultural sense of protection for our young people. Further criminalisation can potentially only do more harm and create more victims.

**The Convener:** To echo what was said, because of that position, the perpetrators of the violence were outside the homes of those against whom they had perpetrated the violence, laughing at them and taunting them further, because there is no police or restorative process. Are those people right to feel let down?

**Dr Gillon:** Yes, of course. I am not trying to minimise their experiences at all. I have spoken to the same families that you have spoken to and worked with the same young girls that you have worked with. It is not that I am not aware of that experience of victimisation, but I do not see it as representing one group of young people's interests and wellbeing against another's. I see them as being directly linked. Until we can support the young people who are causing the harm, we will never be able to support the young people who are experiencing it. Yes, that requires formal responses, but it is outwith my remit to comment on the role of the police and how they respond to incidents. I see those two groups of young people as connected and it is potentially unhelpful to create a dichotomy between them.

**Dr Batchelor:** We spoke to police officers of various backgrounds as part of the repeat violence study. There was a concern about the lack of an off-ramp when they arrest or pick up a young person who might be involved in a violent disorder and take them home. That child or young person is apparently out on the street a matter of minutes later. Concern was expressed by police officers about not knowing what happens next when they respond.

Particularly among communities where there is heightened disadvantage, there was a concern that the police did not respond—when they called the police, the police did not come. However, positive views of the police were expressed in relation to community police officers. The community police officers whom we interviewed expressed a lot of frustration about being pulled out to police corporate events, concerts and so on, when they should be in the community, building relationships with people.

Policing is definitely part of the picture, but I agree with Fern Gillon that going down the route of criminalisation is unlikely to result in a positive outcome. We have lots of evidence in Scotland and internationally that that is the case. Concerns were expressed about what to do in the immediate situation where there is an incident and either the police come but feel that they cannot do anything with the young person,

or the community feels that they contacted the police but they did not come. Policing is an issue that needs to be addressed and our research would suggest more investment in community policing rather than in response policing.

**The Convener:** Thank you; that is very interesting. In the course of the discussion, we have covered one or two of the other questions that we were going to ask, so I will throw it back to you and ask whether there is anything that we have not discussed that you might have volunteered by way of testimony and that would be useful to us.

**Dr Batchelor:** I think that we have managed to anchor in all the points that we wanted to make in relation to your questions.

**The Convener:** Thank you both very much. That has been very helpful.

In the new year, we will take evidence from people with practical experience of addressing youth violence and supporting victims, as part of the extension of our inquiry underpinning the petition from Alex O’Kane. With that in mind, the committee will have a quick discussion at the end of the meeting and then reflect on the evidence at a later date.

I thank both witnesses very much for their time.



## Annexe C

# PE1947: Address Scotland's Culture of Youth Violence

## External Committee engagement session with 6VT

### Introduction

Members of the Committee, Jackson Carlaw MSP (Convener) and Alexander Stewart MSP, met with a group of young people at the Edinburgh Youth Café 6VT. The young people shared their understanding of the key issues raised in the petition, noting that the majority of participants had experienced a form of violence from another young person.

Generally, the group had experienced forms of violence both in-person and online. Participants stated that they feel scared to walk home at night and that Edinburgh City Centre is a particular area of concern. In terms of behaviours, participants indicated that carrying knives and stealing motorbikes are common issues.

The group felt that the type of individual who may become violent towards another young person would have come from challenging circumstances and would present with a group of people who likely "feel terrified as well".

### Causes of youth violence

Participants believed that for some people violence can be a means of 'showing off' in some social settings, especially among 13- to 20-year-olds who might be vulnerable to peer pressure.

Poor mental health was identified as one of the root causes of youth violence. The group shared that young people are taught to "push feelings and emotions down", leading them to abuse drugs and alcohol in order to "numb the feelings". It was stated that being under the influence of substances with unmanaged emotions then causes violence between young people. This group believes that not treating poor mental health creates a cycle which causes youth violence, leading to more young people with poor mental health as victims of such violence.

The group noted that it is easier to access illegal drugs than it is alcohol as a young person. In particular, the group stated that owing money to drug dealers can cause individuals to become victims of violence if they are unable to pay off debt.

The group discussed the impact of social media on both perpetrators and victims of violence. They stated that social media algorithms can suggest violent videos when an individual has not actively sought to view such content. Participants shared that they are exposed to violent content relatively frequently which made them desensitised or, at times, overwhelmed.

## Impact on victims

Many participants felt that a lot of people are “let down by the justice system” and don’t feel supported during the reporting process. The group shared their sense that even if they reported a crime and spent a substantial amount of time giving testimonies, the likelihood of “anything being done about it” was very low.

All of these issues were thought to be more severe in sexual violence cases where taboo, disbelief, and low conviction rates are seen as significant additional barriers to reporting crimes and reaching just outcomes.

One participant stated that the justice system process can leave victims feeling vulnerable and in the end, victims are “expected to continue on with life as if nothing happened”.

When asked what they would do in the event of an attack, one participant stated that she would go to 6VT. The group agreed with this sentiment, affirming that 6VT is a safe space where they could seek support without judgement and receive good advice. A staff member also highlighted that 6VT is a remote reporting site, meaning that staff can assist with reporting a violent incident to the police and a statement can be taken on the premises.

## Prevention

When discussing what stopped them from turning to violence, especially as they had experienced part of the violence cycle, participants shared a number of preventative interventions in their lives. The interventions included attending 6VT as this gave one participant “something to focus

on” and the group expressed that similar services could play an important role in community building, personal development and, by extension, violence prevention.

One participant had found an interest in music and joined a band. Another shared that his older brothers were involved in gangs, which made him want to “step up and be different”, while others agreed that seeing family involved in violence put them off going down that route.

Participants emphasised the need for a comprehensive approach to mental health and community support; particularly through early interventions, perhaps provided by guidance teachers who could support in building young people’s capacity to deal with difficult emotions in ways that do not include resorting to violence. In this context, addressing long waiting lists for mental health support was seen as a priority.

## Annexe D

### PE1947: Address Scotland's Culture of Youth Violence

#### External Committee engagement session with the petitioner and families with lived experience

##### Introduction

Members of the Committee, Jackson Carlaw MSP (Convener) and Alexander Stewart MSP, met with families at LoveMilton Community Centre.

The families shared their individual experiences with youth violence in the community and the impact it has had on their lives.

##### Abbie's story

The Committee heard about the experiences of three victims during the session. The text below is the statement provided by Angela Jarvis, Abbie's mother.

"Abbie had met a new friend. She was reassured by this friend that she would keep her safe. This friend knew Abbie had social anxiety. This friend made Abbie feel secure. Abbie loved her.

The said friend text Abbie to meet at the park, so nothing unusual.

At the park the friend had waited to attack. No warning. No fall out beforehand. Just a cold and calculated attack. The first attack, blows to the head, Abbie couldn't process, when she got up she tried to get away. Then came the second attack, more blows to the head and face, Abbie began seeing stars and wanted to vomit but managed to get up to run.

This led to a chase and another attack resulting in Abbie becoming unconscious, you would think the attack would stop them, but it didn't, it continued.

When I found my daughter, I couldn't process it. Her face looked deformed. I wanted to vomit. I felt faint. I was too scared for a minute to touch her. She was covered in blood and vomit. She couldn't speak, she was in and out of consciousness. I was so scared.

Adrenaline kicked in and I managed to think fast. I got her to the hospital, trying to hold her up with one hand and drive with the other.

[Referring to photographs:] This is my daughter when she would wake up and say she is scared, please don't call the police mum she will kill me. [...] I assured her she won't ever have to see this girl again. This is a serious crime, the girl will be locked away for this. Abbie still passing out and coming round again.

There wasn't one bit of her face and head that had not been kicked or punched. The bruises I just kept finding. Inside her mouth was all torn. Her head was disfigured.

[Referring to photographs:] This is the day CID arrived, this is the day I had to sit with her and hear that the likelihood is that no consequences would be given to this girl. My heart broke in two again and my daughter's fear was horrendous. My baby was broken and my heart was shattered.

My eldest boy had travelled up from England and said "see mum, I told you we should have dealt with the consequences, the system is useless."

I always thought that the police were there to protect and the justice system served justice. I couldn't process this.

Doing my homework afterwards, I learnt this girl had attacked no less than 20 children and was well known with the police and in fact I still continue to get videos or stories of attacks weekly.

Why do no consequences still stand? This is something I don't understand.

Since the attack which happened in October last year, Abbie has felt let down by the world. She has attempted to leave this world twice and won't leave the house without me [there] with her. She has lost an education through fear of school and being around teens. She has no trust. Outside is a frightening place and not a place of fun and laughter that she can enjoy before adulthood.

My son is angry and I have had to counsel him. He wanted to take things into his own hands because he sees the pain Abbie continues to suffer.

Abbie's youngest sister can no longer go where she used to go play with her friends through fear this girl will attack her.

At least we had a bit of peace of mind that we managed to get bail [i.e. the attacker was granted bail only subject to conditions, including keeping away from Abbie].

In February the said girl approached our property with a gang of boys to stare and intimidate.

Phone police. Bail is broken. There is no bail.

I still don't know to this day why there is no bail, as a victim's mum and as a victim, you don't matter. As a perpetrator, they know what's going on.

We were let down again.

Abbie's PTSD went through the roof. Having dreams of being chased. Jumping at her own shadow. And wanted to be anywhere but at her home she used to love.

Abbie has been in 24 hour care. Even moving her into my room to always be there for her.

And as a mum I am constantly thinking "how am I going to keep my daughter alive?" How can I show her that the assault was wrong?

Police Scotland told us to just keep ourselves safe, lock the doors and contacted Victim Support which provide us with three cameras.

Cameras that record. Which, yes, is evidence. But we had evidence of her beating my child almost to death, so what good are cameras that show evidence of her coming to our home?

It was providing us with a small sense of security.

In the meantime, the perpetrator attends school, has made new friends, can go out and enjoy her teenage life, and in fact continue to inflict violence and fear on others. Whilst Abbie is locked up. No education. No counselling. No friends. No summer being out enjoying herself. Often no sleep while she continues to process. Abbie feels let down by all the services. Abbie is going to go on a child protection plan because she hurts herself, but no child protection plan is in put in place when a child hurts others.

The perpetrator has all the protection. You can't share her name, you can't approach her or provide your own punishment for the crime. But

she can continue to message, intimidate and beat Abbie again if she likes and her life won't change.

If this was your child, how would you feel? Would you agree that the perpetrator should have all of the protection and no consequences?"

## M's story

Members then heard about an attack on another young girl by the same perpetrator. Her experience was similar in that the perpetrator and her friends brought M into their group. M shared that the perpetrator was known for being violent but that she became friends with her because she felt that would give her protection.

On the day of the attack, M was at a shopping centre with the group and began to realise the attack was coming when they tried to convince her to leave the shopping centre (so as, she assumed, to be out of view of CCTV).

M alerted her mum by text, who then contacted the shopping centre security to beg them to prevent any attack until M's dad could arrive. Her mum was informed that the security guards could not intervene unless an attack had begun, and they were splitting it up – there was nothing they could proactively do to prevent the attack from happening.

M was attacked by the group in the shopping centre and it was broken up by the security guards.

Her mum emphasised a lack of police action following the attack. She was initially told the attacker would be charged and believed this, particularly as there is CCTV footage of the attack to use as evidence, but she has not been given an incident number and has not had contact from the police in months since the attack.

## K's story

K's mum told Members about how her daughter was attacked on a school bus on the way home one day. She shared that K was scratched, had her hair pulled out and was stamped on by the attacker. Within an hour, her mum had been sent seven videos of the attack. The police and school explained that the consequences they could put in place were limited as the perpetrator was 12 years old. By way of punishment, the perpetrator was issued with a one-day in-school exclusion as her only

sanction. K's mum emphasised a lack of support from the school, sharing that while the perpetrator receives daily counselling through the school, K only received three sessions. K is now escorted between classes and cannot leave the school grounds at lunchtime, while the perpetrator has none of those restrictions.

K's mum shared that her daughter is now quiet and withdrawn. K no longer goes out after school with friends, suffers from anxiety, and has given up previous hobbies she enjoyed. Her siblings have also been attacked, and she receives constant messages containing threats and insults both while at school and at home.

## Causes of youth violence

The group expressed concern about a lack of discipline culturally and recognised that young people are still "figuring out who they're going to be as adults" between the ages of 12 and 14. One parent stated that a lot of young people are "given up on at home because they don't have the discipline or structure", she believes that those young people are then left without direction.

In the cases shared during the session, there were no drugs or alcohol involved and therefore did not appear to be a cause of any attack.

The participants felt that social media platforms have a role to play as young people can feel encouraged to participate in and film violence with a view to sharing it online. The parents believe that social media platforms allow violent videos to be circulated without accountability as parents do not receive responses to their communication with the platforms. The group felt that social media platforms should have a responsibility to remove videos containing such violence.

However, participants also noted that not all attacks are recorded.

## Impact on victims

The participants raised concerns about the lasting impact on victims, including their families. In particular, they emphasised that the impact is exacerbated by a lack of support from formal structures within both the education and justice systems.



The families shared their fears over the safety of their children in the local community and the young people stated that they can no longer go outside without fear. One parent added that living in a small community “makes it difficult to get distance and space” from perpetrators.

When considering the mental health impact of violence, parents shared their fears over losing their children to suicide and noted that the waiting list for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services is significant.

One mother asked:

“What society do we live in when we can’t keep our kids safe?”

In one instance, the child did not receive support from the school, which has left her scared to walk between classes alone. The parent stated that the system “was created to support the perpetrator” and that this is done at the “expense of victims”.

The group shared that at the time of reporting, families had been reassured by the police that action would be taken. However, communication stopped soon after that point. The group expressed that not being informed about the process made them feel more vulnerable to the perpetrators.

A significant sentiment from the group was that the lasting impact on victims following a violent attack is exacerbated by a lack of consequences for the perpetrators. One expressed the view that nothing will change until a child is killed or a parent takes matters into their own hands and is imprisoned for assault.

## Consequences

Throughout the session, participants emphasised a lack of consequences as the key issue for consideration. They shared concerns about rehabilitation in the community, noting that such interventions fail due to insufficient resources, which results in more violence occurring. It was suggested that for some individuals, it is necessary to remove them from the community and provide rehabilitation where they are separated from the victims.

Frustration about the justice system was expressed, with details of circumstances in which the police were unable to proceed with criminal charges due to the age of the perpetrator, including incidents with video footage and where an individual had attacked multiple people. The

police had been unable to take further action because the perpetrators were under 15 years old. In one instance, the perpetrator went on to attack more people.

More broadly, there was a sense among the group that the police hear about online threats of violence so frequently that “they become immune to it” and have stated to a concerned parent that “nine times out of ten” no attack occurs as a result of online threats. The parent’s reaction was to wonder “what if my child is the one (out of ten)?”

Another parent said of the violent children: “They are laughing in our faces – they have all the power, and they know it”. Some of these children are also attacking adults, stealing from shops and starting fires. The girl who attacked Abbie and M is now reported to be carrying a knife.

Initially the families had thought that their situations would be handled by the justice system but were left asking “what’s the point in contacting the police?”

The group discussed the impact of family and home life on perpetrators, reflecting that some parents are unable to acknowledge their child’s behaviour while others recognise the issue but feel unable to bring forward consequences at home. They emphasised the importance of parental responsibility to bring forward consequences, noting that their own children are aware that it is wrong to be violent towards other people.

When discussing the approach taken by schools, it was noted that teachers are not permitted to intervene in fights or violent attacks. By way of punishment, single day in-school exclusions were noted as common occurrences but that in other circumstances they could only provide in-school counselling for the perpetrator.

Overall, it was felt that the justice system should look at each situation on its individual circumstances and bring forward different consequences for different incidents.

## Prevention

The participants felt that schools and the police should be better supported to stop violence from happening and that when perpetrators

face consequences this will reduce the likelihood of more violence occurring in the future.

The importance of youth work was raised but with the caveat that it is “very difficult” to run such work due to funding and safeguarding requirements. One parent stated that “youth groups and individuals are trying to make a difference but it’s difficult”.