

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

4th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), Wednesday 6
March 2024

PE1947: Address Scotland's culture of youth violence

Petitioner	Alex O'Kane
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1947

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [Wednesday 21 February 2024](#). At that meeting, the Committee took 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
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. The Committee has received a new response from the Petitioner which is at **Annexe C**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,811 signatures have been received.
5. 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 D** and a note of the session with the petitioner and families can be found at **Annexe E**.

6. 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.

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 21 February 2024

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of continued petitions, the first of which is PE1947, which was lodged by Alex O’Kane, on addressing Scotland’s culture of youth violence. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland.

When we last considered this petition, we took evidence from Dr Fern Gillon and Dr Susan Batchelor, and the committee has had a meeting with an Edinburgh-based youth group, 6VT, which is just off the Grassmarket. We also visited Milton in Glasgow, where we met the petitioner with our parliamentary colleague Bob Doris in attendance. At that meeting, we heard from families—not necessarily from the Milton area; there were people from Fife present—who had had direct experience of the issues raised in the petition, and some of their evidence, which was given anonymously, was, for committee members, very harrowing to hear. However, we were extraordinarily impressed with the courage of the individuals and their families and the candour of their evidence, and I would like to thank all those who were prepared to meet us.

I am delighted to welcome our witnesses to the committee this morning: Emily Beever—[Interruption.] I have suddenly noticed that my notes were missing—they were on a different page. We have with us Emily Beever, senior development officer, No Knives, Better Lives and Will Linden, deputy head and head of analysis, Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, and I am also delighted to welcome Jonathan Watters, community policing inspector, Police Scotland. Welcome, all, and thank you for being present.

Our questions probably arise out of the different evidence sessions that we have held. I know that you are not a conglomerate, so if you have a particular view that you would like to express, just let me know that you want to come in and I will invite you to do so.

What does the available evidence tell us about the level of involvement of children and young people as perpetrators of violent behaviour? Obviously we have heard examples, but our academics did not think that it was a significant issue, particularly in relation to young people. If these perpetrators are there, are they teenagers, or younger or older than that? Secondly, is there some easily identified universal relevant factor that you can point to as the source of such behaviour, or is it much more complicated than that and not something that can be summarised simplistically by saying that it is to do with, say, deprivation, family or whatever? I would be interested in knowing that.

Who would like to kick off? It is quite a general introductory question—a starter for three, perhaps.

Will Linden (Scottish Violence Reduction Unit): What we know about violence in Scotland and the young people involved in it—and this was repeated at the previous committee meeting at which this issue was discussed—is that most, if not the vast majority, of young people in Scotland are not involved in violence or criminality. They are an absolute credit to the country, their family and their communities.

However, we also know that some groups of young people are involved in violence; some have been assaulted and are victims themselves, while others have committed the violence. However, what they are involved in tends to vary by age group; the older the age group, the more violent the behaviour is likely to be, while, as we have seen through the behaviour in Scottish schools research report, younger age groups tend to be involved in low-level violence and antisocial behaviour.

The numbers are not terribly high, but each community is different. When we have looked at specific communities and areas, we have seen that people's experiences of violence change. Having been involved with the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit since the start and the days of John Carnochan and Karyn McCluskey, I have seen violence in Scotland changing and the levels coming down significantly. That has been driven mainly by young people's behaviour, which has changed over that period, with fewer involved in carrying weapons or in violence and gang violence.

That said, when you look at the instances of violence, things are not equal. Some communities and, indeed, some families experience violence a lot more, and that goes for groups of young people, too. We might talk about a reduction or changes in violence across the country, but the fact is that, for some people, communities and individuals, it does not feel that way. It actually feels very different, particularly if you are the mother of someone who has been assaulted, if you have been assaulted yourself or if you have lost someone to violence. Violence is horrific, and it tarnishes our communities and what we look at.

You have to look at the behaviours happening within age groups to know how to tackle them. We do need to think about the young people and how we prevent this sort of thing, and we are looking at the teenage group that was mentioned in the context of some more serious violence, but the fact is that some of the most serious violence in the country is committed not by young people but by people over the age of 20. Indeed, since 2005, when I became involved in this work, we have seen that trajectory increase year after year in that age group involved in serious violence.

You cannot tackle violence through addressing youth culture alone; instead, we must tackle it across the country and look at all age groups. If we do not do that, we will not be setting the best example.

The Convener: Our academics suggested that the historical territorial gangland violence among young people is less of an issue than it once was and that the pattern of violence and the way in which it occurs are different.

Will Linden: The sort of territorial violence that was highly promoted or reported on in, for example, Glasgow in the mid-2000s has not disappeared or gone away, but it has been significantly reduced. I think that, at one point, we were reporting on 50, 60 or 70 gangs with 600 members. We are not seeing such numbers of young people being involved in that sort of thing, and we are not seeing the large territorial street fighting that we used to see in the parks on Friday and Saturday nights.

However, it still happens, and we are also seeing the influence of other factors such as social media, with the expansion of networks and in how people connect. The nature of territorialism has changed; it is not necessarily all about who your next-door neighbour might be. The idea of networks and social networks has broadened over that period, and that has affected our response, too.

The Convener: We will be looking in some detail at the influence of social media over the past 10 or 15 years, but I note that Emily Beever wants to come in.

Emily Beever (No Knives, Better Lives): We would echo what Will Linden has said: the majority of young people are not involved in violence. That is important, because one of the foundations of prevention is being reassured that the majority of young people are not carrying weapons and are not going to be involved in violence. A lot of the time, it all comes down to the fear factor; if a social norm or the feeling is created that violence is just around the corner and if the perception is that lots of young people are ready to jump in, it puts other young people on edge, and they might start taking measures like carrying weapons, because they think that they will keep them safe. We certainly want to avoid that, because it is not the case.

I do not know whether the committee has seen this, but the last time that the Scottish Government did a deep dive into the carrying of weapons and the profile of individuals involved—those responsible for the weapons and those harmed by them—it found that, depending on the classification of weapons that were being carried, those involved were in their late 20s, say, 27 to 29.

As for your question whether there is any universal factor, the situation is, of course, more complex than that. There is no universal factor, but things such as poverty, the mental health crisis and the fracturing of relationships due to the Covid pandemic make violence more likely or set young people on a path that makes it harder for them and their peers to make positive decisions.

Jonathan Watters (Police Scotland): I agree with Emily Beever and Will Linden. The vast majority of young people who come into the city centre do so to enjoy its attractions. Quite often, there is not a lot for them to do in their local area, and often they do not have much money on them, which leads to an element of hanging about. However, that does not necessarily mean that they are doing anything wrong. There might be the perception among members of the public that they are, but more often than not, that is not the case.

As Emily Beever has said, there is certainly no universal factor here. Sometimes elements such as alcohol can be a factor in the way that children and young people present to us, but it is just one of many factors. According to our analysis and

statistics, it is males in the 26 to 35 age group who are more likely to be involved in violence than young persons.

The Convener: The committee is particularly concerned about younger people. The victims of violence we met were 12 or 13 years old. One was the subject of violence on a school bus. One was a slightly withdrawn individual who was artificially befriended and more or less invited by appointment to be assaulted. We might have a chance to look at some of that in more detail later. The victims were girls and they were attacked by other girls. The committee heard about horrendously despicable acts involving people of a relatively young age, egged on by the peer group in attendance. Are those two examples uniquely awful or, in the pattern of trends, is there a trend of growth, however small, in youth violence in that age group?

Emily Beever: We have just done a piece of work on the specific issue of violence between girls because practitioners have been telling us that they feel it is becoming more frequent and perhaps more serious. The statistics do not show that because they do not record it in that way, so we went out to young people and spoke to them directly.

The majority of the young people we spoke to had violence woven throughout their lives. They had been responsible for violence but had also been harmed by violence—perhaps in the home or perhaps through social media—and they were saying that, where they were responsible for harm through acts of violence, it was as a result of all those other things. They were young people who were loyal to their friends, which also sometimes meant that they got involved in fights.

They felt that they did not have many trust in adults. They said explicitly that teachers do not care until there was a crisis point—until they were in a fight—so they really felt that they were not getting support. They were young people who were fiercely protective of their families. We found that families were a real trigger point for violence—for example, if someone had said something about someone's family—and also that some families condoned violence. There was a lot of pressure on these young people from all those different arenas, and that culminated in violence in some shape or form.

We are now exploring how to support young people, girls in particular, to develop those trusting relationships with adults, to make sure that they have that support in place and that they have support to navigate social media in a positive way. We put a lot of onus on young people to navigate social media. It is a complex place with lots of things that are acting against us, including all the persuasive design that is in there.

Young people also lacked any kind of hope or optimism for the future, so they felt that that was it, that was their lot for life and it was always going to be like that. Until we have a positive future for them, they will feel that there is nowhere else for them to go.

Jonathan Watters: Again, I agree with Emily Beever. The two examples that the convener gave are uniquely awful. Common assaults are quite frequent and low-level public nuisance is the top call involving young people that the police attend in Glasgow city centre, so in relation to young people we generally deal with crime at a very low level as opposed to those more serious matters.

The Convener: We will come back to that. Some colleagues will attest that I represent a relatively affluent area in that I am the MSP for the Eastwood constituency on the south side of Glasgow, which has some very high-income areas but it also has its own less fortunate areas. This is another theme that we might come back to but I have had examples of youth violence brought to my attention and I am struck by what seems at times the lack of parental responsibility in acknowledging that their children can in any way be responsible for acts of youth violence. Those parents, therefore, support neither the teachers nor the school and have themselves become part of the harassing posse, if I can put it that way, of the individuals who have been the subject of the violence.

Of course, that is an emerging trend. Teachers, particularly those who have left the profession, have been saying to me for a very long time now that if they only had to deal with the children that would be fine, but they now find dealing with the parents almost impossible because they get very little support from them. That is a theme that I want to come back to, but I do not want to hog all the time, so I will hand over to David Torrance.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning to the witnesses. I know that the media will be watching this, so, in your opinion, is the experience of violence among children and young people increasing? I just want to get your views on that on the record.

Will Linden: That is a very difficult question. Just now, the reporting of violence is not increasing. What we are seeing is maybe at a very low level, in terms of stuff that is coming through schools and so on. From the perspective of policing and recorded crime, we are not really seeing an increase, but that may be to do with recording issues.

What we are probably feeling on the ground, from listening to people, is that there is a feeling that violence is increasing. I am a bit concerned that that might cascade a few years down the line and that in 18 months or so we might start to see an increase in recorded crime and an increase in violence. Although we might not be seeing it just now, it does feel that way, but not at any catastrophic level—it does not feel as though it is going to go out of control. I still think that there is an opportunity—if we intervene, we can provide support and help and stop this from happening—but I am concerned.

Jonathan Watters: The data over the past five years shows that the number of incidents reported is quite stable. There was a spike just after Covid, throughout 2022. The first 11 months of 2022 were particularly bad, with youths coming into the city centre on the back of the lifting of Covid restrictions. That led to more reports, but since then the number of incidents has levelled out. There has been no real

change over the past five years. There might be a perception that things have got worse, but certainly from my experience and from the statistics that I have, there has been no real change to the level of incidents.

Emily Beever: It is worth saying, in case the committee has not seen or looked at it in detail, that the latest version of the “Health Behaviour in School-aged Children” report, which came out last June, paints a really bleak picture of what is going on for young people in Scotland. Not that many young people are very happy with their lives and not that many are confident. Lots of young people feel lonely. All those things make for a perfect storm in terms of situations where young people are just less able to make positive decisions. The results are quite drastic when we look at how those numbers have changed since 2018. It is definitely worth the committee looking at that report to get that perspective from young people who are telling us how their lives really are.

David Torrance: Going back to violence among young people, what part have social media sites such as Instagram, TikTok and so on played in relation to an increase in violence? I have seen some horrendous videos on some of the social media sites, where people are boasting about what they have done and they are quite proud about it. In Fife, there was a video about a school teacher being assaulted by a pupil and it went viral everywhere. How has the rise of social media played a part in violence among young people?

Emily Beever: I can talk to young people’s experience and what they have told us about how they use social media. Certainly, social media includes some enabling factors. For example, young people told us that very large group chats on Snapchat are often used to co-ordinate fights. Young people have said that, once they were added into one of those groups, they felt as though there was no way out and that they had to have a physical fight. They felt trapped. Even if they did not want to fight, they did not feel that there was a way out. That is one way that social media has contributed.

It is worth saying that this is not just confined to Scotland. Because of the spread of networks available to young people, some of the young people we spoke to were receiving harrowing threats, even death threats, from young people outside of Scotland who somehow had been added into these massive group chats or who somehow had got their number.

Young people also experience other types of violence through social media—not only violence in videos of young people fighting each other but serious animal cruelty, for example, as well as bullying or other types of harassment that are maybe not even aimed at young people. Young people said that there was an ever present sense of violence within social media.

Will Linden: Emily Beever raises some very good points. One problem with social media is the algorithms and how they attract people to watch videos and how things are shared, propagating things such as likes or streaks. That can give social media an addictive quality for young people.

Is social media a cause of violence? I am not so sure. I do not think that it helps. It is an accelerant—it can make things a lot worse. We need to take a serious look at how we address it and how we police it at a national level because there are real challenges with social media. Social media companies need to look seriously at what they are doing and how they are exposing young people to it.

We are also exposing adults to it. We need to remember that young people are, if you like, learning machines. They come into this world and learn from their community—from their parents and other adults—from the people around them. Young people's behaviour is sadly a reflection of some of our own behaviours so we need to address our attitude towards social media as well.

Young people's attitude to social media and their use of it differs vastly from our own. Adults use social media, the internet and technology for transactional behaviour—we use it to do things. For young people, the lines between the real world and social media can be blurred and they can merge. We need to look at some of the work that Emily Beever was talking about and listen to young people more about what would work and how we could address problems; we need to take the lead from them on what to do.

The Convener: I want to illustrate that point with the evidence from one of those young people from whom we heard. She was a 12-year-old girl who was vulnerable. She was befriended on social media and invited to meet the individual by whom she had been befriended. She found that, in fact, she had been invited to an appointment where there was a crowd of people. She was then physically assaulted. The incident was filmed. She was left unconscious. She was hospitalised. Her parents did not recognise her when they saw her in hospital. The video of the assault was posted, not anonymously but with the names of all those involved attached. They did that because, in their minds, if you are under 25 the procurator will not take forward any action against you. Therefore, they felt that they could do that with impunity. By thinking that way and by promoting that view, they are encouraging others to do the same.

I accept that, in that case, social media is a tool that is being used by people who are disposed towards that kind of violence, but it struck me that the more that there is a belief, rightly or wrongly, that that process as it was described is accurate, the more it will encourage more of the same, because the people perpetuating the violence felt empowered. However appalling it might be, they felt that it made them untouchable and gave them status within their peer group. That is an example of what you and David Torrance are talking about that we heard about directly. It was very difficult not to be profoundly struck by it.

Will Linden: Yes. It is a telling point and I know the case that you are referring to.

If we go back to 2005, before most social media, there were instances of things such as happy slapping, in which people would be videoed being assaulted and it would be posted on things such as Myspace or the videos were shared. Now, because we have that speed, that alleged anonymity and a belief in a lack of consequences, it

makes a significant difference in relation to people posting things. It can encourage other behaviours.

We also know that the ability to share videos through social media results in constant retraumatisation for the victim because it is constantly out there. It is hard to take down. Even if the social media companies take things down, they have already been shared across WhatsApp groups and so on. It is not like a violent incident of old, whereby you might have been assaulted but you may have been able to move on from it if it was not too traumatising. This is traumatising every day, not just for the victim but for the victim's family and friends as well. It is horrific.

Can we address it through sanctions? Perhaps. Behaviours have consequences but we have to understand what those consequences are and we have to understand what works best. We also have to support the victims and victims' families better. We are not terribly good at that. We need to think about things from the victims' perspective and support them. At the same time, we do not want to see this violence; we want to prevent it. I would not like to spend all our time dealing with victims' services and dealing with trying to stop offenders from offending again. I would rather prevent that violence from happening in the first place.

The Convener: One of the parents said that they were slightly aghast that the remedy was to put in place a series of actions to support the perpetrator of the violence, to try to take them out of the culture of violence, but that the victim of the violence had received virtually no remedial support whatsoever. David Torrance, sorry—I interrupted you.

David Torrance: That is okay, convener. Thank you.

This question is to Mr Watters. Some of the evidence that the committee has taken from families was about social media and threats of violence or violence on social media. They felt that the police had “become immune to it” and that there was no response from the police. Can you put on record what your position is?

Jonathan Watters: Yes, these videos are very concerning. It is very harrowing to hear the details of the incidents that you talk about. Having to live through an experience again and again because it is on social media compounds the experience for the victim and their family. I do not take away from that at all.

However, in my experience social media is not the main issue. It is the violence itself. For every instance we have a bespoke care package for each victim, particularly if they are young, in which we try to link in with the schools. We also look at whether incidents are related to gangs. We also try to link in with campus officers who work in the schools.

How successful the youth justice system can be is not very visible. There are three different levels of direct measures by the police. It may be surprising to learn that 75 per cent of children who are taken home and given a formal warning in a first instance do not offend again. Then we move to early effective intervention, which again is about diverting youths away from violence and offending. That has proved to be very effective. I can speak about Glasgow because I am the community inspector

for Glasgow city centre. Early effective intervention works. It does not work in all instances, but it does on the whole. If the offences are of a very high level, the case will go to the procurator fiscal or the children's reporter.

We have a system in Glasgow called One Glasgow for young people who are repeatedly offending. We are intervening. We find that 93 per cent of those who are referred to One Glasgow get involved in that diversionary programme. It has been found to be very effective. Often, the effective measures are not visible to the public, which is unfortunate. A lot of good work is happening in the background.

David Torrance: I have one more question for you, Mr Watters. The families we spoke to did not feel that the police would respond to any threats to their children on social media. Can you elaborate on what Police Scotland would do if such threats were constantly being aimed at a child?

Jonathan Watters: We would have to look at it case by case. If there is a video or there are social media threats, there are provisions under the Communications Act 2003 that we should be using. We can prefer charges against those who are responsible. There is legislation available and we should be using it for those offences, but we would have to look at each individual case.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Good morning, panel. I have a couple of questions. I want to stick with social media first.

So many fake accounts have been opened. If an account has been opened in my name and I report that to the police, the response from the police is, "Sorry, we cannot do anything," but that fake account can put up loads of stuff. Recently, I have been getting quite a lot of complaints from ethnic minority people that fake accounts have been opened for young people but, when it has been reported to the police, the police have just walked away. Do you have anything to say about that? The police say that you have to write to the social media company. Do you think that social media companies are not taking responsibility, as it is quite easy to open an account in anybody's name without any background checks?

Jonathan Watters: A lot of the social media companies are based abroad, which makes it more difficult for Police Scotland to engage with them to try to get their co-operation. Some companies co-operate and we try to make things better for people reporting what you describe. If people think that their details have been used fraudulently to set up a fake account, they should report it to the police. I would encourage that.

Foyso Choudhury: Thank you.

I will ask about another thing. I have a lot of constituents, mostly from Leith, who have shops or education centres that have been targeted by youngsters—12, 13, 14-year-olds—kicking at the windows and the doors all the time. It is the same people. When the police have been called, they have said that the young people are under age and that they cannot do anything. If the shopkeepers or the business owners go out and talk to the kids, their parents will come and start jumping on them. What response should I give to my constituents who are going through that sort of trouble?

Those things are happening more or less every single day in Leith—on Ocean Drive and so on. I constantly get emails from the shop owners.

Will Linden: That is a good point. This is about how we respond to problems at a local level. When we look at groups of young people coming together at areas around shops and transport hubs, and we perhaps find increasing antisocial behaviour, low-level violence and other crimes and issues that, as has been said, are just young people hanging around, we know that what works are things such as hotspot policing. Hotspot policing is incredibly effective, but hotspot policing is not just about policing and criminal justice. It involves identifying where some of the challenges are and how we can best deploy resources. That could be multiagency partnership resources, it could be youth workers, or it could be street workers, such as a hospital navigator or a street navigator, engaging with young people to find out what is happening, listen to why they are there and try to help them move along. We do not want to see young people being criminalised and brought into the criminal justice system. Equally, we want to see people in the community being able to go about their daily business and not be scared and to be free from that sort of behaviour. We want shopkeepers to be able to continue with their daily business.

There has to be some way of addressing the problem. We have to be able to deploy some form of resources but, again, that might take some funding to allow us to think about what we want to do. It takes resources. It takes people resources to deal with people problems, and that is one of the issues that we face.

Emily Beaver: It is worth emphasising what Will Linden said about talking to the young people involved and finding out what the drivers for violence are. Is it that there is nothing else for them to do and that they have found something to amuse them but it just so happens that that is inconvenient and unpleasant for the people who are experiencing it? What about moving money in youth work services upstream so that young people are not in a position to be making these choices in the first place? That is where we should be emphasising funding for preventative measures.

Foyso Choudhury: This is my last question. There has been an announcement about police stations closing. Local gurdwaras and mosques and communities feel more comfortable when they know that there is a police station nearby. Do you think that closing down police stations in the area will make people feel worried that there will be a lot of trouble? That is probably for Mr Watters to answer.

Jonathan Watters: I think that people are more interested in where the police officers are as opposed to the physical buildings. The Scottish Government has invested a lot in mobile devices so that officers can be in their areas and can work remotely using their devices. They do not have to return to a physical building to do things such as paperwork. With advancements in technology, the buildings themselves are less important. They might be symbols in the community in that people know where they are, but the police are just like every other public service and have budget constraints. Even if they are looking to save money on buildings, the police officers will still be in the communities. It will just be the buildings that might not be there any more.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Some years ago, from 2007 to 2011, I was community safety minister and, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice at that time, Kenny MacAskill, we worked very closely with John Carnochan and Karyn McCluskey. I was struck by their passion but also by their practical approach.

In talking about preventing youth violence, we have heard from Inspector Watters about diversionary activity. It seems that one of the key ways—Inspector Watters has confirmed it this morning—to take young people on to a different path of life and thinking and away from mindless violence is to provide diversionary activity. At that time, we introduced the idea of cashback, investing money that was taken from criminals—drugs money, for example, or other property seized—in diversionary activity. Is that still one of the main corrective approaches? If so, is it being supported sufficiently?

I am not just talking about taxpayers' money or resources, as people tend to call it, as if it were a type of mineral. It is not; it is money, but it is not just money. It is also a will and a purpose among Government agencies to get things done and not pass them to somebody else's desk. I do not know the answer to this question, but I want to hear from each of the witnesses. Are we doing enough? Should we do more and, if so, how do we go about that? What do we need to do more of or do better that could help to divert some of these young people away from some of the acts of mindless violence that we have heard about in what were extremely harrowing cases, as the convener has pointed out?

Will Linden: You raise some very good points about what we need to do. In the days when cashback was introduced, along with a number of other programmes that John Carnochan and Karyn McCluskey helped to pioneer, we were looking at the idea of primary and secondary prevention and how we stop the transition of young people into crime, how we change behaviours, how we stop people carrying knives and how we engage with them. It was incredibly successful. Some of the best evidence around that from an international perspective is in some of the diversions out there, such as social skills training, sports, mentoring and navigators, and the idea of supporting people in the community at that point in need.

We need to invest more. We need to invest more of our time and our effort and make decisions about what faces our young people today. If we are not making decisions about how young people are served by our communities, we could still be facing these problems in future and they will only accelerate.

Whose responsibility is it? It is everyone's responsibility. One of our mantras that go through what we do is that this is about leadership and not necessarily just political leadership. It is about leadership at all levels and not looking to the left and to the right and saying, "You need to do something." This is about us all doing something, whether it is political leaders, teachers, police officers, family members, community members, brothers, sisters. We all have a choice to make about violence. We all have a choice to make about our children's futures and how we spend our money, how we spend our resources, how we spend our time. There may well be political

decisions through budgets, but we have to make a decision about what we want for the future.

Emily Beever: Cashback is a great example. The programme recently changed and shifted some of the money away from smaller grass-roots organisations. The longevity of funding across the third sector has to be a consideration. It takes a long time to build sustainable, meaningful relationships with young people. If you are working with one-year funding and then you do not get it renewed, the young people do not have stability. They cannot trust that process and then we see a lot of young people falling out of services and falling out of youth work provision because of funding cuts and the fact that the programme that they go to in the summer has been cut or whatever it might be.

We have provided the committee with some examples of current, on-going youth work activities. As Will Linden said, it takes a team. There is a great example of a partnership between Children in Need and McDonald's. Lots of McDonald's restaurants were facing antisocial behaviour and disruption from young people. Instead of being punitive and banning young people from McDonald's, the company is trying to talk them, welcome them in and do some employability and skills work with them. Young people now have part-time jobs in McDonald's. There are also detached youth workers present to support the young people who are there to have those trusting relationships. There are lots of different things going on and certainly more funding for youth work that can be embedded within our communities would be of benefit.

Will Linden: Backing up what Emily Beever said, particularly around strategic funding, I think that something like cashback with three to five years' worth of funding for an organisation allows long-term planning and long-term development of workforces and services and training of youth workers and people who can interact and work well with the communities. It is difficult for the many third sector and community organisations that do the vast majority of that on-the-ground preventative work across Scotland to deal with year-to-year funding. If you have those sorts of troubles with funding and you do not know what the future will be, how can you make the planning decisions that you need to make to support your communities better? We need to look at how we fund in general, particularly for those smaller organisations, because those are the ones that make the real difference, especially in building relationships with young people to help prepare them better for the future.

Fergus Ewing: Longer-term funding is needed, because year-to-year funding is the death knell of schemes given that, by definition, it takes longer than a year to do anything worth while, by and large.

I do not know whether Inspector Watters wants to answer the question about what the police role is or should be. What more could the police do, if anything, on diversionary activity?

Jonathan Watters: One project that we are doing in Glasgow city centre is called the common ground youth project. The police cannot provide that diversionary activity alone, so that project will be led by Barnardo's. It involves having youth

workers in the city centre to try to engage with young people who are sometimes on the periphery of groups, and to signpost them to services in their communities. Sometimes only limited services are available, but there are more services back in the communities than in the heart of Glasgow or other cities. That is an important first step in trying to make things better. Of course, we could do more and, by working with partners, we can at least enhance our chances of success.

Fergus Ewing: I am sure that you do a lot of good work. As you say, sadly, much of it is invisible, which is a shame.

In the distant days when I had an executive function, we sometimes used the Army and Army facilities such as barracks as well as outdoor activity establishments to take youngsters from Glasgow who, as I think John Carnochan said, had been identified as about to go into serious crime. They had started on criminal activity and John's view was that, if things took their course, it was just a matter of time until they got involved in more criminality, went to Glenochil, ended up in Barlinnie and so on.

John's idea was to get them in a room and give them one of his typical talks, which I imagine would make most people's hair curl. However, he also wanted to take them out of their habitat and the place that they were happy with, which was maybe out in the schemes somewhere, and go somewhere entirely different such as the Cairngorms. The Army was very good at that, because that is what it does. It takes young men—they are mostly men, although there are women as well nowadays—and turns them into stronger and better team-playing people. That is what Army training is all about, and it is very good at that.

Maybe that sounds old-fashioned to some people, but I think that that strand—although it is not the sole answer—would help young people, particularly boys in their teens, from becoming hardened criminals. The minute investment that is involved would repay itself in spades, by avoiding all the misery that such criminality would cause throughout their lifetimes, for other people and themselves.

Is that happening now, or has it been dropped?

The Convener: I was going to ask whether that was a reflection or a question, Mr Ewing, but we got to a question in the end.

Emily Beaver: Such activities certainly still continue, with the Army and other providers. It is worth saying that some young people will thrive within the boundaries of the rigid Army setting, but others might not. A range of providers have that kind of system, which involves taking young people out of their norm and showing them something different. As I referenced at the start, some young people cannot see a different future for themselves—it can be hard to imagine. Just having that break and the opportunity to learn something different can be important.

Venture Scotland is one organisation that has lots of provision that involves teaching young people outdoor skills, doing outdoor activities and spending lots of time in nature. That has a health and wellbeing impact as well as an impact on antisocial behaviour and perhaps involvement in violence.

Fergus Ewing: Precisely. That was helpful.

Will Linden: Those programmes can be effective, but that is not just about the programme; it tends to take a lot of work, before and afterwards. It does not matter whether it is an Outward Bound adventure course or a week's residential course with the Army—although, as Emily Beever said, that might rile some young people—it is about the work that you do afterwards to support the person. Just taking a young person out of their scheme and away from their environment, their troubles and the trauma that they face daily for a week might give them a week's respite and reflection but, if you put them back into the same trauma, community, problems and so on, the gains can quickly be eroded.

We have found that we need to support young people when they come back, through things such as mentoring by adults and peers and people who can support them daily and look to challenge some of their behaviours as well as some of the circumstances that got them there in the first place. It is much more elongated than a one-week or even a one-month programme. It takes a significant amount of time and resources to deal with young people who have significant trauma and issues and to help to change that.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I am interested in the justice system response in the widest possible sense. I welcomed the comments from Mr Watters about the three tiers. I was interested in the statistic that he provided that, when the police take children home, 75 per cent do not reoffend, which is amazing.

However, I am interested in the more extreme end of the three-tier approach. What are the likely consequences of multiple assaults, particularly where an individual moves from the children's hearings system into the criminal justice system? Is the children's hearings system adequate? I know anecdotally from my experience in Dundee that individuals can sometimes rack up dozens of convictions, if you like, in that system and then have a big shock when they enter the criminal justice system. What are the likely steps in those cases, which I hope are the more extreme ones?

Jonathan Watters: The more extreme cases would be reported to the fiscal and there would be a children's hearing. It would then be down to a sheriff whether to put in statutory measures and whether the person needed compulsory care in the local authority. That is an extreme measure. We try to intervene and provide diversions before someone gets to that stage.

I am not sure about Dundee but, as I mentioned, in Glasgow we have the One Glasgow system, which involves people who repeatedly come to the attention of the police. Last year, 99 people entered that system and it was effective. It does not just look at the individual; it looks at the whole family, because quite often, as Will Linden said, you might remove a person for a short time from their environment but then they go back. We need to take a whole-family approach and think about what financial assistance we can provide and about employability and whether the young people have any hope for the future. We need to look at all of that, which is why schemes such as One Glasgow are effective.

On the tier system, early intervention is quite effective. When someone gets to the higher levels—to the procurator fiscal and the court system—what happens is almost

outwith the control of the police. However, the police are involved before it gets to that level, and our role, along with our partners, is to try to prevent escalation.

Emily Beever: It is important that we ground this conversation in a children’s rights-based approach, which is at the front of everybody’s mind at the moment. We need to think about what a justice system for children would look like. We are talking about children. Even if they have been responsible for harm, we have to hold that uncomfortableness and have that difficult conversation. Yes, they need to be held accountable, but they also need help to recover from whatever they are going through and with their reintegration into society. They are not lost causes that we need to ship off somewhere and hide away from everybody else.

In thinking about what child-friendly justice looks like, a good definition that we use and share with practitioners is that a good friend can tell you when you have done something wrong and they will help you to do better next time. That is what we need to have. We must help young people who are responsible for harm or for violence to do better next time. We have to see that they are not the sum of their behaviours. Even if those behaviours have been frequent, we must always have that hope and optimism for transformation and change and be with them in doing it.

The Edinburgh study of youth transitions and crime, which has followed young people throughout their lifetimes—they are now in their mid to late 30s—recommends maximising diversion from the criminal justice system. That system just does not work for young people; it does not set them on a better path. Given that the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child will come into force in the next few months, we have to keep all that in mind and think about what that looks like and how it could be a radical shift for our justice system for children.

Maurice Golden: You have articulated what the system should be. To pick up on some of Mr Watters’s evidence, is there any evidence that putting a child into local authority care or a secure unit has beneficial outcomes for the individual? What is the panel’s assessment of the effectiveness of the justice system response?

Emily Beever: I cannot comment on the totality of that, but certainly we work with young people who are in secure care and sometimes in the young offenders institution at Polmont. They are some of the nicest young people you have ever met, and those are always our easiest sessions. The young people there are much keener to engage than when we go into schools, for example, which is always striking. However, those young people are vulnerable. They are there because they are vulnerable for a whole load of reasons and potentially because they are a danger to others or themselves.

We often see the same young people in that system. To give one striking example, we went to one secure care unit and a young person said, “I met you a few months ago in the other secure care unit.” They were still in that system. Another young person said, “I have to go to Polmont later. What’s it like?” They had never been. Another young person said, “My whole family has been in prison.” They had been in

Barlinnie and so on. That gives a sense of who those young people are, what that demographic is and the level of support that they need.

In secure care, there is quality support and people can build relationships with the staff. I cannot speak to the statistics of that, but certainly the young people who we have met need a lot of support to do better next time.

Will Linden: I will not comment on whether the justice system is effective or ineffective, as that is outside my expertise. However, it could be better. We could decide not to go down that silo route of just having a justice system response.

The examples that have been given of young people committing multiple crimes, including multiple acts of violence, hark back to a phrase that former Glasgow director of education Maureen McKenna once said to me, which was, "All behaviour is communication." What is a young person telling me about their life, why they keep committing crimes, why they keep getting involved in violence, why this is happening to them, and why it is not being stopped or why we are not doing something about it?

If the justice system is not currently able to work to transform and transition young people and let them have better outcomes, whatever that looks like for them, we need to think about what else is needed. How do we work across our systems, such as our mental health, social care and education systems? The problem is that we have all these systems and we expect young people to navigate them. We expect the young person to be part of a system rather than placing the young person at the centre and having the system navigate around them.

Would I say that the system is perfect? It absolutely is not, but it is probably the best that it can be at the moment. We just need to think about it differently.

Maurice Golden: Jonathan, do you want to comment?

Jonathan Watters: I am not sure whether having children in secure facilities is successful, as that is outwith my area of expertise.

Maurice Golden: That is fair enough.

My final question is about the role of schools in prevention. We have discussed the role of social media, but I imagine that a lot of the violence emanates from the school environment, even if it does not take place there. In your assessment, how effective are schools at intervening early and at working with the police to get community officers out? Anecdotally, I have heard that primary schools, in particular, are very effective in combating social media abuse, for example. I am keen to hear your views on the role of schools and the education system.

Will Linden: Schools play an incredibly important role in that regard. There are many old phrases or adages on the subject: teachers can teach only what parents provide and what communities provide, and it takes a community to raise a child.

The idea of schools being solely responsible for addressing such behaviour is difficult. Schools are there to educate, train and prepare young people for their future in the widest possible sense. They do a great job, but it is a struggle for them just now. The issues with teachers complaining about behaviour and violence in schools

have been well publicised. They probably need more help and support. We cannot keep expecting schools to fix some of our social problems. Wider issues are at play.

We need to support schools to address such behaviour. It goes back to the primary prevention and secondary prevention modelling. If we want to truly help, we need to help schools more. We need to provide resources so that there can be additional help for educational psychologists, mentoring, youth work and so on. We have good relationships with campus officers and the third sector. Schools need to be given as much help as possible if we want to prepare our young people for their best future. I do not know whether they have that help just now. That is a question for teaching unions and teachers to discuss.

Emily Beever: There are some great examples of schools being innovative in using their resources and time to support young people, but the picture is quite mixed—there is not a consistent picture—because schools do not all have the same resources. For example, campus officers are not in every school. In areas such as Falkirk, there is a campus officer in every school, whereas areas such as Aberdeen do not have any.

If a school has the resources and can commit the time, it is able to develop positive relationships with young people. It all comes down to that. I am sure that we can all think of teachers who stood out and with whom we had a positive relationship. We need that for all young people. Teachers need to have the breathing space in the curriculum and in the school day to foster those relationships, but that can be challenging.

The Convener: I feel that I have a duty to the petitioner and to the witnesses from whom I heard to ask this question. They understand that the police operate within guidelines, issued by the Lord Advocate, that deal with the circumstances in which alleged offences committed by children should be reported to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. What impact do those guidelines have on police who have to deal with allegations of violence? Does more need to be done to explain to victims what action is and is not being taken?

The experience of those witnesses was not abstract; it was real. They were told by the police, “They are under 25. There’s nothing we can do. It’s not worth it. The procurator won’t act.” As a consequence, in both cases, the families felt unable to leave their homes, because they had come into contact with the perpetrators, who provoked them further, mocked them and made their lives difficult in their community because they felt that they were immune. Bizarrely, their parents seemed to be part of the posse of those abusing the victims. Gone are the days when some parents would have felt that they had a duty to act in respect of their children; they now seem to feel that they have to defend their children in front of the people who were abused.

What would you say to those people? They listened in some despair to our academic discussion at our previous evidence session, and they tried to relate that to their absolutely appalling experiences and the lack of any response.

Will Linden: My response is quite simple. We need to be more transparent with parents and families, who need help and support. They have been victimised and

are traumatised daily. If we do not do that, are we fulfilling our public sector duty? I am not so sure.

I cannot comment on specific policing and COPFS procedures, but we must better look after victims and their families. It is, quite frankly, incomprehensible if we are not doing that. We are talking about people who have faced traumatic challenges in life—the victims are sons or daughters who have been assaulted or affected by violence—and it does not stop.

People reconnecting and continuing to provoke—you talked about parents supporting that—is not new. We saw that back in the 2000s in relation to gang members, with parents actively supporting violence. That is not new behaviour. Many parents cannot understand such behaviour, because they do not necessarily expect their children to be involved in it—perhaps there has to be some realism and a check on that.

We must address such behaviour, and we have to work from a victim perspective, not just from the perspective of tertiary prevention. From a victim perspective, there should be no victims. We should stop such behaviour in the first place; there should be no violence. We should not rest until every young person in Scotland feels safe from violence and does not have to deal with the consequences. However, when violence happens and there are consequences, we should support victims as much as we can.

Jonathan Watters: I cannot comment on individual cases but, on the whole, we provide a robust police response. It does not matter whether the victim is young or old; we use the same investigation model. We take witness statements, review closed-circuit television and report the circumstances to the procurator fiscal or to the children's reporter. There is no difference in our approach.

Perhaps those of us in the police at low levels need to show leadership by cascading information to other officers and saying that we need to be more transparent with victims, as Will Linden said. Young people can still be arrested and taken into custody if that is in the interests not only of the young person but of the community. We have police powers at our disposal. As I said, on the whole, the youth justice processes are successful, but the disposals and the diversionary work that takes place are probably not visible to communities. From the beginning, we are trained to take a victim-centred approach. We should provide that to the public. In more cases than not, we do so, but sometimes the system is not perfect and people get let down.

The Convener: Mr Ewing has a final quick follow-up question.

Fergus Ewing: Out of fairness, I will follow suit and play devil's advocate. One mother provided quite harrowing evidence of an assault on her young girl. I will not mention names, but the mother said:

“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.”

I mention that because, over the years, I have quite often heard it said that the police knew well that an individual had been involved in many other crimes and had carried out many other assaults. I appreciate that that is just a general claim with no particular evidence behind it, but I mention that case because it is probably not an isolated experience. Many people, perhaps those living in areas of extreme poverty, find that a young hoodlum is causing endless mayhem but that nobody ever seems to do anything about it.

That is extremely unfair to the police. Even if the police do their job, there is the question of what happens when the case goes to the justice system. I am aware that some argue that not much happens.

Inspector Watters, what would you say to this mother whose daughter was attacked by another female in a horrific way that left her almost unrecognisable as a result of her facial injuries? She is now scared to go out at all. Can the police or any other authorities do anything more to identify youngsters who plainly cause serious injury and harm to other young people in Scotland?

Jonathan Watters: It is difficult for me to comment on the case that you have described, because I do not know all the details. There is an escalation process. The system sometimes lets people down but, on the whole, it works, and the police have clear guidelines on what we should do.

The difficulty is that the persons committing the offences are young people themselves, so we need to take a public health approach. How can we divert them away from offending? We do not simply look at punishing the young people; we think about how we can divert them away from a life of crime.

It is difficult to answer your question, given the harrowing details, but, on the whole, a robust system is in place that serves the majority of the public. I do not think that that will bring much comfort to the victims who have been mentioned, but I encourage people to report such incidents.

The Convener: I have allowed the question session to run on a little bit, because it is an important subject. Would you like to volunteer any final comments before we conclude?

No one has any other comments. I am very grateful to the witnesses for their helpful, candid and forthright evidence.

Annexe C

Petitioner submission of 28 February 2024 PE1947/E: Address Scotland's culture of youth violence

I watched the two academics giving their evidence to the Committee about youth violence and crime and as the petitioner I feel compelled to respond.

Firstly, can I stress that I mean no disrespect whatsoever towards the academics. I'm simply giving my honest response to the testimony they gave.

When I heard their evidence and their conclusions, I actually asked myself "is it me?"

This immediately gave me the feeling of "deja vu" as I recalled a disturbing chapter of my life which, in part, is well documented in the national media and books.

Years ago, I found myself raising serious concerns about a very serious situation. The police took a firm stance that there was no evidence and no concerns. The local authority took the same stance, including all of its departments. The majority of the local politicians either took the same stance or went completely silent. The media took the stance that they had to go with the official narrative from all of the above agencies and organisations. Indeed, the local authority's press office engaged in a campaign to discredit me by telling reporters that I was just a "bampot". This is important and I will come back to this.

At this point I remember thinking "is it me".

I could see a situation which involved serious criminality and the safety of children but all the agencies, organisations and officials with a responsibility, with a duty of care, were taking a different stance, they were saying the exact opposite.

My home was the subject of six firebomb attacks for raising concerns, yet I was being told that there was nothing to be concerned about. That's how blatant this was.

In 2006 there was a triple gangland shooting in broad daylight and sadly a fatality. This was the tipping point when the agencies, organisations and local authority's positions were no longer tenable, this was the point where they could no longer claim that day was night, black was white and wrong was right.

In 2007 I completely vindicated and was formerly named in Scottish Parliament and commended for my efforts by MSPs, one said thank god for the "bampots".

I wish I could say that this made me feel better, but people had died, people had been injured, lives had been destroyed and a community had been damaged. So, I felt nothing apart from disappointment and disillusion in the decision made by those in positions of trust with a duty of care.

In reality, I believe, many of them knew what was going on but it was easier, safer and cheaper for them to ignore, discredit and try to silence the person raising the serious concerns than it was to deal with the serious concerns.

I also believe that when a narrative is formed and accepted by agencies and organisations - it then becomes difficult for them to change their direction as they caught on the tracks of the narrative they accepted.

I fear this situation is happening again with the current policy and guidance on youth violence and crime.

When I heard the two academics giving their evidence, I honestly couldn't relate to any of it. Indeed, it flies in the face of everything I'm seeing and hearing on the ground.

I am the founder of the No1seems2care help group which has over 107,000 followers and reaches between 1 million and 2 million people even 28 days. The page often reaches higher numbers. I feel I have a relatively good understanding of what's going on and how many people feel.

I understand that the academics were talking about reported crime and I believe they accepted that many crimes are not getting reported. But I struggle to understand how crime can be accurately measured if it's not being reported.

It's more difficult than ever to report a crime,

- a) there are fewer police in all areas of policing
- b) police stations are closing early or closing down completely
- c) there is often a waiting time when contacting the 101 call center
- d) even when you do get through and report, there is no guarantee that the police are going to call out
- e) even if the police investigate and charge someone, there is no guarantee that this will ever go to court
- f) even if the case does go to court, it's often a long process - I attended a court case with a victim four different times.
- g) even if there is a conviction the punishment is sometimes not worth the hassle the victims have to go through.

None of this could be described as encouraging people to report crimes. As some say "what's the point?"

Indeed, Abbie who is the face of this petition after she was brutally attacked has now become the subject of a hate campaign for going public and speaking out.

Some of the Committee met Abbie and her mother Angela in Milton. But now the hate campaign against Abbie has reached the point where her mum has decided to pack up and move to a different location. This means relocating Abbie and her brothers and sisters to a new location just to keep her safe. This is what happens when you speak out. This is why many people are not speaking out or reporting crimes.

So, I believe it's safe to say that reported crime must be at an all time low. Therefore, any statistics used by academics should be considered as statistics based on a lack of accurate data.

It is more difficult than ever to report a crime, which results in crime dropping and people feeling safer?

Does this sound right? Does this make sense? Does this ring true?

If you accept this as accurate, then it follows that the additional police officer, the additional police stations, the better access to the police and more prosecutions have actually been the cause of higher crime.

I suggest that this is a nonsense and if it continues law and order will crumble and the next generation is going to suffer. We all need discipline, deterrents and consequences. Without them there will be chaos, without them we are damaging our younger generation, we are damaging their future.

I contacted Bob Doris MSP with examples of incidents occurring in one week within half a mile radius of my home:

- busses couldn't reach the Milton bus terminus as youths were attacking the buses. The busses had to stop and drop people off on the outskirts of Milton and the police had to attend.
- a young girl was found injured on the street near the bus terminus.
- a young male was attacked by youths and kicked and stamped on. This was videoed and circulated. The video was sent to me, it was disturbing to watch.
- there was a public protest in the community with over 150 local people taking to the streets and a police officer was injured.

This is just a fraction of what's going on.

This is the reality.

Annexe D

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 E

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”.