

# Violence Research Programme

## Physical and Sexual Violence Between Children Living in Residential Settings: Exploring Perspectives and Experiences

### KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ Children managed their experience of peer violence within a complex framework of values and interpretations of each other's behaviour, governing their strategies for self-protection and restricting staff's awareness and ability to intervene.
- ◆ The more serious incidents occurred away from staff and were often pre-planned.
- ◆ Experience of all forms of violence and threat was strongly linked to gender.
- ◆ The most common protective strategy which young people advocated was retaliation, with arguments of justification and revenge.
- ◆ Violence was normalised by staff through hierarchical peer group dynamics and for boys through conceptions of emerging masculinities.
- ◆ Staff generally intervened in physical and sexual violence which occurred in their presence but were less likely to take verbal aggression seriously, although the young people often found it more distressing than physical attacks.
- ◆ Racist attacks or insults were unusual and not usually tolerated in the peer culture.
- ◆ Young people were more likely to rely on other young people rather than staff for emotional support to deal with the distress caused by peer violence.

### RESEARCH TEAM

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Children's homes admit young people with challenging behaviour and conflicting needs. Those with histories of abuse and of abusing others may be placed together. Government guidance on violence emphasises management and staff competence, rather than the context in which young people interact. Research has rarely looked at children's experiences of peer violence. This study explored children's and staff's experience of peer violence in children's homes.

### Different types and levels of attack

Exploration of violence could not be confined to physical assaults, since coercive and violent cultures can be, and often are underpinned and maintained by fear and intimidation. Children's experiences produced a continuum of behaviours that were multi-faceted. Categories derived from the young people's accounts were:

- ◆ **direct physical assault:** examples from young people's accounts included: 'fighting', 'punching' 'leathering' 'kicking', 'pushing', 'slapping'.
- ◆ **physical 'non – contact'** attacks which harmed young people emotionally rather than physically, such as intimidation by looks or gestures, written threats, forceful invasions of personal space and attacks on personal belongings such as 'trashing' bedrooms.
- ◆ **unwelcome sexual behaviours,** experienced by young people as both abusive and sexual, for example 'flashing', grabbing a girl's breast, inappropriate touching, unwanted sexual gestures and remarks.
- ◆ **verbal abuse,** generally name-calling concerning gender, sexuality, ethnicity, family, and appearance.

Young people described differential levels of impact; **Low level** attacks were viewed as having little impact, were infrequent, not a severe use of force and often a spontaneous response to an isolated event. **High level** attacks were when force was severe, attacks were frequent, and part of a wider power structure. Young people viewed the impact as significant, often couched in terms of 'fear' and 'vulnerability'.

Half of the young people interviewed described **direct physical assault** as victims, perpetrators or witnesses. Girls reported isolated and infrequent attacks in response to particular catalysts, whereas boys' use of physical violence was often embedded in expressions of certain forms of 'macho' masculinity. Almost half of young people experienced **non-contact** attacks, often as part of a wider cycle of verbal and physical violence.

Reports of **unwelcome sexual behaviour** were low but girls were three times more likely to report this than boys, and to see it as high impact. Girls experienced the most serious cases and the majority were from boys to girls. All were coercive, and most incidents took place in girls' bedrooms.

Nearly all young people experienced **verbal abuse**. There was a general undercurrent of name-calling and swearing accepted in children's cultures in most homes. However high impact verbal abuse breached boundaries of acceptability by impugning the victims' sexuality or through insulting their families. Girls were more likely to use sexuality whilst boys engaged in 'mother cussing'. These were the worst forms of insults experienced, warranting immediate, often physical retaliation. Family insults may be especially hurtful in the context of children's homes as family relationships were often strained, uncertain and sometimes severed. Most young people regarded these insults as more harmful than physical violence.

### Children's protective strategies

Most young people advocated **retaliation**. High impact attacks generally justified targeted and planned retaliation. Nearly all accounts used language of revenge, prevention, protection of honour and similar justifications. In most homes young people used peers rather than staff as a source of **emotional support**. Peers were the first port of call in all incidents later disclosed to staff. Reasons included feeling that staff could not solve and might exacerbate the problem, lack of trust/empathy and to avoid 'getting into trouble' themselves through violating non-disclosure cultures ('grassing'). In homes that actively fostered positive relationships staff were more readily used as emotional support and young people perceived interventions as being successful. These were homes where high impact violence was rare.

### Staff understanding and response

Consistency of staff intervention differed both between and within homes, with responses to **physical violence** the most consistent. It was routine for staff to intervene in physical violence, up to and including restraint if conciliatory methods were unsuccessful. **Non-contact** attack was unanimously considered the most difficult to identify, due to its hidden nature, rooted in the group's power dynamics. Staff described its covert nature as 'undertone', 'undercurrent' and 'backdoor' violence. Staff were often reluctant to discuss **sexual violence**. Managers appeared more confident in discussing it than front-line colleagues. In contrast to young people, many workers diminished the importance of **verbal abuse**, especially sexual insult, thinking it too ingrained in the young people's everyday language for them to have any significant impact for change. They did recognise that 'mother cussing' had a significant effect, but primarily were preoccupied with children's physical safety.

The main method of securing young people's safety was through direct supervision. Restriction of young people's freedom was a key mechanism to increase surveillance. Rules in many homes included restriction to communal areas, and controlling access to bedrooms, while some had alarms on bedroom doors and CCTV. A few staff in homes with very restrictive practices questioned the long-term consequences for young people's development. Strategies were reactive rather than proactive, and workers often lacked training or confidence in undertaking group work on sensitive issues. There were some positive initiatives but most control centred on the use of negative sanctions, including ultimately loss of placement, rather than on rewards for positive behaviour. Perspectives on reducing violence concerned the need for positive relationships with children, the control of 'inappropriate referrals' especially emergency placements and establishing a 'good mix' of young people.

Staff were aware of gender differences in patterns of aggression, although they both underestimated girls' involvement in physical violence and lessened its significance by referring to 'cat fights' and 'bitching matches'. Male violence was often perceived as a normal although uncontrolled developmental expression of masculinity.

Power dynamics between young people were also conceptualised by staff in terms of the 'pecking order'. Positions could be established by positive means such as maturity or through violence and intimidation. Staff saw this as a normal or at least inevitable aspect of residential life, but for many young people the process was intimidatory.

### Shared and different worlds of meaning

In many ways young people and staff agreed on the nature of violence, although differences in interpretation affected staff's ability to help young people and influence their behaviour. Staff

## Research Findings

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presumed that they found out about unobserved physical violence, although young people described incidents they believed remained unknown. Serious sexual incidents, whilst disclosed to other young people, were generally not reported to staff. However both groups most often discounted or minimised sexual violence when physical force was absent, if the instigator was female and if the victim had a previous history of promiscuity.

Both staff and young people used the term **bullying** to represent aggression which was a targeted and persistent abuse of power. Often young people were viewed as being both the victim and aggressor on different occasions. However, many young people rejected the term 'bullying' in relation to their own experiences, as this denied them access to justification narratives used in explanations of their aggression and implied low status and weakness for victims. This hampered professional attempts at intervention.

Both groups agreed that **racist and homophobic violence** and insult were rare. Racism was one area where staff were more proactive within clear agency policies, and young people generally gave an anti racist perspective, although certain 'outsider' groups were at greater risk of racial victimisation. Such groups were not ascribed the 'street credentials' of wider youth cultures with which many young people engaged. The rarity of homophobic insult was directly rooted in homophobia, as challenging a person's heterosexuality was seen as being the most derogatory form of verbal insult.

### Implications for policy and practice

Violence between young people in children's homes shows many similarities to that found in other contexts, and appeared no higher than that found in some studies of day schools and neighbourhoods. However its operation throughout all areas of young people's lives, particularly the likelihood of invasion of personal space and attacks at night, can make its impact much greater. Reducing violence requires a planned, proactive approach. Staff require appropriate team and individual training, and young people need to be consulted and involved in the development of strategies both to challenge violence and support victims. Strategies will need to recognise the importance of verbal attacks, both as sources of direct harm and in setting the context for physical and sexual attack. Violence is underpinned by cultures which treat male violence as natural, accept the normality of sexually derogative language, or ratify hierarchical power relations between young people. These cultures must be challenged through management, staff training and groupwork with and by young people themselves.

### About this study

Altogether 74 young people aged between 6 and 17, and 71 staff including front line and management in 14 different children's homes were interviewed about their past and present experiences of peer violence and aggression. Vignettes describing different levels and forms of aggressive behaviour, based on young people's accounts, were used to assist discussion of sensitive topics in semi-structured interviews.