Children's COMMISSIONER

Keeping kids safe

Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation

FEBRUARY 2019

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Introduction from Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England

The Serious Case Review into the death of 14-year-old "Chris" tells a tragic story of a damaged childhood[1]: domestic violence in the home, years in temporary accommodation, serious problems in primary school leading to exclusion from secondary school and grooming by criminal gangs. It describes how by the age of 13, Chris was ordering a Rambo knife and bullet-proof vest from the internet for protection, telling his Mum he was being pressured into selling drugs. In September 2017, he was shot at close range in a playground in East London, and he died later in hospital.

The review into his death makes clear that a system designed to keep vulnerable children like "Chris" safe had failed. This report shows there are thousands of children just like him, putting themselves in the same kind of danger. If we are to turn around their life chances and tackle the scourge of serious violence, county lines drug running and gang activity, we need to know more about who these children are and why they are members of gangs - and how we can keep them safe.

This report investigates what it means to be a child gang member in England. It estimates how many children in England are in gangs, and looks at the risks factors which make it more likely for a child to end up being groomed for gang membership. Finally, it questions whether those responsible for safeguarding children are responding adequately to the rise in gang violence and how children can better be kept safe. I have been shocked to discover that many of those responsible for the protection of children in their local areas seem to have no idea where to start, despite hundreds of thousands of children being at risk. In this, I draw parallels with CSE a decade ago – before children being sexually exploited were recognised as victims and not perpetrators, and the adults supposed to protect them stopped turning a blind eye to widescale abuse.

Our research presented here estimates there are 27,000 children in England who identify as a gang member, only a fraction of whom are known to children's services. Their experiences vary widely. For some, being in a gang entails little more than putting a hashtag on social media. For others it can be far more serious and dangerous. Many of the children who identify as gang members feel they have no choice or no better options. Some are groomed and exploited by gangs but never identify as members. Often it is these children, described to me once as 'collateral', who are the most vulnerable and at risk.

What our research shows is the vulnerability in these children's lives. Often they come from families with substance or alcohol abuse problems or where there is domestic violence. They may grow up neglected, in poor housing, sometimes with family members who are associated with gangs or criminal activity. These are children who are more likely to suffer from poor mental health and are more likely to have Special Educational Needs. They are also more likely to be excluded from school. And far from the bold and aggressive stereotype image of a gang member, I have been struck by how visibly fragile many appear in person. It is very clear to me that we are not doing enough to protect them from harm.

Last year, the inspectorates of the police, health, probation and children's services made a joint call to agencies responsible working with children to "learn from the mistakes of child sexual exploitation" by "treating children as victims not perpetrators" and "not to underestimate the levels of criminal exploitation in their local areas". This report shows that those calls have not been heeded. Instead, I find that all the mistakes that led to serious safeguarding failings in relation to CSE in towns up and down the country are

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[1] *http://www.newhamlscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Serious-Case-Review-Chris-.pdf*

now being repeated. Local areas are not facing up to the scale of the problem, they are not taking notice of the risk factors in front of them, and they are not listening to parents and communities who ask for help.

Tackling gang exploitation needs a paradigm change in thinking, which stops treating these children as criminals responsible for their own situation and instead sets out to protect them.

New local safeguarding arrangements, with a focus on contextual safeguarding, have the potential to make this happen, yet there are few signs that any adequate plans are in place. When we asked 25 Safeguarding Boards in 'high risk' areas what they knew about the number of children involved in gangs or in danger of being drawn in, the response was deeply concerning. Not one of them was able to give adequate answers to all of our questions, while several areas with the highest indicators of gang violence had no estimate at all of levels of gang violence in their area. Our data also shows that less than half of child offenders involved in gangs are being supported by children's services.

The Government needs to face-up to the scale of this challenge, and ensure both the priority and resources are given to helping these children.

The parents I talk to whose children are in gangs are desperate for help - first shocked and then exasperated by the daily calls to one service or another, told repeatedly that nothing can be done to protect their children. The implication is that services will only be able to intervene when things get much worse. One parent told me her child had ended up in A&E with stab wounds, yet still they weren't offered any help from children's services. "How much worse does it have to get?" she asked.

These children, whose lives are exploited and whose futures are heading in the wrong direction, do not have a voice. When they do speak privately they say they want to get out. I have even heard of children on cross-country trains carrying drugs to a market town who have deliberately got themselves caught, just so that the nightmare will end. Others have no idea where to look for the escape route. Exploited and manipulated by professional adult criminal gangs, we need to help these children.

It is the duty of politicians and those agencies working with children to look out for the most vulnerable. No child should end up as a headline about gangland murder or the subject of a Serious Case Review simply because nobody thought it was their job to keep them safe.

Anne Longfield OBE
Children's Commissioner for England

Research methodology

This report draws on the following work undertaken by the Children's Commissioner and her team over the past 12 months:

> An extensive programme of engagement with children, their families and the professionals working with them in a range of settings including schools and alternative provision, gang diversion programmes, youth custody and family support programmes.

> A bespoke data collection from every Youth Offending Team (YOT) in England asking about the children they are working with and their characteristics. This information provides the biggest sample of known gang members in England currently available.

> A statutory data request made to the Chair of Local Safeguarding Boards in 25 areas with high-levels of suspected gang activity, asking about the information they hold in relation to children and gangs in their local areas.

> A bespoke analysis of the ONS British Crime Survey enabling us to examine the characteristics of self-identifying gang members and those in close proximity to them.

> Examination of data collected in relation to children's services, schools and education, policing and children's services relating to known or suspected gang activity.

> Learning from the Serious Case Reviews conducted when a child has died as a result of gang violence.

> Learning from existing research conducted into gangs and child exploitation including joint research from Ofsted, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP); as well as reports from the Early Intervention Foundation and the Local Government Association, cross-referenced with data collected as part of the Children's Commissioner's Vulnerability Framework to enable us to develop a detailed portrait of the children at risk of gangs in England.

Executive summary

1. What does it mean to be a child gang member in England?

Gang membership is complex. For some children, it represents little more than a loose social connection - a hashtag for Instagram. Yet this is the exception. **The criminal gangs operating in England are complex and ruthless organisations, which use sophisticated techniques to groom children and chilling levels of violence to keep them compliant.** They prey upon marginalised children who have often been let down by multiple agencies. As well as gang members, there are many gang associates and others on the periphery, not given the status of membership but being groomed and exploited by gangs. Many of these children don't feel that they have any choice about their situation.

2. How many children in England are in gangs?

British Crime Survey data held by the Office of National Statistics suggests that **there are 27,000 children in England who identify as a gang member**.
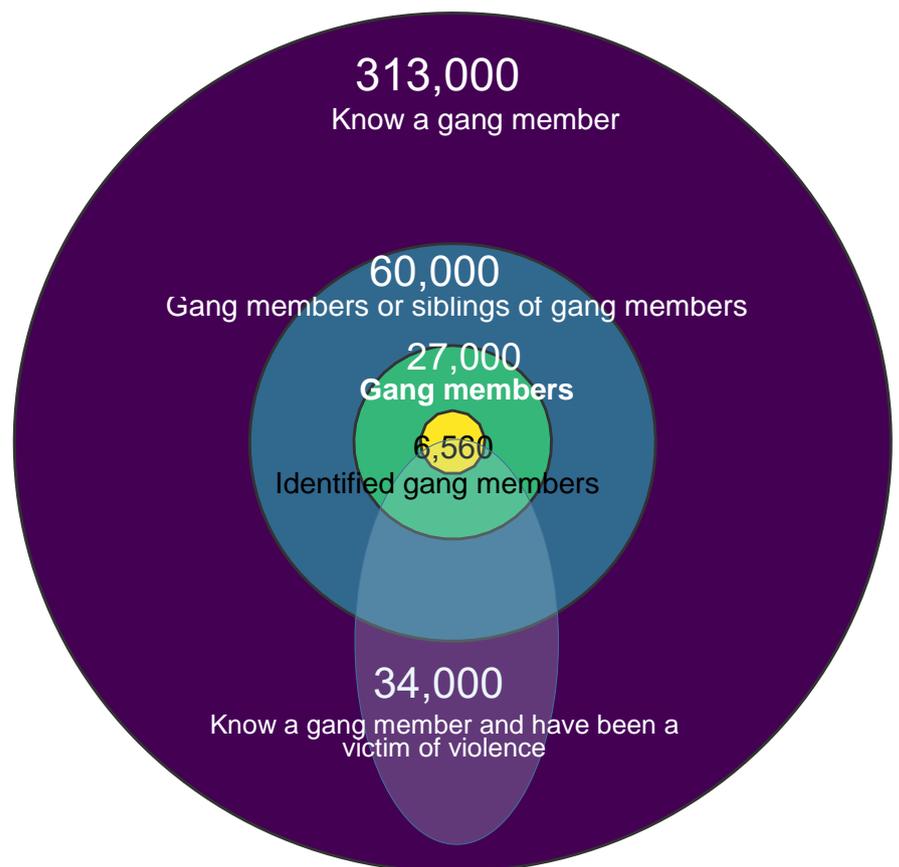
However, this is not the full story. There are also children who are being groomed and exploited by gangs, but who would not identify as gang members. New analysis by the Children's Commissioner's Office of these children on the periphery of gang membership shows:

313,000 children aged 10-17 know someone they would define as a street gang member. Within this group, the following groups are particularly vulnerable:

> 33,000 children who are the sibling of a gang member
> 34,000 children who have been the victims of a violent crime in the past 12 months and either are a gang member, or know a gang member

The group we think that authorities should be most concerned about are the group who are *either* in a gang or on the periphery of a gang *and* have experienced violence in the past 12 months. **This is 34,000 children in England.**

Only a tiny fraction of these children are known to authorities; **just 6,560 gang members or associates are known to children's services or youth offending teams. This means there are more than 27,000 children in England believed to be experiencing gang violence but who are not identified by the authorities.**

313,000
Know a gang member

60,000
Gang members or siblings of gang members

27,000
Gang members

6,560
Identified gang members

34,000
Know a gang member and have been a victim of violence

3. What are the characteristics of children involved in gangs?

While it is important to remember that *all* children can fall victim to gangs and criminal exploitation, the analysis in this report shows that on the whole gang members are highly vulnerable children with a range of factors increasing their risk of being drawn into gangs.

Comparing children in gangs who are assessed by children's services with other children referred to children's services (an already vulnerable cohort) reveals that children in gangs are:

> **95% more likely to have social and emotional health issues**
> More than twice as likely to be self-harming
> 41% more likely to have a parent or carer misusing substances
> **Eight times more likely to be misusing substances themselves**

Comparing children in gangs within the criminal justice system to other young offenders reveals that children in gangs are:
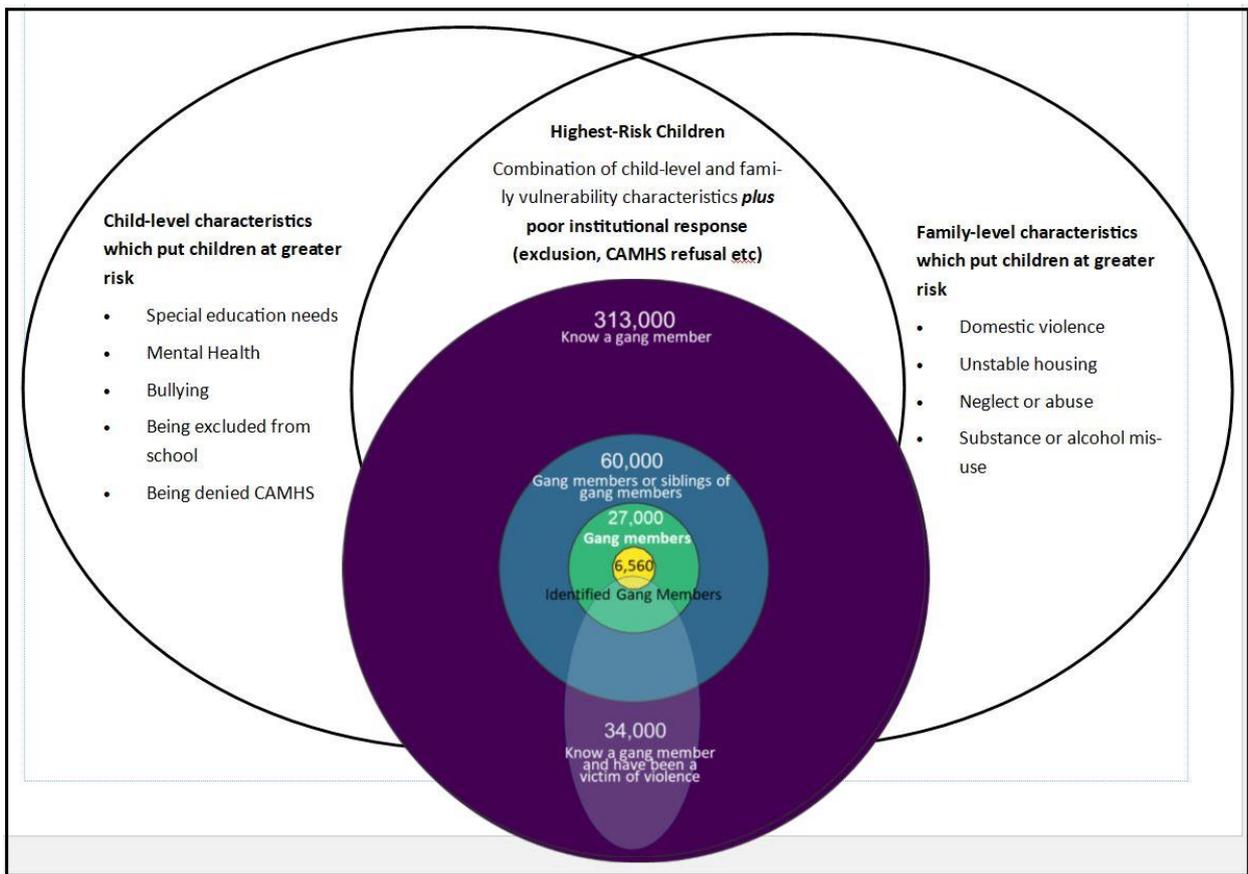
> 76% more likely not to be having their basic care needs met at home (as assessed by a practitioner)
> 37% more likely to have witnessed domestic violence
> **37% more likely to be missing/absent from school**

4. Who are the children most at risk of being groomed and exploited by gangs?

Gangs set out to prey on vulnerable children and to exploit their weaknesses. Identifying the factors that make children more susceptible to gangs enables us **to identify which children are at the greatest risk:** the children who have multiple interlinked vulnerabilities – both at the individual level (such as mental health or special educational needs) and the family level (such as abuse and neglect). These vulnerabilities cause children to act out, or may make them susceptible to gang inducements or threats. These risks can be moderated or exacerbated by whether and how services respond when the child's needs first emerge. In particular, a child being excluded of off-rolled from school increases their susceptibility to gang violence.

The diagram below shows how gangs exploit children experiencing three particular risk factors:

> Risks around their home environment
> Issues such as mental health
> Children at risk because of a failure of institutions to respond adequately, for example children excluded from school or deprived of much-needed mental health support.

Child-level characteristics which put children at greater risk

- Special education needs
- Mental Health
- Bullying
- Being excluded from school
- Being denied CAMHS

Highest-Risk Children

Combination of child-level and family vulnerability characteristics *plus* poor institutional response (exclusion, CAMHS refusal etc)

Family-level characteristics which put children at greater risk

- Domestic violence
- Unstable housing
- Neglect or abuse
- Substance or alcohol mis-use

313,000
Know a gang member

60,000
Gang members or siblings of gang members

27,000
Gang members

6,560
Identified Gang Members

34,000
Know a gang member and have been a victim of violence

Trends

Across the board data shows that leading indicators – potential 'early warning signs' – of gang-based **violence have been on the rise in recent years.**

> Referrals to children's services where gangs are identified as a factor at assessment **rose 26% between 2015/16 and 2016/17 (from 5,200 to 6,570)**
> Permanent exclusions are **up 67% compared to 2012/13 (from 4,630 to 7,720)**
> Hospital admissions for under-18s who have been assaulted with a sharp object **rose 20% between 2015/16 and 2016/17 (from 399 to 483)**
> Nationally, the number of 10-17 year olds cautioned/convicted for possession of weapons offences **rose 12% between 2016 and 2017 (from 2,763 to 3,088)**

5. How have those responsible for safeguarding children responded to the rise in gang violence?

The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) asked 25 Local Safeguarding Children Boards in 'high-risk' areas about their response to gang violence and criminal exploitation – requesting working estimates of the number of children in gangs, on the periphery of gangs and at high-risk of being drawn into gangs and how each group was defined. Responses showed:

> Many areas had no information on the levels of gang activity and risk among children in their area. It was often the areas with the highest indicators of gang violence that had the least knowledge
> Most areas had identified only a handful of children who they believed to be in gangs or at risks of gangs.
> Only one area had a population-level estimate of gang membership - the others based their estimates entirely on individual children who had come to the attention of authorities.

Safeguarding boards also appear to be failing to investigate deaths or serious injuries to children where gang violence is a factor. **The lack of serious case reviews following violent the deaths of children killed in gang violence are being properly investigated to ensure that lessons are learnt in terms of protecting other children.**

6. What has been the response of national government?

In response to rising levels of youth violence, there have been numerous Government initiatives, and multiple funding streams to try and prevent youth violence. However:

> There are too many small funding pots, all involving large amounts of bureaucracy, with **none of the funding streams alone being commensurate with the level of need**

> Fragmentation between different Government departments involved in delivering the policy response is hampering national-level initiatives being translated into frontline changes. The Serious Violence Strategy is being led by the Home Office, but much of the delivery is within the responsibility of the Department for Education or Health. Better co-operation is needed.

> In particular there is a need to ensure that resources are available for the family-level interventions the Government have identified as most effective, including 'Early Help' within children's services and the Troubled Families programme.

There are two areas where there is a particular gap between the evidence about what is effective at mitigating gang violence and the current Government response

> Services delivered by health professionals, including CAMHS and family-based therapeutic approaches

> Early-years initiatives to promote healthy child development and good parenting.

7. How can children be kept safe from gang violence?

Once a child is within a gang, extricating them is very hard. While gangs may entice children with money and bribes, once children are involved, they use threats, violence and intimidation to keep children under their control. These children may need a range of interventions, but the single most important thing is for them to have a relationship with at least one trusted adult who can help divert them away from gangs and access other services. Because of this, the children most at risk are those who are isolated and invisible to the authorities, generally let down by multiple agencies.

This report identifies four steps that are needed to stop this happening:

1. Step one is taking a life-course approach. This means recognising that while a child may be drawn into a gang as an adolescent, the underlying reasons they were susceptible to this, almost certainly appeared years earlier. Interventions are needed across a child's life.
2. Step two is ensuring those agencies in contact with children at each point, are doing their job.
3. Step three is putting in place the local-level co-ordination that ensures steps-one and two occur. This should be responsibility of Local Safeguarding Boards and their successor bodies. There should be a particular focus on identifying the cohort of children in gangs or at greatest risk.
4. Step four is a national coordinated response from Government, as outlined below.

Key Recommendations to Government

Overall, we have found that the Government's response to serious violence has identified what is needed, but has not yet done enough to ensure that the necessary services are put in place. These are the actions we believe are needed to plug the gaps in what has been provided to date:

1) The Government needs to be clear that child criminal exploitation is a national priority, and lay-out clear expectations for all the organisations working with children - including the police, schools, children's services and NHS bodies - as to their role. While the Department for Education has put in place the structures to achieve this, the practice is yet to match the theory. To address this the department should:

   a. Be much more explicit about the role of Local Safeguarding Childrens Boards (LCSBs), and their successor bodies, in relation to gangs.

   b. Put more resources into improving knowledge of best practice around interventions for children in gangs, including adolescents at high-risk of absconding from care.

   c. Respond to the forthcoming Exclusions Review by ensuring that schools realise the safeguarding implications of excluding children, and are held responsible for these.

2) The joint inspections from Ofsted, HMIC, the CQC and Probation Inspectorate have been invaluable in identifying what is needed in terms of combating child criminal exploitation. This report recommends that the joint inspections be rolled-out to all areas, starting with the high-risk areas who were unable to respond to our data request for this report. The Department for Education and Home Office should provide the funding to enable this.

3) There needs to be a much greater focus on the early years within the Serious Violence Strategy. Specifically the Department for Education should set a clear target for reducing the number of children beginning school with very low levels of development, along with a strategy for how this can be done, and introduce a national plan for improving SEND identification in the early years.

4) The NHS and Public Health England needs to recognise the importance of health-delivered interventions for combatting youth violence. Health bodies need to be proactive safeguarding partners, working to reduce risks, not just reporting them to other agencies. Specifically, there needs to be: specific referral processes to prioritise CAMHS services for those at risk of gang membership and exclusion; greater focus on CAMHS access and services for under-11s (who may have conduct problems or issues with emotional regulation which may not be recognised by existing services) and processes in place to ensure that services are commissioned for families, including family therapy approaches for young children.

5) The forthcoming closure of the Troubled Families programme represents a serious threat to the support offered to many of the families with greatest gang risk. The government urgently needs to commit to the programme for 2020/21 to stop closure processes beginning from March 2019. Long-term, the future of a family-based approach needs to be ensured and developed.

6) The Department for Education needs to review what level of youth services are required to meet the needs of adolescents at risk of gang violence, many of whom will fall within the remit of Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989, and ensure that local authorities have the resources necessary to provide this.

7) The Department for Education needs to recognise the importance of 'Early Help' services within children's services, and ensure local authorities have the resources available to provide early help to those with high gang risks. This starting point for this needs to be an understanding of how many families are currently in receipt of early help services, and what those services are.

Question 1: What does it mean to be a gang member in England?

The criminal gangs that are exploiting children are large, complex and ruthless organisations[2]. For the vast majority, vulnerable children who can be used and, if necessary, discarded, are an integral part of their business model. The National Crime Agency estimates that the county lines element of this industry – where drug gangs go outside of their local area to expand their reach – is alone worth more than £500m[3]. The link between these large, sometimes international networks, and the localised street gangs children encounter is often complex.

This report draws on first-hand accounts of the tactics these gangs use to ensnare children, the sophisticated and fast-evolving techniques of recruitment, invariably backed up by threats and serious violence.

For many children, involvement in these gangs is not a voluntary act. In some areas children are considered members of a gang based purely on their location, their family or their wider associations. One child told us that he was considered in Gang X simply because of the street he lived on. This then determined which streets he could and could not safely travel down and even how he could get to school. If violence broke out between gangs, he would be a target.

In one Alternative Provision unit we attended, the headteacher estimated half of the pupils would consider themselves gang 'members'. Another third were considered gang 'runners', and these tended to be very vulnerable children who could be "collateral". In one sense, gang membership offered some protection. Yet this does not mean children were exercising their own agency in affiliating with a gang. We met three boys in Merseyside who were close friends at school, but at the end of the school day would have to be put into three different taxis because they were considered to be in separate gangs. Not only could these children not travel home together, not one of them had a safe route home without traversing areas associated with a rival gang.

As gangs have sought to expand their reach, they have also looked to expand their recruitment. When the police become better at spotting traditional gang members, and disrupting their activities, gangs have then recruited a more diverse membership. We have been told that younger children, particularly girls, are being recruited by gangs because their profile makes them less likely to be noticed by the authorities. The techniques for recruiting these children are very similar to grooming for sexual abuse. They will normally start with inducements. In one case, we heard of a written manual, with a clear timeframe for entrapment. This started with the giving of gifts or praise, the overtures of friendship. On day two, they would protect the child from some danger – real or contrived. By day five, the child would be running an errand, a simple drop in return for some money. On this errand, the gang would arrange for the child to be mugged. The child would lose the money, and would therefore be considered to be 'in debt' to the gang.

This "debt bond" has been a common theme of all the gangs we've heard about through our research. One particularly disturbing element has been the notion that children who are arrested, and therefore have either money or drugs confiscated from them, are then considered to be "in debt". We learnt of a child being stabbed in revenge for failure to repay a "debt" arising from an arrest. We have also been told of children in prison still being pursued for their "debt".

Gangs often exploit the response of agencies to help them gain control of children, For example, when children are arrested or excluded from schools, gangs tell the child that they now have no prospects of getting an education or normal job, and therefore their only choice is continuing with the gang. We have encountered cases where children have lost opportunities to study, to take up an apprenticeship and even

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[2] The relationship between organised crime and urban street gangs is discussed in more detail under Question 2.
[3] http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/1247-latest-threat-update-estimates-at-least-720-county-lines-drug-dealing-lines

to join the Army because of criminal sanctions imposed for relatively minor crimes. Each time this happens, it closes off a route out for the child involved.

We have heard from children who, having been arrested, have been asked for information by the police, and believe that they need to provide this information to reduce their punishment. Yet these children were conscious of the risks associated with doing this - they believed that the gangs were deliberately feeding false information to different children, so that if it was acted on by the police they would know the "snitch". For those children suspected of being a "snitch" redistribution could be brutal, against either them or their families. The murder of Abraham Badru[4] is believed to have been in retribution for having prevented the gang-rape of a girl *ten years* previously.

The threat of violence is a recurrent issue for children hoping to extricate themselves from gang association. Often for children who have been extensively involved in gangs, they must face up to the threat of reprisals, while also dealing with fractures in their home life and education resulting from their gang activity. Frequently, these children have no stability in any aspect of their lives, so staying in a gang appears to be their only option.

Most of these children have parents desperately trying to keep them safe. A recurrent theme of our visits was the frustration of parents who had asked for help which was refused. When they had recognised warning signs – their child having new things, staying out after school or even going missing – agencies had dismissed their concerns. We spoke to parents who had raised concerns for years, but had been given little or no help while they watched as their children received gifts from a suspicious neighbour, then began to miss school, and were then excluded. One mother told us she had asked for help when she found large amounts of cash on her 13-yr old son, but the police believed his explanation that he had made this money stacking crates in a warehouse. Crates his mother pointed out he could not have lifted. Again and again these parents had sought help but found that the first time agencies engaged with them was when their child was arrested. One parent told us of the relief when her son was arrested because finally someone professional was taking an interest. This relief was tempered by the knowledge that her son's criminal record could seriously undermine his life-time prospects.

In more serious cases, we have been contacted by parents who believe their child is in serious and imminent danger, including cases where children have been the victims of serious assaults and stabbings. Yet they still do not feel that they are being helped to protect their child.

Case study: Chris, London

Chris grew up in London. His early childhood was highly disrupted, with the family frequently moving between different types of emergency accommodation provided by the local authority, across his home borough and other parts of London. He lived with his mother and sister, contact with his father having stopped when Chris was 9, after a long history of domestic violence. There were also allegations that Chris' mother hit him.

Chris had extensive special educational needs, including ADHD and a conduct disorder. This led him to act up and self-harm while at primary school. Despite these challenges, the primary school provided a range of specialist support to help Chris manage. Unfortunately this support did not follow Chris to secondary school, where there was "little evidence that his SEND (special educational needs and/or disabilities) needs were fully understood or met"[5] and therefore Chris' behaviour became increasingly difficult as he struggled to manage his own temper. He received multiple fixed-term exclusions; at age 13 he was transferred to a

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[4] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-43894344
[5] http://www.newhamlscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Serious-Case-Review-Chris-.pdf

pupil referral unit. Chris did have appointments with a clinical psychologist for his ADHD, who also tried to get support for his family in the form of referrals to talking therapy and substance misuse support   .

Shortly after starting at the Pupil Referral Unit, police became aware that Chris was associating with older, known gang members. This, combined with concerns about Chris' behaviour led police to refer Chris to children's services who decided not to hold a child protection conference but to refer Chris to the Youth Offending Team. He was aged 13. Police reports from the time report that Chris was believed to be being targeted by gangs because he was easily influenced. Shortly after this Chris was arrested for a sexual assault. The police did not take this forward but did again refer him to children's services. They in turn referred Chris to family support services, who closed the case after one visit. In the same month Chris' school also asked for help with his behaviour, with a particular concern that he was interested in knives. This was referred to the Youth Offending Team, who visited once but then also closed the case.

A few weeks later, Chris went missing from his mother's home for a week. His mother called the police and children's services. On his return home, the police spoke to Chris who refused to say where he had been. After a fight with his mum shortly after, children's services again made an assessment but did not intervene and Chris went to live with his uncle.

At this point Chris was not attending school, but rather was a "virtual pupil" at his PRU. He told his mother that he has been pressured into selling drugs and his mother found, and then disposed of, £600 of Class A drugs. Children's services record that Chris believed his life was in danger. The Metropolitan Police raided Chris' house and recovered items connected to several robberies. They recorded Chris on the gangs matrix. However, because Chris was now living with his uncle in a different borough, all support was withdrawn. Neither children's services nor the youth offending team continued to work with Chris, and he was not attending school. Despite the extensive evidence of gang-related criminal activity, Chris was not referred to either children's services or the youth offending team in his uncle's area.

Chris' mother reached out to children's services for help, saying she was fearful for her son's life; she asked her housing association if she could be moved so Chris could live with her away from the gangs. This did not occur. Instead, at this point Chris entered a spiral of violence and increased criminality, including possession of a knife, and then of acid; both times Chris said he needed to carry these for his own protection. Chris' relationship with his uncle broke down and he moved back to his home borough, despite telling authorities he feared for his life because of gangs. He was shot and killed less than two months later. He was still only 14.

By the time of his death, Chris had been known to 12 agencies. Yet it appears that the last time Chris had a stable and supportive relationship with any professional was when he was at primary school. After that, numerous organisations from schools to children's services to the police failed to understand his needs and failed to give him stability, support or protection. Numerous different agencies failed to provide Chris with the type of sustained relationship that may have diverted him for danger. Despite all the warning signs, there was no sustained attempt to get Chris away from gangs or to keep him safe.

The details of Chris's story are taken from the Serious Case Review into Chris' death, commissioned by Newham Local Safeguarding Board and is available at http://www.newhamlscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Serious-Case-Review-Chris-.pdf

Question 2: How many children in England are in gangs?

Identifying the total number of children in gangs poses both practical and conceptual problems. The children we want to identify are those for whom being in a gang is a defining characteristic, such that it dictates large elements of their behaviour, and in turn exposes them to huge risk, both in the short and long term. This is not all children who identify as gang members. Some children use the term "gang" to signify a simple social association.

The Government guidance "Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity"[6] (published in 2010) distinguishes between:

> 'Peer Group' – a relatively small and transient social grouping which may or may not describe themselves as a gang depending on the context
> 'Street Gang' – "groups of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity"
> 'Organised Criminal Gangs' – "A group of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise). For most crime is their 'occupation'"

The relationship between these different layers is complex. 'Street Gangs' as defined here will often recruit from particular 'peer groups' to the degree that in many areas any form of peer group will involve some loose association with a 'street gang'. This situation can be extremely fluid, as different gangs jostle for control of areas or merge, meaning there is often a large degree of flux[7]. It is often the children on the periphery who are groomed by gangs, and end up in the greatest danger, but may not ever either consider themselves, or be considered full gang members.

Though the exact form of 'street gangs' may vary, three elements are almost invariably present: violence, drugs and geographical definition[8]. It is often these elements which form the basis of the link back to the organised criminal gangs who are those providing the supply of drugs and are those making huge money from the violence on our streets.

Notwithstanding the challenges outlined above, it is vital that we get the most accurate possible estimation of the number of children who are at real risk of harm in street gangs, or on the periphery of such gangs.

The starting point for estimating this group is the number of children who identify themselves as being in a street gang. **There are 27,000 children in England who identify as a member of a street gang** (aged 10-17[9]). This definition of street gang is based on a group of young people who hang around together *and:*

> have a specific area or territory;
> have a name, a colour or something else to identify the group;
> possibly have rules or a leader;
> who may commit crimes together.

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[6] Adapted from Adapted from Hallsworth S and Young T (2004) Getting Real About Gangs. Criminal Justice Matters (55) 12-13, as used within
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/189392/DCSF-00064-2010.pdf.pdf
[7] For an interesting discussion of these issues see Home Office research conducted with Community Safeguarding Partnerships
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/491802/horr88.pdf
[8] See above
[9] CCO analysis based on the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2017
https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Summary-Table-Annex-1-to-Vulnerability-2018-Overview-Report.pdf

However, we have to recognise that not all children who are involved in street gangs are involved in serious violence or criminal activity. More importantly, we also have to recognise that there are many children involved with gangs and being exploited who do not self-identify as gang members. These are likely to be drawn from the much larger group of **313,000 children[10] who know someone they would define as a street gang member.** Within this group, we can also identify:

> **33,000 children who are a sibling of a gang member**
> **34,000 children who are either a known gang member or know a gang member and have been the victim of violent crime in the past 12 months[11].**

The latter group is of particular importance. As discussed under Question 1, gang association is complex. Children on the periphery of gangs may be the most vulnerable, equally not all children who identify as gang members are at risk of violence or exploitation. Therefore, the group we think that authorities should be most concerned about are the group who are *either* in a gang or on the periphery of a gang *and* have experienced violence in the past 12 months. This is 34,000 children in England.

Identification of gang members

We have compared these population-level estimates of gang association with numbers of children identified. Gang members may become known to either children's services or the criminal justice system (through the police, but handled by the Youth Offending Team). For the purpose of this report, we have combined data from youth offending teams and children services:

1. Children referred to children's services with an assessment in the 12 months to March 2018, using data from the Children in Need Census.
2. Children assessed by YOTs in the 12 months to September 2018 using the Asset Plus process[12]. This is previously unanalysed data sourced from 130 of 137 Youth Offending Teams in England.

This has enabled us to identify[13]:

> **5,230 children aged 10-17 who are known to children's services and had gangs identified as a factor at their latest assessment[14]**

> **2,420 children aged 10-17 were identified as gang associated by their Youth Offending Team (YOT).**

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[10] Note that this has been estimated pro rata for all 10-17 year olds, but is based on 10-15 and 16-24 year olds in the CSEW, year to March 2017 ([link]).

[11] Both of these figures are estimated pro rata for all 10-17 year olds, but are based on 10-15 year olds in CSEW March 15/16 – March 17/18. Source: ONS, ([link]). The figure is for children who know a gang member and report having been a victim of violence. We cannot exclude from this known gang members, and as all gang members will also know a gang member, we have presumed this figure will include some gang members.

[12] Asset plus is a standardised assessment framework used by Youth Offending teams (YOTs) in England and Wales. This assessment is required for all children receiving either an out of court disposal or a court sentence. These are regularly reviewed and includes practitioner recorded information on (amongst other things):
> Child's demographics
> Any known gang associations of the child
> Personal, social and family factors affecting the child – including school, housing and health related vulnerabilities
> Child's offending

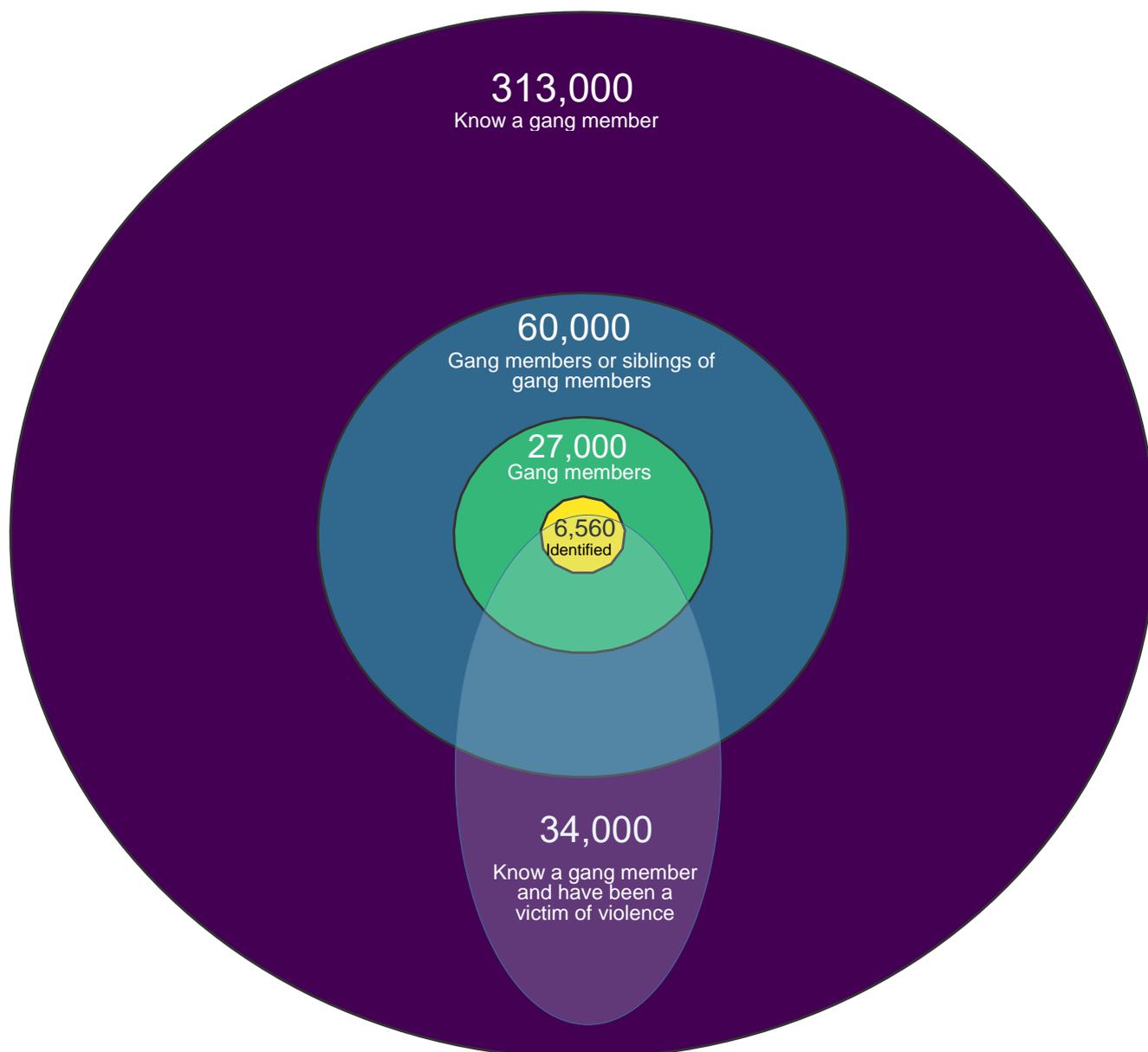[13] The methodology for this is explained in greater detail under question 4.

[14] The figure is 6850 children if we include all children. However we excluded children under 10, on the assumption that the gang risk identified at assessment was more likely to relate to parents or siblings than the child themselves.

When we combined these figures and remove overlaps, this results in a cohort of 6,560 children who are involved in gangs and known to the authorities.

This means that just 1 in 4 gang members is identified by authorities. In reality the under-identification is likely to be greater still. Both YOTs and children's services identify 'gang association', this is any situation where a gang poses a risk to a young person, this could be a gang member, gang sibling or gang associate. The group of children at highest risk are the gang members or associates who have also experienced violence. There are 34,000 such children in England, even if we assume all those identified (6,560) fit within this category, this still leaves **more than 27,000 children in England thought to be experiencing gang violence but not known to authorities**.

Figure 1, below, outlines what the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) reveals about the total population of children in England who are either in a gang, or known to a gang member, combined with Children's Commissioner's Office analysis of the gang members identified by local areas. It shows that those children identified by the authorities represent only a tiny proportion of the overall number of children who are either in gangs, or exposed to risk from gangs.

Figure 1. Size of gang identification in England

313,000
Know a gang member

60,000
Gang members or siblings of
gang members

27,000
Gang members

6,560
Identified

34,000
Know a gang member
and have been a
victim of violence

Question 3: What are the characteristics of children involved in gangs?

The data collection from Youth Offending Teams and examination of the Children in Need census represents the most up to date information available on children identified by YOTs and children's services and the largest sample of known gangs associates in England. This data also enables us to compare these children to others assessed by social services/youth offending teams to examine vulnerabilities that are more common amongst gang associated children even when compared to other already vulnerable children.

It builds on recent work by the Early Intervention Foundation, the Local Government Association as well as others and gives the most complete picture of the scale and characteristics of the group of children identified as gang associated in England today.

In both cohorts, information on gang association was taken from the child's latest assessment during the period. This is to give the maximum amount of time for gang association to be identified by a practitioner.

Key Findings from this analysis

1. **The scale of those identified is relatively small compared to estimated prevalence.** As discussed under Question 3, the 6,560 children in gangs who are known to either or both of children's services and YOTs, is less than 1 in 4 of the estimated number of child gang members.

2. **Gang risk is still a small element of children's services and YOTs' workload:**

   > Just 2% of children known to children's services have gangs identified as a factor

   > Just 12% of young offenders have are identified as gang associates.

Less than half – 48% – of children assessed by YOTs as being gang associated are also currently known to children's services in some form[15].

3. **Children in gangs are generally extremely vulnerable.**

Children in or associated with gangs are some of the most vulnerable in the country. Even compared to other children known to children's services, they are at greater risk of from factors relating to their family or home environment. Gang associated children are more likely to experience[16]:

   > **Parental substance misuse:** 68% more likely to have this identified than other young offenders and 41% more likely than other children assessed by children's services
   > **Neglect:** 76% more likely to have their basic care needs not being met flagged as a concern than other young offenders, 48% more likely to have neglect identified at assessment than other children assessed by children's services.
   > **Violence towards them within the home:** 41% more likely to have violence from a parent identified as a concern than other young offenders; 39% more likely to have domestic violence where the child is the subject recorded as a factor at assessment than other children assessed by children's services.
   > **Offending in the family:** 60% more likely to have this flagged as a concern than other young offenders and twice as likely to be living with known offenders.
   > **Housing instability:** twice as likely to have short term/temporary housing listed as a concern than other young offenders.

Gang associated children are also more likely to be vulnerable due to their schooling situation:

   > **School instability:** 55% more likely to experience a mid-year school move in the 12 months prior to their assessment than other children assessed by children's services and 5 times more likely to have had a permanent exclusion in the previous academic year (aged 5-15).
   > **Alternative Provision attendance:** 6 times more likely to currently be in alternative provision in the 12 months prior to their assessment than other children assessed by children's services (aged 5-15).

Gang associated children are also at greater risk of mental health difficulties:

   > **Mental health:** 77% more likely to have the child's mental health identified as a factor at assessment than other children assessed by children's services. They are also 95% more likely to have Social, Emotional and Mental health issues identified as a primary SEN need than other children assessed by children's services.

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[15] This includes those recorded as currently a child in need, subject to a child protection plan, under a care order or accommodated under Section 20 at their latest assessment.
[16] Note: all comparisons presented are relative risks after differences in age, ethnicity and gender are taken into account.

> **Self-harm:** Twice as likely to have self-harm recorded as a factor at assessment than other children referred to social services

There is some evidence that they are less likely to be receiving support for these difficulties:

> Only 20% of gang associated children with any SEN have a statement or Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, compared to 30% of other children assessed by children's services with an identified SEN.

These vulnerabilities are also coupled with considerable personal risk:

> **Substance misuse:** 81% of gang associated children have substance misuse identified as a concern at their latest asset plus assessment, this is 34% more likely than amongst other young offenders.
> **Going missing:** 36% of gang associated children have "going missing" identified as a factor at assessment. This is 9 times more likely than other children assessed by children's services
> **Child sexual exploitation or abuse:** 23% of gang associated children have child sexual exploitation recorded as a factor at assessment. This is 5 times more common than other children assessed by children's services.

Limitations

This analysis provides the most complete picture of the scale and vulnerabilities of children identified as gang associated in England today. However, it is limited by the quality of the data sources. Key issues with both data sources are:

1. The lack of consistent definitions as to when a child should be recorded as gang associated. Currently this is determined by practitioner judgement.
2. Children receiving an assessment (in either sample) may be determined by local authority recording practices. This is likely more of an issue with the Asset Plus data, whereby some YOTs divert gang associated children to preventative programmes rather than criminalising them.
3. Both datasets suffer from missing data, which may bias results. More detail on this is available in the technical report accompanying this report.

Question 4: Who are the children most at risk of being groomed and exploited by gangs?

Figure 2 on the following page, shows summaries of the risk factors that have been shown to be associated with a greater likelihood of participating in gangs or youth violence. The first table is from research carried out by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF), while the second is from research by the Local Government Association (LGA). For each table of risk factors, we have overlaid figures from our annual study of childhood vulnerability,[17] which tracks how many children in England are growing up with different vulnerabilities. The figures provide the best available estimates of the numbers of children living with the risk factors identified.
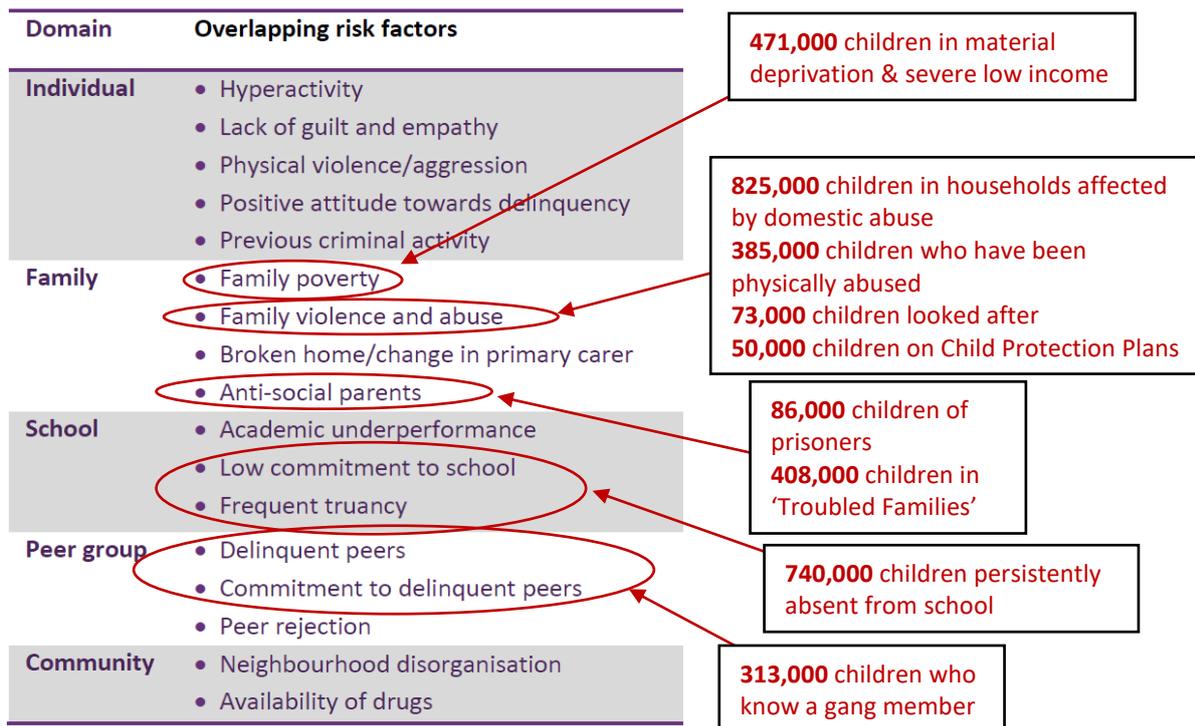
Some of these factors are themselves indicators of gang involvement – such as previous criminality or a close association with delinquent peers – but many other factors are underlying risks present in the home during childhood, such as family violence and abuse. Our study of childhood vulnerability has found that 2.1 million children in England are living in a household where there is some kind of complex family or parental issue. Among this group are an estimated 100,000 children living with a parent suffering from severe mental health issues, alcohol or drug dependency *and* domestic violence[18].

What this shows is that very large numbers of children in England are growing up exposed to risks which *could* pull them into gangs, and that it is possible to identify the cohorts of children and families where risk is higher. Furthermore, most of these risks can be reduced with the right support at the right time.
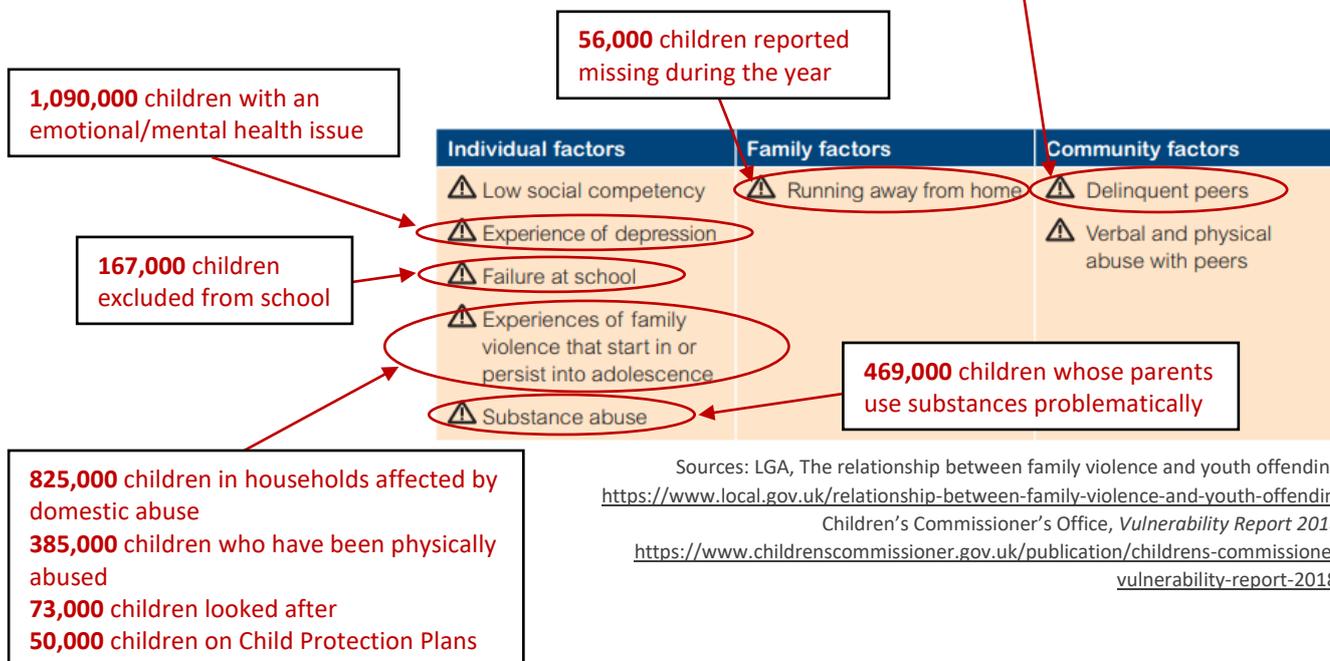
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[17] See https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/childrens-commissioner-vulnerability-report-2018/.
[18] As above

Figure 2. Risk factors for gang and youth violence, combined with statistics from Children's Commissioner's Vulnerability Framework

Domain	Overlapping risk factors
Individual	• Hyperactivity • Lack of guilt and empathy • Physical violence/aggression • Positive attitude towards delinquency • Previous criminal activity
Family	• Family poverty • Family violence and abuse • Broken home/change in primary carer • Anti-social parents
School	• Academic underperformance • Low commitment to school • Frequent truancy
Peer group	• Delinquent peers • Commitment to delinquent peers • Peer rejection
Community	• Neighbourhood disorganisation • Availability of drugs

471,000 children in material deprivation & severe low income

825,000 children in households affected by domestic abuse
385,000 children who have been physically abused
73,000 children looked after
50,000 children on Child Protection Plans

86,000 children of prisoners
408,000 children in 'Troubled Families'

740,000 children persistently absent from school

313,000 children who know a gang member

Sources: EIF, Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: Spotting Signals of Risk and Supporting Children and Young People – Overview, http://www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Final-R1-Overview-Preventing-Gang-Youth-Violence.pdf
Children's Commissioner's Office, *Vulnerability Report 2018,*
https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/childrens-commissioner-vulnerability-report-2018/

56,000 children reported missing during the year

1,090,000 children with an emotional/mental health issue

167,000 children excluded from school

Individual factors	Family factors	Community factors
⚠ Low social competency ⚠ Experience of depression ⚠ Failure at school ⚠ Experiences of family violence that start in or persist into adolescence ⚠ Substance abuse	⚠ Running away from home	⚠ Delinquent peers ⚠ Verbal and physical abuse with peers

469,000 children whose parents use substances problematically

825,000 children in households affected by domestic abuse
385,000 children who have been physically abused
73,000 children looked after
**50,000** children on Child Protection Plans

Sources: LGA, The relationship between family violence and youth offending, https://www.local.gov.uk/relationship-between-family-violence-and-youth-offending
Children's Commissioner's Office, *Vulnerability Report 2018,*
https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/childrens-commissioner-vulnerability-report-2018/

The children most at risk have multiple interlinked vulnerabilities – both at the individual level (such as mental health or special educational needs) and the family level (such as abuse and neglect). These vulnerabilities cause children to act out, or may make them susceptible to gang inducements or threats. These risks could be moderated or exacerbated by whether and how services respond when the child's needs first emerge. For example, a child could be supported within school instead of off-rolled or excluded, they could receive mental health support instead of being turned away, or they could have their special educational needs recognised (and receive appropriate support) instead of being left to struggle.

It is important for agencies to understand that gangs exploit the confluence of these inter-linked factors to recruit or exploit children. Understanding gang risk is therefore about understanding how these factors inter-relate, not just to each other, but also the cohorts of children already in gangs or on the edge of gangs. The Venn diagram in Figure 3 shows the relationship between all of these factors.

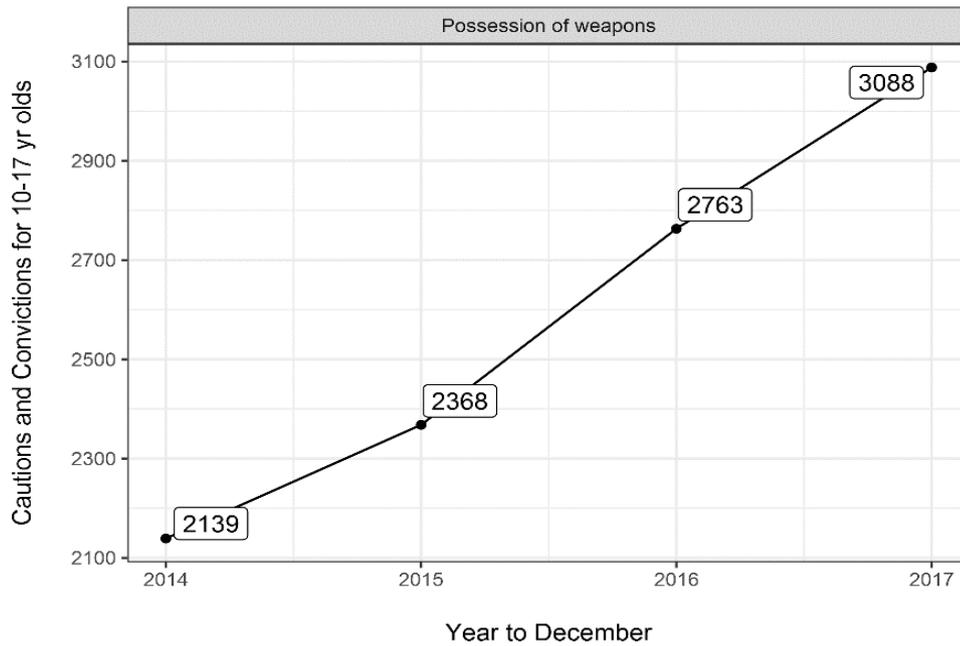**Figure 3. Venn diagram of children at risk of gangs and gang-associated children**
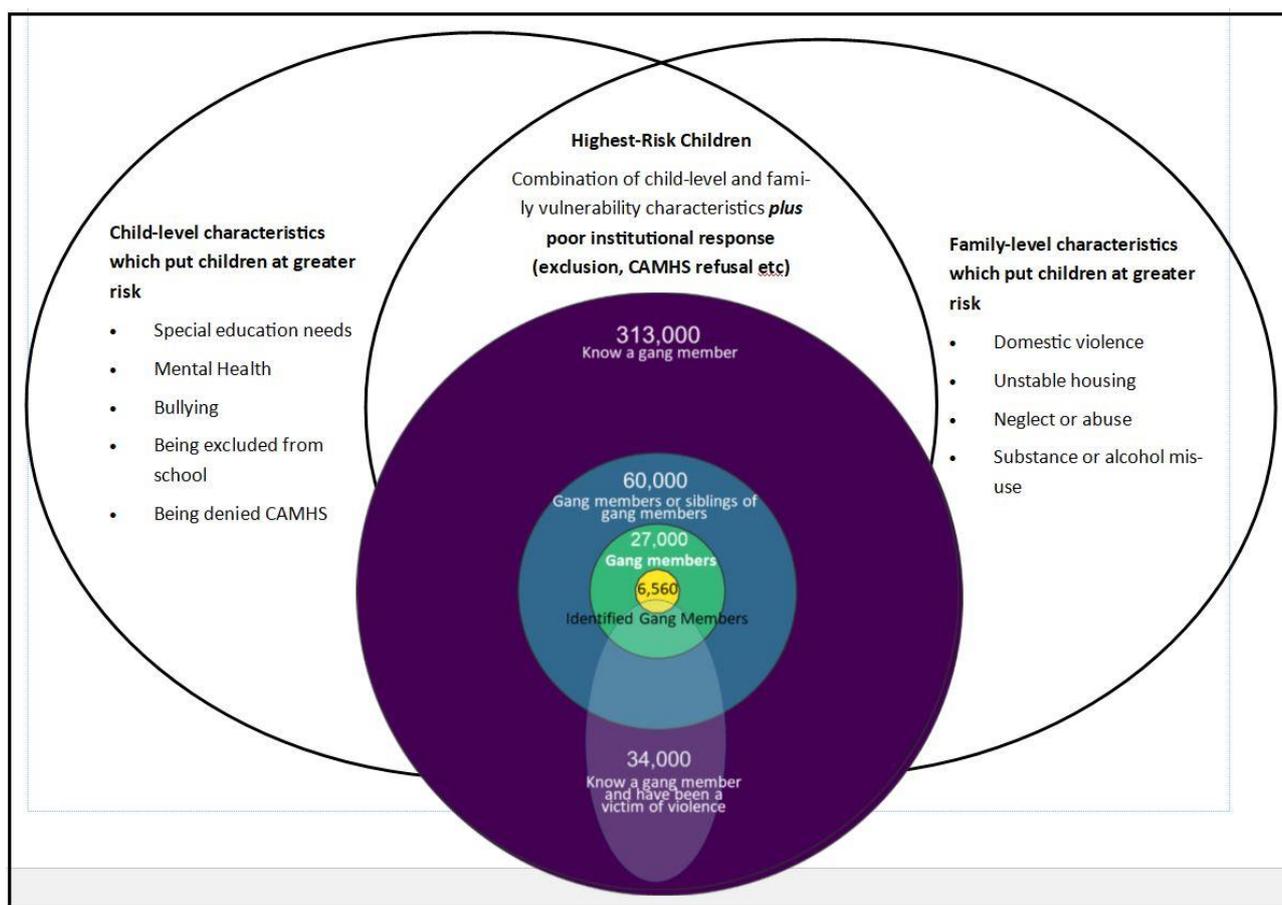
Trends in vulnerability over recent years

Across the board data shows that leading indicators – potential 'early warning signs' – of gang-based **violence have been on the rise in recent years.**

> Referrals to children's services where gangs are identified as a factor at assessment **rose 26% between 2015/16 and 2016/17 (from 5,200 to 6,570)**

> Hospital admissions for under-18s who have been assaulted with a sharp object **rose 20% between 2015/16 and 2016/17 (from 399 to 483)**

> Nationally, the number of 10-17 year olds cautioned/convicted for possession of weapons offences **rose 44% between 2014 and 2017 (from 2,139 to 3,088)** – see Figure 4 below.

> Permanent exclusions **rose by 67% between 2012/13 and 2016/17 (from 4,630 to 7,720)** – see Figure 5 below.
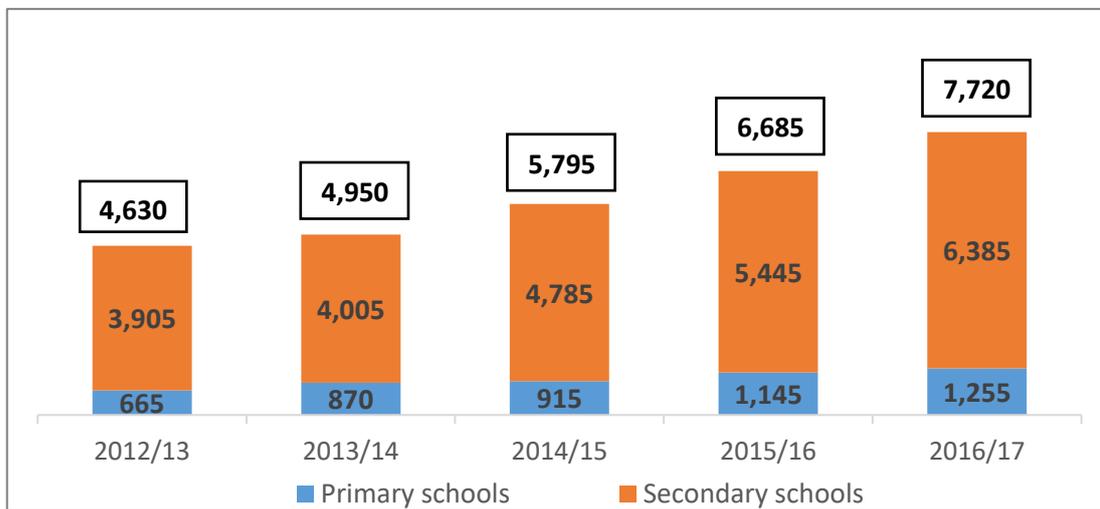
Figure 4. Cautions or convictions for possession of weapons

Source: Ministry of Justice, *Outcomes by offence data tool*
https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-justice-system-statistics-quarterly-december-2017

Figure 5. Permanent exclusions in England, 2012/13 to 2016/17

Source: Department for Education, *Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017*,
https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2016-to-2017

Connecting Gangs and School Exclusions

There is extensive evidence linking school exclusions with gang involvement. According to the Local Government Association:

> *"The targeting of young people excluded from secondary schools is a major feature in the profile of 'county lines'. … In some areas, PRUs become the arena for gang rivalries … PRUs are also viewed as the place where already vulnerable young people get first hand exposure to and experience of crime (drug dealing /violence/intimidation/ recruitment for 'county lines')."*[a]

The number of permanent exclusions has increased by 67% from 2012/13 to 2016/17, and has almost doubled among primary schools, as shown in Figure 5 above. Previous research has found that children excluded from school at age 12 are 4 times more likely to be in prison by age 24,[b] and that more than 4 in 5 boys in Young Offender Institutes have been permanently excluded.[c] **Furthermore, figures that we have obtained from the Office for National Statistics show that:**

- Self-reported gang members aged 10-15 are 5.5 times more likely to have been excluded or suspended in the last year, compared to children aged 10-15 who do not identify as gang members (16% vs 3%)[d]
- Children aged 10-15 who carry knives are 7 times more likely to have been excluded/suspended in the last year, compared to children aged 10-15 who have not carried a knife (23% vs 3%)[d]

Often it is involvement in gangs which prompts a child to be excluded. We have encountered children who have been permanently excluded from school because of poor attendance. At least one of these children was subsequently found by the National Referral Mechanism to have been criminally exploited in these periods.

However, it is equally important to recognise that the act of excluding a child in itself makes that child more vulnerable to gang violence. Being in school places a structure around a child. It provides a child with a set place to be, as well as relationships with trusted adults and peers. Schools have a range of safeguarding responsibilities, which they discharge within the school or by notifying other agencies. All this is lost when a child is excluded or off-rolled. Parents have repeatedly identified this to us as a trigger point, which caused their child to go from some involvement with gangs to full membership. We have heard how being removed from schools has caused children to spend more time with other gang members, allowed children to go missing for long periods and become involved in every more dangerous activities and criminality. We have also seen very different approaches within alternative provision. Some alternative provision provides excellent gang diversion programmes through an innovative and engaging curriculum. Others inadvertently become gang grooming grounds, where children are exposed to other gang members and often placed on part-time curriculums or even become 'virtual pupils' – meaning that most of the day they are free to associate with other gang members.

[a] Source: LGA, County lines - a national summary & emerging best practice, https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/County%20Lines%20National%20Summary%20-%20Simon%20Ford%20WEB.pdf.
[b] Source: https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/2013/exclusionprison-280213.
[c] Source: HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2014–15, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/444785/hmip-2014-15.pdf.
[d]https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/adhocs/009653crimesurveyforenglandandwalescswe stimatesofgangmembershipandknifecarryingamong10to15yearoldchildrenenglandandwalesyearsendingmarch2016andmarch2018

Question 5: How have those responsible for safeguarding children responded to the rise of gang violence?

Children in, or being groomed by, gangs are nearly always at significant and immediate risk of harm. The exact nature of this harm may vary, but accounts of gang involvement invariably include some or all of: coercion, emotional abuse, sexual violence, school absence, enforced criminality and physical assaults of various types. All of these forms of harm are recognised in statutory guidance as sufficient to warrant a response from safeguarding authorities.

Primarily, the responsibility sits with local authorities, who are required under the Children's Act 1989 to protect children at risk. But effective safeguarding needs a multi-agency approach. There is an equally important role for police, health bodies, schools and youth services.

Co-ordinating these bodies is the responsibility of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board, whose primary responsibility is to "co-ordinate what is done by each person or body represented on the Board for the purposes of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in the area"[19]. Specifically, the Board has responsibility for 'Developing' policies and procedures for keeping children safe'; 'communicating' this to all relevant partners, 'monitoring' what is being done and reviewing serious incidents when children have come to harm[20].

As concern has grown about the need to protect children from gang violence and criminal exploitation, a joint report was issued last year by all the relevant inspectorates: Ofsted, HMI Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and HMI Probation. The inspectorates were stark in their warning to agencies "not to underestimate the risk of child criminal exploitation in their areas"[21]. It went on to call on local agencies to learn the lessons from sexual exploitation; to treat children as victims, not perpetrators and to remember that all children are at risk.

To look at the local safeguarding response, we issued a statutory data request to the Chairs of 25 Local Safeguarding Boards in areas which we deemed to be "high-risk" of gang violence and criminal exploitation. We asked the boards to provide us with their estimates for:

a) The number of children in their local area who are in gangs
b) The number of children in their local area who are related to gang members
c) The number of children in their local areas who are at high-risk of gangs

In addition, for each group we asked how it was defined, and how many of the children or families within the group were being supported.

As we can't directly measure gang crime in an area (no national dataset is available) the 25 areas were identified by creating two summary proxy measures based on known risk indicators:

1. Recorded crime offences all offences[22]
   > Assault with intent to cause serious harm offences
   > Possession of knives offences
   > Possession of firearms with intent offences
   > Drugs Trafficking offences

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[19] Sect 14, Children's Act 2004 http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/section/14
[20] 'Local Safeguarding Children Boards Regulations' http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2006/90/regulation/5/made
[21] https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/news/news-feed/criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines-learn-from-past-mistakes-report-finds/
[22] Per 1,000 people. Source: 2017/18 CSP level police recorded crime open data tables aggregated up to LA level, year to March 2018.

2. Children in Need (CIN) factors at assessment[23]
   > Going missing
   > Gangs
   > Socially unacceptable behaviour (where ASB and offending gets flagged at assessment)

The 25 areas, and how they responded, are listed below in order of the level of gang risk we identified. Of the 25 areas where we formally requested data, only 16 responded, including 4 that responded to say they held no relevant information. In nine areas, the Chairs of the LCSB failed to comply with their duty to respond. Others were only able to answer some of the questions posed (marked below as a partial response). As the table below shows, it was often the areas with the greatest gang risk that either failed to comply or had the least information on gangs in their area. Areas which were only able to answer some of the questions are marked as 'partial responses'.

It is important to note that the responses below only reflect the response of the LCSBs. It is possible that individual safeguarding agencies on the board, such as the local authority or the police, may have collected additional information and this is not known by the LCSB. Therefore a poor response to our request does not necessarily mean a poor safeguarding response across the area, but it does suggest a lack of leadership and co-ordination on the part of the LCSB. Given the complex nature of criminal exploitation, and the need for a multi-agency response, the LCSB should be the body co-ordinating this.

Area	Response
Manchester	Responded to say they had no data on gangs
Blackpool	Failed to respond
Tameside	Very limited information provided
Islington	Failed to respond
Nottingham	Failed to respond
Doncaster	Failed to respond
Hull	Responded to say they had no data on gangs
Essex	Partial Response
Liverpool	Full response
Reading	Partial Response
Peterborough and Cambridgeshire	Partial Response
Haringey	Failed to Respond
Stoke-on-Trent & Staffordshire	Full response
Knowsley	Partial Response
Croydon	Full response
Tower Hamlets	Partial Response
Southwark	Partial Response
Birmingham	Full Response
Kent	Partial Response
Hackney	Failed to Respond
Salford	Very limited information provided
Southend-on Sea	Very limited information provided
Bradford	Failed to Respond
Northumberland	Failed to Respond
Newham	Full response

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[23] All rates per 1,000 children. Source: 2017/18 Child in Need Census, underlying data, year to March 2018.

Of those authorities who did respond, the quality of responses varied considerably. The most comprehensive information was provided by Liverpool, who were able to provide a detailed response which broke down gang identification between 'Organised Crime Groups' and 'Urban Street Gangs'. Liverpool had mapped known affiliates of both, and often siblings, across different agencies. Similar definitions were used by Knowsley and Birmingham.

These tended to be the exception. Some areas disputed whether this was a relevant issue for them. None of Manchester, Tameside, Salford, Southend and Hull had a current estimate of gang members in their area. One area said they could not provide any estimates because, while they had a population of children known to be associated with gangs, they could not distinguish between "perpetrators and victims" – in direct contradiction to the Ofsted/HMICFRS guidance that agencies need to recognise that children involved in gangs, in either capacity, were at risk.

Across London and the regional South East areas, we found that local areas did have a working definition of gangs, and were aware of children who were meeting this definition and what agencies they were in contact with. This tended to be small numbers of children, and is discussed in more detail below. Some areas were also able to provide estimates for the number of siblings of these gang members, and some had a small cohort of children whom they knew to be on the fringes of gangs.

Staffordshire was alone in estimating a larger population of children as gang members.

Overall, the responses we received show that very small numbers of gang members are being identified locally. Some London boroughs with high-levels of gang violence estimated gang membership at a dozen children. Some large counties known to be hubs of county-lines activity identified less than twenty. Even large cities only estimated gang membership in the dozens. Staffordshire alone provided a much larger estimate of the number of children in gangs. Almost universally, local safeguarding boards based their estimate of gang membership on the number of children in contact with statutory agencies, normally Youth Offending Teams or Children's Services. **Our responses showed very little attempt to create a population level estimate of gang members within local areas.**

Only some areas had made an attempt to identify siblings. Some areas, such as Liverpool, were able to map what contact families had with different agencies. This meant they did know siblings, but only the relatively small numbers who were in contact with statutory agencies. Other areas provided a basic estimate based on known gang members.

Identifying the wider population of gang members again proved problematic, with the estimates provided by local areas being universally low. In addition to Staffordshire, Birmingham, Essex and Croydon all identified a much larger population of children at the edge of gangs or at high-risk of criminal exploitation. A few areas, such as Reading, did identify and quantify the known risk indicators of criminal exploitation, such as registered missing episodes, but these had not been translated into an estimate for an at risk of population. **We found little evidence that local areas have a working estimate of the number of children who are at heightened risk of gang exploitation.**

Because local areas base their estimates of gang members on the number of children in gangs who are accessing services, universally, local areas reported that 100% of their gang population is being supported by agencies. All areas responded that Youth Offending Teams and Children's Services worked with gang members, within children's services most areas specifically recognised the role of 'early help' and 'troubled families'. The other agencies identified as part of the response was more varied. Only four areas identified the voluntary sector as being part of the response to gang risk. Given that some of the most effective interventions working directly with families and providing diversionary activities and support for teenagers are normally delivered by the voluntary sector, this is a particular concern.

Similarly, no response identified any interventions being provided or funded through public health, suggesting either a complete absence of a public-health approach, or a failure to co-ordinate between public health and safeguarding, despite both responsibilities sitting with local authorities. This is despite the national focus on the need for a 'public health' approach, building on the perceived success of the model adopted in Glasgow[24], and the strong evidence behind a number of health-based interventions.

Responding to Serious Incidents

In addition to pro-actively coordinating a safeguarding response, local safeguarding boards also have a statutory duty to investigate when something has gone wrong, and a child has experienced serious harm or died. The death of any child has to be reviewed, and review occurs "so that bereaved families are supported in their grief, that other siblings and the wider public are protected from similar circumstances, and that reasons for the death are investigated"[25]. How this process works is in the process of change. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced a new child death review process[26], alongside replacement for Local Safeguarding Board, however the old process was in place for most of the period we have investigated.

Under both systems, the type of review, and who leads it will depend on the circumstances in which the child dies. Normally, this will be either the Clinical Commissioning Group or local authority. Immediate oversight of this process is done by the 'Child Death Overview Panel', who in turn report to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (or its successor). Where a child either dies, or experiences serious harm, and abuse or neglect is suspected, then the Local Safeguarding Boards can instigate a serious case review (which has become a 'Local child safeguarding practice reviews'). These are detailed investigations, led by a senior independent professional, who undertakes to find out the circumstances of a child death, and, crucially, what lessons agencies can learn to prevent future deaths occurring. These reviews are published, reviewed by the Department for Education[27] and *should* be added to the NSPCC's depository[28] of serious case reviews. From April 2019 data on all child death reviews will be collated by NHS Digital.

Serious case reviews are normally for deaths in a domestic situation, to review the response of safeguarding agencies. But they should apply equally to gang related deaths where previous abuse of the child involved is known or suspected. The statutory guidance on what constitutes abuse and neglect is explicit that it includes abuse or neglect outside the home, specifically including gangs and criminal exploitation. The current guidance states: "Children may be vulnerable to neglect and abuse or exploitation from within their family and from individuals they come across in their day-to-day lives. These threats can take a variety of different forms, including: sexual, physical and emotional abuse; neglect; exploitation by criminal gangs and organised crime groups; trafficking; online abuse; sexual exploitation and the influences of extremism leading to radicalisation."[29]

Sadly, over recent years there have been a number of violent deaths linked to gang violence[30]. Given the complexity of gang violence, and the high-levels of harm associated with gang affiliation, it is likely that any

[24] https://www.economist.com/britain/2018/08/23/as-knife-crime-rises-in-england-police-look-to-glasgow

[25] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/627206/SFR36_2017_Text.pdf

[26] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/16/part/1/chapter/2/crossheading/child-death-reviews/enacted

[27] Previously by the Serious Case Review Panel, https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/serious-case-review-panel and now by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel.

[28] https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/case-reviews/national-case-review-repository/

[29] Working Together 2018 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/729914/Working_Together_to_Safeguard_Children-2018.pdf

[30] A central figure is not available. Child Death Overview data shows that in the year to March 2017 (the latest period for which data is available) there were 47 child deaths from deliberately inflicted injury or abuse and a further 210

death caused by gang violence would meet the threshold for a serious case review. Yet there have been just four serious case reviews published into gang-related killings since 2015[31]. One of these, the case of Chris, is summarised under Question 1 of this report. There are many common themes between the issues picked up by Chris's serious case review and others. In all of the cases, the children had chaotic and unstable home lives, frequent but usually sporadic[32] contact with different agencies and a complex set of emotional health issues, usually combined with SEND. All of the case reviews show how agencies could, and should, have identified and responded to risk factors earlier.

While the Serious Case Reviews that have been conducted are extremely useful, it is not clear why more have not been conducted. The case reviews to date have all involved children with a long and complex history of involvement with agencies, not all children in gangs are on the radar to the same degree, and learning from these cases may be particularly helpful. There may be reviews underway which have yet to be published. Serious Case Reviews are complex and therefore lengthy, it is not uncommon for them to take in excess of 12-months to be published. Going forwards, there is a new system of oversight of these reviews, ahead of new child death review process entirely from April 2019[33]. **Nevertheless, we are concerned that the lack of serious case reviews since 2015 suggests that children who are killed by gangs are not always having their deaths properly investigated.**

In recognition of the particular issues posed by safeguarding adolescents engaged with gangs, the Department for Education has announced that the newly-established Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, will conduct its first national thematic review on 'adolescents in need of state protection from criminal exploitation'. Specifically, this national review will seek to learn from the serious case reviews and 'local child safeguarding practice reviews' and use these reviews to improve national-level understanding of the necessary response.

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deaths from external trauma. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/child-death-reviews-year-ending-31-march-2017

[31] There were a total of 15 Serious Case Reviews published from 2015 to present where gangs were identified as a factor. Of these 4 related to child sexual exploitation, 4 to homicides, 2 to suicides and 1 to a drugs overdose. Two others were in respect of parental gang involvement being a factor in the death of an infant and one was conducted when a child killed an adult through gang involvement. Criminal exploitation did not come up in any serious case reviews.

[32] The exception being two of the case reviews which related to children in care.

[33] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-death-review-statutory-and-operational-guidance-england

Question 6: What has been the national response to youth violence?

As gang violence and criminal exploitation has increased over recent years, there have been a series of Government initiatives. The Serious Violence Strategy was published in April 2018, and the Serious Violence Taskforce has met monthly since. The Serious Violence Strategy alone identifies six different pots of funding. These include[34]:

> £11 for a new Early Intervention Youth Fund[35]
> £2m for a 'Community Fund' across 2018/19 and 2019/20
> £3.6m funding the National Crime Agency and National Police Chiefs Council to develop a National County Lines Co-ordination Centre
> £40m of Big Lottery funding, delivered through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to boost local 'open access' youth provision in six areas.
> £90 million of dormant accounts money to support disadvantaged and disengaged young people with their transition to work
> £13m over four years for the Trusted Relationships Fund to pilot approaches which provide support to young people at risk of child sexual exploitation, gang exploitation and peer abuse.

Subsequently, the Government has also announced:

> £200m for a Youth Endowment Fund, "a 10 year investment to support interventions steering young people away from becoming involved in violent crime or reoffending,"[36] overseen by the Home Office.
> A £5m 'Supporting Families Against Youth Crime' fund, overseen by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.[37]
> £2m for a research unit to look at child exploitation, trafficking, modern slavery and child sexual exploitation, overseen by the Department for Education.[38]

While each of these projects is well-intentioned, it is not clear how this money is being translated into frontline action. We have heard numerous reports of stifling levels of bureaucracy connected to accessing funding. In one case, the Government is still running the bidding process, to appoint the organisation who will then administer the bidding process for areas wanting to access the funds[39]. One local authority reported to us months of negotiations to decide whether they would meet the eligibility criteria for another funding stream. All of this is taking valuable time and resource, both from those applying for and distributing the grants.

Alongside the announcements, the Serious Violence Strategy also contained substantial research showing the need to invest in early intervention, prevention and therapeutic approaches to reducing youth violence. In particular, the report highlighted the effectiveness of[40]:

[34]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/seriou s-violence-strategy.pdf
[35] This was subsequently reported to be £17m in the Government press release announcing the Youth Endowment Fund, see below.
[36] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-opens-bidding-process-for-youth-endowment-fund
[37]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/749843/Suppo rting_Families_Against_Youth_Crime_Prospectus.pdf
[38] The Department has pledged £2m for a research unit to look at criminal exploitation alongside child sexual exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery[38].
[39] The Home Office has announced a bidding process for organisations to apply to be the bid organisation for the Youth Endowment Fund. The bid organisation will then have to determine the exact process for bid applications.
[40] See 'Box 4: Value for Money Interventions' and 'Box: 3 Targeted Interventions'
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf

> Pre-school programmes
> Multi-systemic therapy family therapy for families of children aged 12-17 with behaviour problems

While the funding streams above may fund a few pilot schemes, the amount of funding provided to date is not commensurate with the number of families who need help. Moreover, the provision of such services would generally be delivered by local authorities' children's services teams or the NHS. Yet neither the Department for Education nor the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) have made commitments in these areas within the Serious Violence Strategy.

The Serious Violence Strategy is one of many sources to identify the importance of health services for reducing violence. In 2012, a Department of Health report found that youth violence costs the NHS £2.9bn a year, and stated that "programmes that support parents and families, develop life skills in children, work with high-risk youth and reduce the availability and misuse of alcohol have proven effective at reducing violence. Measures to ensure appropriate identification, care and support mechanisms are in place are important in minimising the harms caused by violence and reducing its recurrence." Yet we have found no evidence that either NHS England, Public Health England or DHSC have taken steps to ensure that advice is translated into services being commissioned by health bodies in local areas.

There are similar issues with the approach taken by the Department for Education, which is responsible for children's services and safeguarding. The department has identified the approach required, but has not taken all the steps necessary to implement them. For example, it has recently updated the statutory safeguarding guidance, 'Working Together'. The updated guidance places a much greater emphasis on external threats, including gangs and criminal exploitation; explicitly it recognises the need for "early help for a child who … is showing signs of being drawn into anti-social or criminal behaviour, including gang involvement and association with organised crime groups"[41]. The new guidance also stresses the importance of 'contextual safeguarding', which can be broadly defined as threats outside of the home, alongside domestic issues.

The department has also taken steps to reform Local Safeguarding Children's Boards. The new arrangements, which will come into effect in different areas from the beginning of 2019/20, are a safeguarding partnership between health, local authorities and the police. This partnership, into which other education providers can be co-opted, has been set up to co-ordinate "their safeguarding services; act as a strategic leadership group in supporting and engaging others; and implement local and national learning including from serious child safeguarding incidents"[42]. All of these measures put local institutions on a better footing to protect children from gang violence.

Again, however, there are resourcing issues, limiting the degree to which these measures are translated into frontline action. While it is welcome that the Department for Education recognises the importance of 'early help'[43], it has not ensured that local authorities have the resources to provide this. Children's services are extremely stretched at present, with the Local Government Association forecasting a £3bn funding gap by 2025[44]. Within the context of limited budgets, the Department for Education has focused on the provision of statutory services, not early help, which is excluded from the 'activity data' which the

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[41] Working Together, pg 14
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778224/Working_Together_to_Safeguard_Children_2018.pdf
[42] http://www.workingtogetheronline.co.uk/chapters/chapter_three.html#sg_part
[43] Within children's services, 'early help' is a broad term to cover support given to children or families who have not reached the threshold for statutory intervention.
[44] https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-childrens-services/childrens-services-funding-facts

Department collects. **This means that the Department for Education does not know how many families receive early help, how this is changing, or whether expanding or maintaining early help costs or saves money.**

Alongside early help, some families with children involved in, or at risk of involvement in, gangs will be supported by the Troubled Families programme. This was identified by the Serious Violence Strategy and highlighted by several of the local safeguarding boards from whom we requested data. There are over 400,000 children in families who received some support through the Troubled Families programme last year[45]. However, all funding for the programme is due to end at the end of the next financial year. As the scheme is funded and administered by local authorities, they have reported to us that they need to plan for the closure of the scheme (including redundancy costs) out of their budgets for 2019/20.

The other area where there has been a lack of action from the Government has been in early years. Research from both the Early Intervention Foundation[46] as well as the Serious Violence Strategy have both highlighted the effectiveness of interventions before children start school in preventing future engagement in youth violence. Yet these have not been central to the policy response from Government. Previous research by the Children's Commissioner[47] has identified two serious issues within the pre-school population which mean that too many children start school at a significant disadvantage compared to their classmates:

1) Around 13% of children meet fewer than half of the expected development indicators upon starting school. This indicates low levels of development across both physical and emotional development, which place children at a huge educational disadvantage and increases their risk of marginalisation within and beyond education.
2) Very poor levels of SEN identification prior to children starting school. This means that many conditions which could be effectively treated or supported before a child falls out of the school system, are effectively being missed.

There are many effective interventions which could these include parenting programmes, systemic family therapy and speech and language therapy[48]. The latter has been the intervention most often raised with us in the course of this research. **About 9% of 5 year olds have a speech or communication problem: 80% of which stem from a child's environment.** Untreated, the inability to communicate often develops into frustration, poor emotional regulation and then emotional health problems. There is clear research showing the impact this has on in-school and life-time attainment. **More than 60% of children in Young Offenders Institutes have a diagnosable communication problem[49].** The provision of speech and language therapy is a shared responsibility between the NHS and local authorities, through arrangements that have been heavily criticised by the CQC and Ofsted[50]. In addition to funding, many local areas have told us they are restricting access to speech and language therapy because of staff shortages. The Children's Commissioner is currently undertaking the first ever nationwide audit of the provision of speech and language therapy to understand what is provided by whom, does it varies across the country. This will be published in 2019.

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[45] https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Summary-Table-Annex-1-to-Vulnerability-2018-Overview-Report.pdf
[46] https://www.eif.org.uk/report/preventing-gang-and-youth-violence-spotting-signals-of-risk-and-supporting-children-and-young-people/
[47] https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Growing-Up-North-March-2018-2.pdf
[48] See both the EIF research above and the Serious Violence Strategy (as before)
[49] See https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy#section-7 and https://eresearch.qmu.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/20.500.12289/1057/eResearch_1057.pdf
[50] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-area-send-inspections-information-for-families

Translating these numerous national-level initiatives into practical change to improve the lives of vulnerable children is undermined both by fragmentation between the numerous different project streams, and between government departments. While the Home Office leads on county lines, gang violence and criminal exploitation, the government's own research suggests that it is health and family-level interventions which have the greatest impact, and the Department for Education holds the national lead for protecting children. While the Home Office has established the Serious Violence Taskforce to bring together ministers from key department with other stakeholders, this Taskforce now has to bring about the cohesive national action plan which was envisaged when it launched.

The joint inspectorates of Ofsted, HMI Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and HMI Probation have demonstrated that more cohesive working between national bodies is possible. These agencies have come together to produce excellent research on what is needed to keep children safe[51]. This report was informed by joint area inspections in three areas, looking at the response of all agencies[52]. Given the response from local areas we received to inform this report (see discussion under Question 5), we believe there is a clear need for these joint-area inspections to continue.

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[51] https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/news/news-feed/criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines-learn-from-past-mistakes-report-finds/ (also discussed under Question 6)

[52] For an explanation of how these inspections work see https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/680088/Child_sexual_exploitation_gangs_and_children_missing_from_home_care_or_education_joint_targeted_inspection_guidance.pdf

Question 7: How do we keep children safe from gang violence?

As this report shows, gangs will exploit any vulnerabilities that a child or their family possess. Combatting this is complex, and will depend on the child. There will be a range of different responses needed. But the basic premise from which all these interventions work an understanding of the child's situation and at least one person working with them consistently. The children who are most vulnerable are either those invisible to authorities, or those like Chris, whose case we discuss under Question 2, who was known to numerous agencies none of which had developed a relationship with him.

This report outlines the system-level response needed to identify these children and to ensure they are not left isolated and invisible. Crucial to this is recognising the importance of direct and trusting relationships which enable children to change their behaviour and seek help. The box below explains this.

> ### "Good gang prevention work is like losing weight"
> Children involved in gangs often make poor decisions in terms of who to hang out with and what actions to take. Often, they are just taking the easiest decision available to them. But once they enter a gang's orbit, they enter a spiral where the decisions that will withdraw them from the gang become harder and harder to make.
>
> Vulnerable children are not alone in making poor decisions. As one professional pointed out to us, most office workers know they should stay away from the biscuit tin, but that does not mean they do it. Most office workers can take the odd biscuit without developing a problem, just as most children can be naughty occasionally, and take a risk, without ending up in gang.
>
> But there are a minority for whom those decisions have very poor consequences. The morbidly obese for whom food because a real threat. The vulnerable children for whom a series of bad decisions becomes a lifestyle. These people need help in changing their behaviour. Yet in neither situation does castigating the individual work. Instead, we have to promote positive behaviour, and provide clear alternatives. Effective weight-loss programmes work because it offers that alternative, along with the belief and encouragement that it can be done. The same needs to be offered for children in gangs.
>
> Crucial to success is the social aspect, where groups of adults offer encouragement to one another. Yet vulnerable children often don't have this. Their relationship with family is often fractured, and once isolated within school or excluded, they don't have a trusting professional relationship – while their peers are encouraging dangerous activity. The case of Chris, covered under Question 1, showed a child known to multiple agencies but without a trusted relationship with any one of them.
>
> If we want to empower children to be resilient to the lure of gangs and make different choices, we need to ensure they have a relationship that enables positive decisions. The choices children will need to make are hard. Avoiding a gang may mean forgoing an entire social life, becoming isolated and enduring the risk of physical violence. Vulnerable children won't make these choices alone. There are numerous gang intervention projects which can work: they might use youth work, sports clubs, music or education settings in which to develop these relationships.
>
> The task for the authorities is to identify what types of interventions work, and ensure they are available to the children who need them.

Step 1: Take a life-course approach

As this report shows, gang membership is complex, and those recruiting children are ruthless. Once a child is within a gang, extracting them is not straightforward. It is much easier to stop children becoming involved in gangs than it is to get them out. To achieve this we need a 'life-course' approach recognising that while a child may be drawn into a gang as an adolescent, the underlying reasons why they were susceptible almost certainly appeared years earlier. Below are some of the key points for intervention:[53]

Early Years	▪ Parental mental health is vital for babies and young children's development. ▪ Conduct problems can emerge as early as 2-3 years old and are closely related to poor emotional regulation. They are estimated to <u>account for 80% of crime</u>[54]. ▪ Less than half of the children with special educational needs have these identified before primary school, which often makes conditions harder to treat. ▪ There are a whole range of family-based programmes to help children with emotional regulation and mental health. The Serious Violence Strategy estimates that for each £1 spent on the programme £1.61 of benefits were estimated split between increased earnings, reduced crime and improved educational outcomes[55]
The start of school	▪ About 9% of 5 year olds have a speech or communication problem: 80% of which stem from a child's environment. ▪ 13% of children have such low levels of development that they fail to meet more than half of their development checks at the beginning of primary school.
Primary school	▪ Permanent exclusions from primary schools have risen by 67% since 2012/13. Children excluded from school by age 12 are 4 times more likely to be in prison by age 24[56] ▪ Research from the Early Intervention Foundation found that emotional health at age 7 was a key predictor of future gang involvement. The Series Violence Strategy emphasises the importance of family-therapy approaches for this age group. ▪ Schools report to us that young children are routinely turned away from CAMHS because they are not deemed to have a diagnosable mental health condition, even if they display extreme symptoms.
Secondary school	▪ Vulnerable children often find the transition to secondary school hard, as the limited number of close relationships at primary school are replaced by a large number of much briefer relationships. ▪ There were 6,385 permanent exclusions from secondary school in 2016/17; up from 3,905 since in 2012/13 ▪ Youth services have been cut by 60% since 2010[57]. Yet children aged 13-15 are the most likely to be spending large amount of times sedentary or online. Children tell us this often because of a lack of safe-spaces or activities to play in[58]. ▪ Less than a third of children with a diagnosable mental health condition are receiving support from CAMHS[59]
16-18	▪ The education leaving age is now 18; yet nationally 5% of children aged 16-18 are not in education of training. In some cities it twice this[60].

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[53] All figures are from elsewhere in this report unless otherwise referenced.
[54] https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/the-chance-of-a-lifetime
[55] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf p44
[56] https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/2013/exclusionprison-280213
[57] https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/public-spending-on-children/
[58] https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Play-final-report.pdf
[59] https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/childrens-mental-health-briefing-nov-2018.pdf
[60] Children's Commissioner, Growing up North, as above.

Step 2: Make contacts count

There are many points where support for a child or family can reduce the risk of them joining a gang. At each of these points there are services tasked with working with these families, and the key is ensuring these services are used.

> **Maternity:** improving mental health access for new mothers and parents of young children is crucial to helping a child's development.

> **Health visitors** need to identify vulnerable families, develop supportive relationships and refer families into other support when needed.

> **Pre-School:**

1. **Nurseries:** The 40% most disadvantaged 2 year olds, and all 3 year olds, are eligible for some free childcare we need to make these contacts count, and use the early-years learning identified in the Serious Violence Strategy.

2. All children should now have **a health-check aged 2½,** this check could include Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) to screen for emerging emotional health or behavioural problems, as well as looking for communication issues.

3. To improve school readiness and help vulnerable children we need to **improve SEND identification pre-school.** Nurseries and health-visitors have a key-role to play in this.

> **Schools** need to keep children in school by responding to challenging behaviour and additional needs. Action needs to be taken to combat schools who persistently exclude or off-roll.

> For children who are **out of school**, local authorities needs to respond swiftly with a plan to get kids back into education, *including* 16-18s.

> When **children go missing** the 'return home interview' needs to be better utilised to understand why a child has gone missing and where they have been.

> **CAMHS** play a central role in stopping children becoming marginalised and isolated due to mental health problems, anxieties or problems with emotional regulation. The NHS should focus on:

4. **Improving access** so fewer children are turned away.

5. Ensuring that services are commissioned which meet the needs of **under 11s**.

6. Providing **family based approaches** – like systemic family therapy – which have a strong evidence base.

> **Youth services** can be a vital safety net for children out of other services, or needing diversion from gang activity.
> **All children need safe activities, and space to play.** Sports clubs are particularly important.
> **Looked after children** are particularly vulnerable to grooming from gangs, and this is even more so when they experience placement upheaval, and end up out of school.
> The police need to **understand what is going on within communities** so that local level intelligence on crime, anti-social behaviour and threats informs a cross-system safeguarding approach.
> Once children end up within **the youth justice system we** focus on what happens to them on release from custody.

Step 3: Local-level identification and co-ordination

Co-ordinating all the agencies working with children and families is the responsibility of local children's safeguarding boards (LCSB), and their successors. Most of the bodies who need to act are statutory ones, meaning they need to co-operate with the LCSB and comply with the *Working Together* safeguarding guidance referenced in this report, which explicitly states the importance of protecting children from gangs.

Putting this into practice requires **a paradigm shift in the way agencies consider children involved with gangs. We need widespread recognition that children at risk from gangs are a safeguarding concern and need the protection of the law, in the same way as children at risk from within the home or from child sexual exploitation.** For this to happen, local areas need to:

Recognise gangs as a key issue

There are statutory agencies and structures in place for both safeguarding and public health with clear structures, processes and responsibilities. These bodies to recognise that gang violence and criminal exploitation is part of their core business.

Identify the children in need

As this report has exposed, those responsible for safeguarding have identified a tiny fraction of the estimated number of children in or on the periphery of gangs. Knowing how many children are in danger is the vital pre-requisite for planning and co-ordinating the response. Local areas need to:

1. Use local level indicators[61] to devise a population level-estimate of the number children in gangs, on the periphery of gangs or being criminally exploited by gangs. This should be done as part of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessments that all local authorities are required to produce.
2. Map this against the known population of gang-associated children to estimate the number of 'invisible' children: those who are in gangs but not known to those who need to keep them safe.
3. Work with partners – schools, health and community organisations – to identify who these invisible children are.

Know what is happening

The way vulnerable children are treated by the state will have a big impact on the likelihood of them entering a gang. Excluding children from school, off-rolling them, turning them away from CAMHS, and failing to diagnose and treat special educational needs, all exacerbate children's risks. The contribution of health bodies is crucial in mitigating these risks and it vital they realise this responsibility. Safeguarding boards needs to know what is happening and challenge the agencies who are not stepping-up. The new safeguarding oversight bodies have much greater power to do this than their predecessors.

Co-ordinate the implementation

As this report shows, it is when children fall through the gaps in the system (school exclusion, missed SEND, etc.) that they become most vulnerable. The only way to counter this is effective joint action between the different agencies working with children. Schools, children's services, police and the NHS need to be working together proactively, not passing children from agency to agency. In particular, it is important that a vulnerable child has consistency of relationships throughout this process, and therefore it is the children outside of the system, without this consistency, who will require bespoke provision to help them access other services and gain some stability.

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[61] This could include survey-data on gang membership along with key risk indicators such as children going missing, child victims of crime, or involved in criminality, attendance at A&E etc.

Step 4: National level response

Overall, we have found that the Government's response to serious violence has identified what is needed, but has not yet done enough to ensure that the necessary services are put in place. These are the actions we believe are needed to plug the gaps in what has been provided to date:

1) The Government needs to be clear that child criminal exploitation is a national priority, and lay out clear expectations for all the organisations working with children - including the police, schools, children's services and NHS bodies - as to their role. While the Department for Education has put in place the structures to achieve this, the practice is yet to match the theory. Individual agencies need to be proactive partners not just passive refers. To achieve this, the Department should:
   a. Be much more explicit about the role of Local Safeguarding Childrens Boards (LCSBs), and their successor bodies, in relation to gangs.
   b. Put more resources into improving knowledge of best practice around interventions for children in gangs, including adolescents at high-risk of absconding from care.
   c. Respond to the forthcoming Exclusions Review by ensuring that schools realise the safeguarding implications of excluding children, and are held responsible for these.

2) The joint inspections from Ofsted, HMIC, the CQC and Probation Inspectorate have been invaluable in identifying what is needed in terms of combating child criminal exploitation. This report recommends that the joint inspections be rolled-out to all areas, starting with the high-risk areas who were unable to respond to our data request for this report. The Department for Education and Home Office should provide the funding to enable this.

3) There needs to be a much greater focus on the early years within the Serious Violence Strategy. Specifically the Department for Education should set a clear target for reducing the number of children beginning school with very low levels of development, along with a strategy for how this can be done, and introduce a national plan for improving SEND identification in the early years.

4) The NHS and Public Health England needs to recognise the importance of health-delivered interventions for combatting youth violence. Health bodies need to be proactive safeguarding partners, working to reduce risks, not just reporting them to other agencies. Specifically, there needs to be: specific referral processes to prioritise CAMHS services for those at risk of gang membership and exclusion; greater focus on CAMHS access and services for under-11s (who may have conduct problems or issues with emotional regulation which may not be recognised by existing services) and processes in place to ensure that services are commissioned for families, including family therapy approaches for young children.

5) The forthcoming closure of the Troubled Families programme represents a serious threat to the support offered to many of the families with greatest gang risk. The government urgently needs to commit to the programme for 2020/21 to stop closure processes beginning from March 2019. Long-term, the future of a family-based approach needs to be ensured and developed.

6) The Department for Education needs to review what level of youth services are required to meet the needs of adolescents at risk of gang violence, many of whom will fall within the remit of Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989, and ensure that local authorities have the resources necessary to provide this.

7) The Department for Education needs to recognise the importance of 'Early Help' services within children's services, and ensure local authorities have the resources available to provide early help to those with high gang risks. This starting point for this needs to be an understanding of how many families are currently in receipt of early help services, and what those services are.