

Against Youth Violence

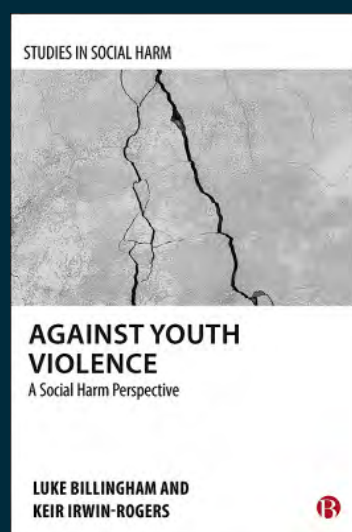
A Social Harm Perspective

OVERVIEW

Violence between young people causes significant harm to individuals and communities in the UK. Too often, however, the problem of 'youth violence' is framed by politicians and the media using an individualising lens that is unhelpful, inaccurate and counterproductive. We need to both take seriously the violence inflicted on young people by a small minority of their peers, and also to place that violence within the context of other social harms which blight the lives of Britain's children.

Prominent social harms including child poverty, inadequate housing, school exclusion and youth unemployment are important in and of themselves. They are also important, however, because of the role they also play in undermining young people's sense of mattering, and ultimately in creating what Elliott Currie (2016) refers to as 'social conditions which predictably breed violence'. We should not be focused narrowly on reducing violence, but instead should be striving to create a better and less harmful society for our children and young people to grow up in.

In *Against Youth Violence*, we propose a new way to understand and respond to violence. A significant departure from the current direction of travel, we call for two main things: 1) a major shift to policy designed to secure a more equitable societal distribution of four Rs: recognition, resources, risk and (state) retribution; and 2) an unrelenting focus on ensuring that all children and young people have nurturing, consistent and caring relationships with adults in the many different contexts in their lives.



Against Youth Violence by
Luke Billingham and
Keir Irwin-Rogers is published
by Bristol University Press,
Oct 2022

[bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/
against-youth-violence](https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/against-youth-violence)



CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

It is important to highlight that the vast majority of young people in England and Wales – regardless of their demographic characteristics – will never be involved in serious interpersonal violence. While the devastating effects of interpersonal violence between young people should not be downplayed, neither should we exaggerate or sensationalise its scale.

- In 2020, 77 young people (aged 10 to 19 years) had a case brought against them for homicide in London, representing less than 0.01 per cent of this age category. In 2019, less than 0.2 per cent of London's young people had proceedings against them for violence with injury offences.
- The vast majority of serious interpersonal violence, both in London and in England and Wales more broadly, is not identified as gang related.
- Knife crime, gun crime and homicide are concentrated in the most deprived areas of the country.

We argue that violence between young people needs to be taken seriously and addressed urgently, but it also needs to be placed in the context of other social harms affecting higher proportions of our younger population. For instance:

- In 2019, 30 per cent of children (4.1 million) lived in relative poverty in the UK.
- In 2018–19, over 10 per cent of school pupils (199,765) in state-funded secondary schools were subjected to fixed-term exclusions from education.
- In the final quarter of 2020, 13.3 per cent of young males (390,479) and 9.7 per cent of young females (271,791) aged 16–24 were classified as not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- In 2019, 1.1 per cent of children and young people aged 0–18 lived in temporary accommodation in England.

The damaging effects of these widespread social harms, among many others, are significant and varied. These effects include creating more conducive conditions for violence. Taking a global perspective, it is no coincidence that in countries where social harms against children and young people are the least widespread and least severe, levels of serious interpersonal violence are similarly low (and vice versa).

In particular, social harms undermine children and young people's sense of mattering, both in the sense of: 1) feeling that they are socially significant (being an important feature of the world as recognised by others); and 2) feeling that they have agency (being a feature of the world and making a difference to it).

From our extensive review of academic and community research, it is clear that young people who lack a sense of mattering are more likely to commit serious interpersonal violence. We would do well, therefore, to focus on building societies in which young people feel that they matter.

We should not be looking down on children and young people as if they are an inherently violent generational mass. If we are to reduce violence effectively, we should be looking upwards at the policies and structures which diminish their lives, and outwards from the perspective of young people themselves. It's only then that we will be able to bring about the changes for future generations which will provide conducive conditions for safety and wellbeing.

The following policy recommendations are built on this premise.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In *Against Youth Violence*, we present what we believe needs to change in order for the lives of children, young people and families to be improved, and for violence between young people to be reduced.

If these aims are to be achieved, we need to move beyond tweaks to specific policies and instead generate a broad and significant shift in policy direction. Rather than focusing myopically on what Joe Cottrell-Boyce (2013) has called 'bounded receptacles for blame', like 'gangs' or 'troubled families', we need a more fundamental reorientation of policy, centred on a more equitable distribution of four interconnected Rs:

- **Recognition:** too many young people experience structural belittlement and humiliation – the policies, institutions and systems that they interact with do not affirm their value, but leave them feeling diminished and disposable. Misrecognition and disrespect have profoundly negative consequences, including stirring up feelings of shame, alienation and rage – emotions which we know are closely connected with violence.
- **Resources:** inequalities of recognition are inseparable from economic disparity. Deep poverty coexists in Britain with immense wealth. This has a pernicious effect on young people, including a significant role in driving violence.
- **Risk:** tied to these interwoven inequalities of recognition and resources, some communities experience far more risk and danger than others. Too many communities are underprotected, their safety concerns inadequately or inappropriately addressed. These communities tend to experience disproportionate levels of risk in relation to a range of adversities which we know to be connected with violence: risk of school exclusion, risk of unemployment, and risk of homelessness, for instance.
- **(State) Retribution:** state responses to violence (or the perceived risk of violence) are too often counterproductively punitive, and significantly disproportionate. Racialised communities are especially affected by this. Our prisons – both adult and youth – overwhelmingly house those who experience the most material scarcity and misrecognition.

With any policy affecting children or young people, policy makers should ask the following question: "Will this policy reduce or exacerbate inequalities in one or more of the four Rs?". Some examples of measures and policy directions that would promote a more equitable distribution of the four Rs in the following areas include:

- **Economic policy**
Substantial reductions in poverty and inequality are vital if we are to see children, young people and families flourishing, and fewer households affected by the forms of pressure and discord which we know to precipitate significant social problems, including violence.

- **Early years**
All parents should have access to high-quality and affordable childcare and early years support. To make this a reality, far greater subsidies are needed to bring England and Wales into line with comparable countries commanding similar resources.
- **Education**
Adequately funded, incentivised and supported by the Department for Education and Ofsted, schools should seek to create inclusive and nurturing environments enabling all children and young people to achieve their potential.
- **Youth services**
All young people should have access to high-quality youth services: both targeted specialist interventions where needed, but also long-term, open-access support from youth facilities and youth workers, so they can form the trusted relationships with professional adults that can make a real difference.
- **Housing and local communities**
Central and local governments should take urgent action to invest in genuinely affordable and social housing.
- **Employment**
Central government should invest greater levels of funding in high-quality employment programmes, training schemes and apprenticeships to boost young people's experience, skills and opportunities. This would reduce rates of unemployment, under-employment and precarious, exploitative employment.
- **Criminal justice, youth justice and policing**
Too often, policing, criminal justice and youth justice systems in England and Wales are overly punitive, racially disproportionate and ineffective. Our criminal justice policies should shift towards enhancing the welfare of our most marginalised citizens and away from a heavy focus on controlling and punishing misdemeanours – a rebalancing that would bring us closer to the policy framework of some other European nations which experience significantly less violence.

Evidence indicates that some targeted violence reduction initiatives have the potential to produce modest and short-term reductions in serious violence between young people. Significant and lasting reductions in violence, however, will not be achieved by putting children and young people through isolated interventions, while leaving broader socioeconomic structures and institutions unchanged.

We must turn away from our current reactive, expansive and expensive response to violence. In its place, we should embrace a more effective preventative approach – one that focuses on creating safer and more nurturing environments for children and young people to grow and flourish.

About the book

For many children and young people, Britain is a harmful society in which to grow up. This book contextualizes the violence that occurs between a small number of young people within a wider perspective on social harm.

Aimed at academics, youth workers and policy makers, the book presents a new way to make sense of this pressing social problem. The authors also propose measures to substantially improve the lives of Britain's young people in areas ranging from the early years to youth services and the criminal justice system.

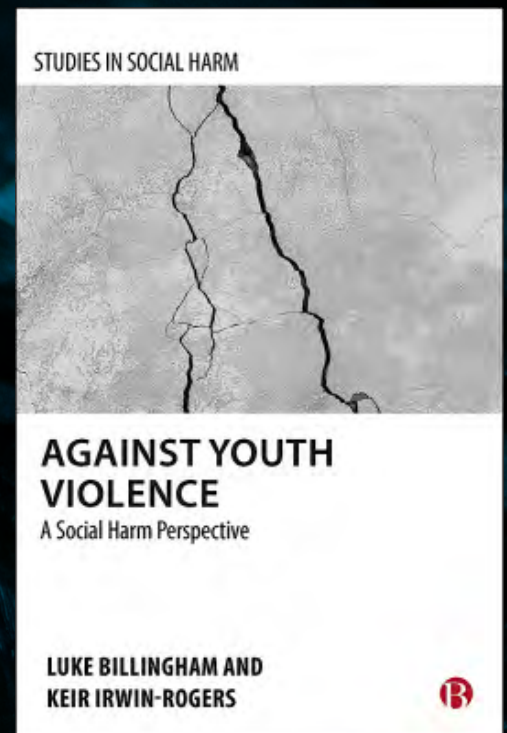
Luke Billingham is a youth and community worker at Hackney Quest and Research Associate at The Open University.

Keir Irwin-Rogers is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at The Open University.

References





Cottrell-Boyce, J. (2013) 'Ending gang and youth violence: a critique', *Youth Justice*, 13(3): 193–206.

Currie, E. (2016) *The Roots of Danger*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Bristol University Press, and its imprint Policy Press, are committed to publishing the highest quality international scholarship in the social sciences and aligned disciplines. As a not-for-profit university press, our aim is to publish work that makes an impact in the world.

Find out more at
bristoluniversitypress.co.uk

 @BrisUniPress
 Bristol University Press
 bristoluniversitypress
 Bristol University Press and Policy Press

 **BRISTOL
UNIVERSITY
PRESS**