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AGAINST YOUTH VIOLENCE:

A social harm perspective

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About the authors

Luke Billingham is a youth and community worker for Hackney Quest, an independent charity based in North East London. Alongside this, he is a Research Associate on the ESRC-funded Public Health, Youth, and Violence Reduction project, based in the Open University. In 2020, he co-authored the Youth Violence Commission final report with Keir Irwin-Rogers and Abhinay Muthoo. In a voluntary capacity, he is involved with a number of criminal justice charities, including as a trustee for Haven Distribution, which provides books for people in prison.

Keir Irwin-Rogers is a lecturer in criminology at The Open University. His research centres on the health and well-being of children and young people, focusing in particular on social harm in young people's lives. Keir was lead criminologist to the cross-party parliamentary Youth Violence Commission and co-authored its final report. He has given evidence to numerous Parliamentary Committees and is passionate about improving policy and practice to enhance the safety, health and well-being of children and young people.

Preface and acknowledgements

The roots of this book lie in a chance encounter back in December 2018, when the authors met in London at an event commemorating the 18th anniversary of the death of Damilola Taylor. As the event drew to a close, we spoke briefly and arranged to spend an afternoon together at Hackney Quest, the youth centre where Luke has worked since 2016. That afternoon, we discussed a range of topics, including the work of the cross-party parliamentary Youth Violence Commission, on which Keir was lead criminologist, and which Luke would later join as co-author of its final report.

Since then, we have worked together closely, not only on this book, but writing journal articles, book chapters and blogs, attending academic and practitioner conferences, and most latterly, on a three-year ESRC-funded project exploring public health approaches to violence reduction. Daily and varied contact over email, phone, Zoom and WhatsApp has resulted in us becoming close friends as much as we are colleagues. We now share as many photos and videos of our own children as we do messages about our work and research.

The relationship we have developed has enabled us to have open and frank conversations about often very difficult and sensitive topics. While our views converge on a great many things, there have also been periods of (in)tense disagreement – we've included a footnote in Chapter 2 which summarises our argument about the value of virtue ethics, for instance. These disagreements could of course have been avoided had we chosen to write separately. However, we believe this book has benefitted in numerous ways from the bringing together of two rather different perspectives – one from someone who has worked primarily as a youth worker, and one from someone who has worked primarily as an academic researcher. In part, such benefit lies in what we hope will be the book's broad appeal, to an intended audience that includes practitioners, policy-makers and academics. The book reflects a degree of both professional and academic knowledge and experience that it would have lacked were either of us to have approached the task of writing it alone.

We share a passion for seeking to improve children and young people's lives – in different ways, both of our careers and our voluntary commitments are dedicated to that goal. We co-wrote this book over the past couple of years in the hope that it might contribute to that aim, by bringing together insights we have each gained from our research and practice with young people. The book presents what we hope could be a fruitful way of considering their lives, and working towards their improvement.

perspective on the issues discussed in this book more than any academic study ever could. I'd like to thank all my current and former colleagues at Hackney Quest and Reach Children's Hub: I've gained so much from your expertise, experience and support. Through the course of my work I've been lucky enough to meet a number of bloody brilliant young adults from across London – some of whom weren't yet any kind of adult when I first met them! – who I've learned a lot from. I mention them here to thank them, but also to suggest to readers that they look out for these names, because they are all trailblazers and community leaders to watch out for: David Adesanya, Athian Akec, Ameerah Amushan, Georgina Appeagyei, Thaddaeus Brown, Joshua Dickinson, Emmanuel Haffner, Diana Hysenaj, Jordan Isaacs, Ranae Kaira, Kaitlene Koranteng, Yolanda Lear, Leo Lukeman, Reece Lukeman, Kadeem Marshall-Oxley, Cheyanne McDonald, Samira Monteleone, Daniel Ocitti, Emmanuel Onapa, Renee Oyeleye, Nicholas Oyeniyi, Alvin Owusu, Shah Rahman, Rajat Singh, and David Smith. I'd also like to thank the fellow-travellers and "professional pals" who've provided me with brilliantly enriching discussion, support and mentorship over the years: Mohammad Abdullah, Deji Adeoshun, Franklyn Addo, Toyin Agbetu, Padraig Cotter-Boston, Shaun Danquah, Matt Ellis, Suzanne Fraser, Tim Head, Hussein Hussein, Jordan Ignatius, Jermain Jackman, Annmarie Lewis, Peter McDonald-Smith, Hannah Millar, Deborah Murphy, Huan Rimington, Hannah Sender, Dami Solebo, Chelsie Sparks, Nick Stanhope, Lisa Stepanovic, Frank Sweeney, Ciaran Thapar, Emma Winch, Ruth Woolsey and Ned Younger. Lastly, and probably not leastly, I'd like to thank my family: my parents, who always seem to have done a decent job; my brother, whose immense pedantry has, I reluctantly admit, probably sharpened my thinking; my daughter Emma (2 months), who suggested a number of vital improvements to the manuscript; and my partner, Flossie, without whose boundless support, care and patience I could never have written a word.

Keir would like to thank the many children and young people who have given up time to share their views and experiences in research that he has conducted over the past decade. Thanks also go to the adults working with children and young people who have kindly and generously supported various projects over the years. I am deeply grateful to all those I worked with as part of the cross-party

parliamentary Youth Violence Commission. Thanks in particular to Gary Trowsdale, a connector of unparalleled spirit and enthusiasm, for getting me involved in the Commission, and for everything that you do to support young people. Thank you to my parents, for your endless support and encouragement. Thanks to Caroline, for your patience and love, and for being a wonderful mother to our two children. Finn (2 years) and Grace (6 months), you've been delightful distractions and the cause of a degree of sleep deprivation that has made the task of writing this book incalculably more difficult – thank you both from the bottom of my heart.

Introduction: Against Youth Violence & Against "Youth Violence" <1>

A harmful society <2>

For far too many children and young people, Britain is a harmful society in which to grow up. Across the country, social harms of various kinds blight the lives of our youngest generations – they are harmed by institutions, policies, norms, systems, organisations, services, adults, and, in some cases, by one another. This book explores the harms that affect young people in today's Britain, in the hope that they could be more effectively reduced and prevented.

One particularly contentious, divisive, and visceral form of harm is physical interpersonal violence between young people. Whether labelled "youth violence", "serious youth violence", "gang violence", or – when a blade is used – "knife crime", the violence which occurs between young people is a source of national consternation. It is neither a simple "moral panic" nor an uncontainable epidemic. It is a type of harm which requires urgent attention, and immediate action. It is also the case that it already attracts substantial attention, and already prompts widespread action, and that some of this attention and action can be, in itself, a source of harm.

We need to both take seriously the violence which is inflicted on some young people by a tiny minority of their peers, and to place that violence in a wider perspective: in the context of the many other harms which damage, diminish, degrade, and demoralise too many young lives. These harms are significant in themselves. Their importance is not restricted to the role they may (or may not) play in encouraging other social maladies. There are, though, connections that can be drawn between harmful social circumstances and violent individual actions. We need to hold individuals responsible for the acts of violence that they commit, *and* to acknowledge that there are social, cultural, economic and political conditions which 'predictably breed violence' (Currie, 2016 p 89). Explanation is not exoneration. The communities which experience the greatest concentration of social harms are also those affected by the highest rates of interpersonal violence. If we are to reduce violence, we need to better understand how social context affects people's behaviour – suggesting neither that actions are

automatic responses to material circumstances, group norms or cultural imperatives, nor that they spring entirely from individual choice.

These are all matters which we address in this book. We seek to provide some fruitful exploration of a handful of questions:

- How much interpersonal physical violence is actually being committed by young people? What are the patterns and trends associated with this violence, and how does it compare to violence perpetrated by adults? (Chapter 1)

- Specifically in the context of children and young people's lives, what is a helpful way to conceptualise social harm? (Chapter 2)

- How might the concept of "mattering" help us to understand young people's lives? (Chapter 3)

- What are some of the most significant and damaging forms of social harm in young people's lives, and what are their effects? (Chapter 4)

- How might the experience of social harm contribute to young people's propensity to commit acts of interpersonal physical violence against one another? (Chapter 5)

- Which kinds of response to "youth violence" can be harmful, and why? (Chapter 6)

- Given all of the above, how might we reduce social harm and violence in young people's lives? (Conclusion)

We hope that this book may be of interest to all those who are invested in bettering the lives of children and young people. We hope that, in some way, this book can contribute to that process of bettering, by suggesting some helpful ways to look at harm, at violence, and at how young people construct meaningful lives.

Box 0.1: "Young people" and "Britain"

Young People

The term "young people" is used throughout this book. Generally, we follow the United Nations (2018) definition of 'youth' and use the term to refer to people between 10 and 24 years of age. In places, we will refer to "children and young people", by which we mean those aged 0-24.

We use the term 'young people' in this book to reflect the fact that interpersonal violence can affect any young person, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity and class. It is important to note, however, that the vast majority of young people to which this book refers are working class young men and boys, who are disproportionately involved in violence between young people, for reasons which we examine. This is of course not to suggest that young women and girls are unaffected by violence between young people – a growing body of research has examined the involvement of young women and girls in violence, as well as the ways that they can be harmed by the violence or coercion of young men (see e.g. Batchelor, 2011 and Young, 2011 on violence among young females; e.g. Totten, 2003 on girlfriend abuse among violent young men; e.g. Iyere, 2020 and Havard et al, 2021 on young girls' exposure to traumatic or harmful experiences due to young men's gang activity).

Britain

Through much of the book we refer to Britain, a landmass composed of three nations: England, Scotland and Wales. While these nations share many similar characteristics and challenges, there are also some significant differences between them. All are subject to governance from Westminster, although Scotland and Wales both have devolved powers. In certain places, we refer more specifically to England or to England & Wales, often due to the geographic coverage of data being presented. Due to the location of much of our research and professional experience, and to

the city's disproportionate levels of violence between young people, we focus especially on London in much of the book.

Why are we "Against Youth Violence"? <2>

We are "against youth violence" in three particular senses, which we introduce below. However, there is plenty that we are "for", too. Through the course of the book, we write far more about what we consider to be a helpful perspective on young people's lives (Chapters 3-5) than we do about the views which we are "against" (mostly in Chapter 6) – we certainly have not intended to produce a work of pure deconstruction or critique. As the following sections introduce the ways in which we are "against youth violence", we will touch upon many of the themes, ideas and problems which are further explored in the rest of the book.

Against youth violence as a reality – we want there to be less violence between young people <3>

A small number of young people in Britain commit acts of physical interpersonal violence against other young people. It is vitally important that we understand the true scale and nature of this problem, and place it in the context of other forms of violence and harm in young people's lives. It is not a problem which should be exaggerated, sensationalised, or glamourised. But, notwithstanding these caveats, it remains the case that our society should vastly improve its capacity to prevent and reduce violence between young people.

We both know parents who have lost children to violence at the hands of a peer. Having each worked with young people in different capacities, we have seen the devastation that one young death causes to a community – the pain and trauma can ripple through friendship groups, families, and neighbourhoods. In many cases, the mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, schoolfriends and teachers, professionals and neighbours who grieve for a lost young person killed by violence can never fully "process" the bereavement. The violent curtailing of a young life is always an immeasurable loss,

because no-one can ever quite know what that person would have gone on to do, achieve, or be. Grieving for a murdered child can stir complex pain and anguish; unbearably raw feelings of despair, horror, guilt, shame, and fury. We must prevent more young people, more families and more communities from experiencing this. Writing of her own experience of grieving for her nephew, Nico Ramsay, who died in 2016 after being stabbed, Joy White (2020 p 109) explains that she has difficulty imagining what this kind of grief must feel like for Nico's peers: 'if, with all my years of life experience, I struggle to make sense of what happened, wrestle and resist feelings of anger, helplessness, sadness and rage, then what do you do with those feelings if you are a young adult?'

The fear and despair which can permeate whole communities affected by violence between young people can also devastate lives. The perceived threat of imminent physical danger can hang over a neighbourhood. It can restrict where people feel able to travel or to spend time, it can cause a near-permanent state of uncomfortable anxiety, and it can prompt intense mutual suspicion and distrust, even among close companions. It can be a common refrain among parents who feel the emotional strain of living in such communities that their favourite sound in the world is their child's housekey turning in the lock, confirming their safe return (Billingham et al, 2018 p 39). Children approaching adolescence in these communities can be deeply frightened of their own impending teen-age years, assuming – rightly or wrongly – that they will inevitably feature violence and danger. They can fearfully anticipate having to make terrible decisions between rival groups of their peers, or having to negotiate the horrible catch-22 of choosing between the illusory safety of gang membership on the one hand, and the potentially fragile solitude of avoiding affiliation with any local grouping on the other. A single violent incident can cause terror to reverberate through a borough, town, or city, marring lives far beyond those directly connected to the events.

Precisely due to the importance and the weight of this issue, reducing violence is not a task to undertake with jerking knees or ideological blinkers. We hope that some of the ideas and discussion that follow may aid the development and implementation of more effective policies and practices to

reduce levels of violence between young people. We do not attempt to present a comprehensive blueprint for reform, particularly as we have made a series of policy recommendations to the UK government elsewhere, through our work with the cross-party parliamentary Youth Violence Commission (Irwin-Rogers, Muthoo & Billingham, 2020). Neither do we seek to identify which specific programmatic interventions are "best" for reducing violence. We offer what we consider to be useful ways of looking at and thinking about the problems of social harm and violence in young people's lives, and – in the final chapter – we make broad suggestions about the kinds of changes that are needed if our society is to become a less harmful place for children, young people and families.

Relevant power-holders in Britain certainly appear to see levels of violence among young people in our society as not just a 'condition' – a state of affairs which exists – but a 'problem' – an issue which requires political attention and action (Kingdon, 1993 p 42; see Chapter 6). We agree – violence between young people is a political problem which requires a serious response. But there is significant contention and disagreement about what kind of problem violence is, and the lenses through which it should be viewed. Violence can be seen as a moral failing of individual character, as a signal of "troubled" families, or as an issue with more structural and historical determinants. We can focus with microscopic intensity on the particular young people who have committed acts of violence, scrutinising them with a moralising, demonising, criminalising eye, or we can bring the lens outward, situating violence that occurs between young people within the context of other violence and other harm in their lives, considering the ways in which the social and economic arrangements of our society make such violence more likely. This leads us to the next sense in which we are against youth violence: we are doubtful about the value of "youth violence" as a descriptive label, as it currently seems to function more as an individualising, magnifying lens, than it does as a concept to encourage reflection on the wider societal conditions and issues with which violence between young people is inextricably tied.

Against the connotations of "youth violence" as a descriptive label – we want there to be less misconception and misunderstanding about young people, violence and harm <3>

We think that the term "youth violence" has developed enormously unhelpful associations, but we have no interest in policing anyone's language. Though we do think that the phrase in itself has some inherent implications which are misleading, our bigger objection is to the current and contingent connotations which can become attached to it. In general, the context and consequence of language is more important than its precise content. Discussions around "youth violence" can mobilise the term in a way which demonises, stigmatises, pathologises, patronises, or stereotypes young people, or in a way which generates profound misconceptions of violence, young people, and harm. Whether or not the two-word concept of "youth violence" has now become inseparably attached to these damaging effects is a difficult question to answer. We are more concerned about the extent and nature of the damage than we are about the strength of the semantic adhesion. If the words continue to be used, but to tell a far more nuanced and accurate story, with the unhelpful connotations stripped away, that would be more of a positive development than if people found alternative words to portray exactly the same misguided assumptions.[1] We are labouring this point for an important reason: we would hate for this book to do little more than increase people's scepticism about the phrase "youth violence", whilst doing nothing to challenge actual misconceptions. We most certainly do not wish for it to encourage the kind of concept-snobbery or label-pedantry which is all too common in politics, academia, the public sector, and the charity sector: the form of holier-than-thou self-aggrandising in which it is pronounced that a certain term must now be abandoned, as if this marks one out as uniquely enlightened or progressive, and as if this act of linguistic disposal will inevitably produce profound societal change.[2]

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[1] We would hope, for instance, that the Youth Violence Commission presented a nuanced picture of violence between young people. It is partly our experience undertaking extensive research for the Commission, however, that has made us more critical of the "youth violence" label, for the reasons we outline in this section.

[2] If a word or phrase is morally dubious in itself, that may be sufficient grounds for disposal. If the issue with a word or phrase is the problematic connotations which have become attached to it, it will always be more

It is one of the primary objectives of this book, then, to describe and dismantle many of the damaging distortions which seem to have now become associated with the term "youth violence". Through the chapters that follow, we will explore many of these fallacies in detail – here we will just provide a brief overview of some of the most mendacious muddles and bunkum binaries that are disfiguring the discussion about violence between young people. When laying this out below, we make liberal use of caricature and straw men, and provide only scant references. In the body of the book, particularly in Chapter 6, we will more thoroughly examine many of these misconceptions, sketching how they have developed since the Victorian era. Here we indulge in a cursory, introductory salvo. We start with the more inherent problems with the phrase, working outwards towards those looser connotations which can (and too often have) become more contingently associated with it.

Firstly, and somewhat unavoidably, the idea of "youth violence" both narrows and blurs focus. It refers broadly to violence involving young people, tending to centre attention on the violence which is perpetrated by young people against other young people, but it could also be taken to include violence perpetrated by young people against adults – it is unhelpfully imprecise in this regard. Despite this imprecision, the frequent circulation of the concept can narrow our sense of who is involved in violence: if our concern about acts of violence comes to be dominated only by those which are committed by the young, it can nudge our gaze away from other forms of violence which are more common, such as street-based violence between adults (usually between men), domestic violence between adults (usually committed by men against women), and violence perpetrated by adults against children and young people. It can also imply that violence between young people is some discrete, bounded problem, which can be isolated from other kinds of violence and harm, and from other connected issues, such as education, welfare, drug policy, racism, child maltreatment, and so on. It can seem to position "youth" as a 'bounded receptacle for blame' (Cottrell-Boyce, 2013 p 202). At worst, if it saturates our understanding of violence, the concept of "youth violence" can skew our

difficult to establish the extent to which the word/phrase has a life beyond those connotations, and can be salvaged, or it has become irreparably tarnished by them.

perspective, leading us to instinctively assume that any report, coverage or research about violence must involve young people. When we see news headlines or article titles referring to violence in Britain, for instance, there may be a tendency for this to conjure images of violent young people on the street, rather than violent adults in the home, despite the far greater frequency of the latter.

The narrowing and skewing of our attention can work in the other direction, too: not just leading us to associate all violence with youth, but all youth with violence. The political potency of "youth violence" as a fundamental problem of our age can lead to both profound misconceptions about the proportion of young people involved in violence,[3] and to the colonisation of other aspects of youth experience – as if the only matters of concern are those which can be tied to the issue of violence; as if all problems in young people's lives should be defined by their (potential) connection with violence.

Moving on to the conceptual associations of the term, the phrase "youth violence" can suggest that the violence denoted is of a youthful character: "youth" can seem adjectival, describing the *nature* of the violence, rather than just who is involved in it, suggesting that youthfulness is inherently criminogenic. Whether violent acts committed by young people are somehow affected in their nature by the age of the perpetrators is questionable – a physical assault undertaken by a 28 year-old, for instance, may not differ very much from one undertaken by a 17 year-old. Of course, some might say that a 28 year-old is still young, and this is another problem: the category of "youth" can be so vaguely defined that it is used with great plasticity, especially by those with an interest in over-stating the extent of "youth violence". Aside from its vagueness, the word "youth" can also by itself have certain connotations; it can be associated with uncontrollable, anarchic, hyper-hormonal, threatening, heavily group-based forms of behaviour or attitude. It now has pejorative overtones whether used in the singular or plural: describing an individual as a "youth" in contemporary Britain has inevitable

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[3] When undertaking the research captured in Billingham et al (2018), for instance, we asked some of our respondents what proportion of local young people they thought were involved in the criminal justice system. Answers tended to range between 10 and 60 percent. The actual figure, according to the local Youth Offending Team manager, was around 1%. There may be many reasons for these misconceptions, but the potency of "youth violence" discourse certainly seemed to play a role.

connotations of yobbishness, while referring to "the youth" as a group can seem to designate them a problematic generational mass. Given all of this, the term "youth violence" can imply that there is something inherent in youth itself which is somehow always-potentially violent, aggressive, or uncontainable, and therefore – at worst – every young person is a potential perpetrator in waiting.

As a product of how it narrows and skews focus, and of its conceptual implications, "youth violence" can also become associated with the idea that violence is not only perpetrated by individual young people, but is somehow self-generated by today's youth. Young people form a separate, distinct community, and it is within this hermetically-sealed world that violence is fostered. It is nothing to do with adults, institutions, structures, systems, politics or economics: violence is a self-spawned property of youth. This misguided perspective can have biological or cultural assumptions attached to it – violence between young people can be seen as a "natural" outgrowth of adolescent risk-taking and boundary-testing, or it can be seen as a feature of life which is incubated within particular, apparently self-contained youth cultures. In the latter case, at the extreme, an especially simplistic form of cultural determinism can suggest that, out of nowhere, young people develop norms and values which valorise violence and discredit peacefulness, as if this malicious cultural creativity occurs in a vacuum. This view appears evident in some policy reports, such as that produced by the Centre for Social Justice back in 2009, which mutilated the work of Elijah Anderson (2000) to suggest that youth violence and gang crime in Britain was caused by a vicious "code of the street" which nigh-on necessitated violence among young people in certain neighbourhoods (Centre for Social Justice, 2009). The report failed to attend sufficiently to Anderson's rich account of how the complex, ambiguous street codes which he observed in his study of inner city Philadelphia were developed as an alternative means for young people to live a meaningful life, in the face of their considerable economic immiseration and social stigmatisation. Anderson carefully details the ways in which wealth has been magnetised away from these places, and dignity stripped from their inhabitants, as the generative context for understanding how young people then construct meaning for their lives individually and collectively, mobilising the few resources they have – including violence – to achieve

some sense of significance, self-respect and status. We would argue, with Anderson, that it is equally important to understand how power, resources and esteem have been torn from a community as it is to understand how their cultural innovation in the face of this harmful inequity may contain destructive social conventions. This does not mean that culturally-coded violence is justifiable, but it does mean that it is impossible to understand such violence without its wider socio-historical context, and that there is little value in any attempt to narrate any subculture as if insulated from this context.

The term "youth violence", then, can encourage us to train our lenses downwards from on high, so that we can observe young people below us. Like the late 19th Century authors studied by Griffin, we can 'view young people from the perspective of an outraged but respectable bourgeoisie' (1993 p 100). Casting our eyes onto the youth beneath us implies a kind of ennobled disdain, as though we are looking down on something entirely detached and degenerate. Their violence is a distant spectacle, we can absolve ourselves of any responsibility to consider how it may be connected to our society's structural features. Viewed in this way, young people can seem 'at once fascinating, incomprehensible and intimidating' – a phrase used by Sharpe to describe how 'poorer urban brethren' were viewed by better-heeled members of Victorian society (2016 p 412). As this suggests, the demonisation of young people – especially those experiencing poverty – has a long history. Golding and Middleton (1982 p 10) argue that this 'minimally informed mythology about the monstrous underworld of the wretched poor' goes back at least to the sixteenth century in Britain.

More specifically in relation to violence involving young people, Pearson (1983) traces a significant trend in British political life across many centuries, in which the mythological belief repeatedly takes hold that society has been 'suddenly plunged into an unnatural state of disorder' (p ix), caused by the uniquely unruly habits of younger generations, who 'soar to new heights of insubordination and depravity' (p 208), disturbing the pristine social peace which pre-existed them, and signalling a period of inexorable decline. He wrote this in the 1980s, in a biting critique of the simplistic 'law-and-order' agenda which remains influential to this day. He did not intend to suggest – and neither do we – that

violence among young people is trivial, nor that it is some perennial, inevitable problem which we therefore need not worry about: he was equally scathing about both 'ageless mythologies of historical decline' and 'the equally pernicious social doctrine that nothing ever changes' (Pearson, 1983 p 223). We should not hesitate in any era to examine the precise extent and nature of violence and harm, but we should studiously avoid rehearsing any of the damaging and lazy mythological notions which abound all too frequently in discussions of "youth violence": that this latest generation of young people are worse than any which has come before, that their violence has sprung from nothing, that we have never seen violence like it, that they manifest or cause all of society's ills, or that their behaviour signifies an irreversible decline in our country's morality and culture. Too often, this mythology supports the age-old habit of focusing our fury on those with the least power and the scarcest wealth, whilst the preponderance of harms caused by those with the most of both go relatively unnoticed.

If the concept of "youth violence" can become attached to the demonisation of young people, it is important to note that not all young people are demonised equally. Pearson (1983 p 224) articulates this point forcefully, criticising the 'dishonourable tradition of British belly-aching against the "racial degeneration" of the common people and its supposed manifestation in "unprecedented" violence'. Demonisation is almost invariably racialised. When he was writing in the 1980s, Pearson identified "black muggers" as the major folk devil of the time, but he also explored the many other groups who were deemed to be "foreign" defamers of the orderly "British way of life" in other eras, from discharged Legionnaires to Irishmen (ibid p x). In more recent times, many researchers have raised concerns about the frequent stereotypical association of "youth violence" with young black men – for instance, Hallsworth and Brotherton (2011 p 8) describe 'a highly racial discourse that panders to fears of the black criminal other'; Gunter (2017 p 225) critiques the 'news-media images that portray black youth as intrinsically criminogenic and violent'; and Williams and Squires (2021, p 38) scrutinise the 'narrative of "knife crime" as a young, Black, male, pathology'. The statistics on ethnicity and violence paint a complex and contested picture: across Britain, it is significantly more common for white young

people to be involved in violence than young Black people (Thapar, 2021 pp 181-2), whilst in cities such as London, there is evidence that young Black people are disproportionately affected by violence (see Chapter 1; Webster, 2015; Nijjar, 2018; Williams & Clarke, 2018; Pitts, 2020; Bhattacharya et al, 2021; Thapar, 2021). Whatever the exact statistical reality may be, the problem of youth violence (and its sister problem of gangs, especially) is too often simplistically and xenophobically associated with blackness. This is frequently blended with the vacuous cultural determinism touched upon above, to suggest that violence is some essential feature of inherently violence-inducing "black culture" (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011; Williams & Squires, 2021). The 'racialising discourse' of whiteness in Britain can also distinguish between different categories of white people, according to presumed moral status or ethical worth, meaning that poorer and non-British white people are racialised as "less than white", inferior, subhuman, or lumpen, especially those who are affected by violence (Tyler, 2013 p 187). The racialising and racist tendency to blame a "foreign" Other for the alleged downfall of our society seems, unfortunately, to be alive and well in many discussions of youth violence.

Lastly, the concept of "youth violence" seems to encourage a great number of false dichotomies. As a supposedly isolable sub-category of crime, it attracts simplistic "takes" of all kinds, which too often involve commentators coming down squarely on one side of an artificially-constructed binary. Young people are described superficially as either powerfully immoral perpetrators or blameless, vulnerable victims; their violence seen as either a freely-chosen choice or as a fully-determined product of their environment – they are demonised, pathologised and patronised in turn. Involvement in violence is seen as the consequence of either brutal exploitation or boundless enthusiasm, as entirely motivated by drugs or money, or solely as a means of shoring up insecure self-identity. It is all about gangs, or gangs do not exist. Behaviour is guided by overwhelmingly forceful group norms and cultural imperatives, or is a mere reflection of individual psychological difficulties. Violence is caused by mysterious, unknowable forces or by easily-tabulated risk factors. Young people are just the same as adults, guided by similar kinds of drives and concerns, or they are a fundamentally different subsection of humanity, which we could not possibly hope to understand or empathise with. The subcultures that

they form are grounded in their passionate rebellion against mainstream society, or they are hyper-conformist bundles of consumers. With all due respect to Billy Bragg, asking "which side are you on?" in relation to any of these binaries is not the most helpful contribution to be made to better understanding young people's lives.

Like any concept, the notion of "youth violence" structures our attention. We fear that it can obscure far more than it illuminates, particularly as its mobilisation has become all the more febrile in recent years. In this book, we will tend not to use the phrase, referring instead to "violence between young people", or – more generally – to "violence affecting young people". As outlined at the outset of this section, though, it is misconceptions and misunderstandings that we seek to challenge, more than specific words used. There is a way of thinking about and looking at violence between young people which takes it as a discrete problem, detached from wider societal issues, encouraging us to cast our critical gaze downwards onto young people as Others, deemed to be the sole origin of their own mutual viciousness. If your aim is to find violent young people, and to find reasons to blame them, and them only, for their violence, you will probably find ways to see, speak and write about the issue on those terms – you will tend to find what you're looking for (White, 2013 p 178). Too often the idea of "youth violence" seems to encourage this kind of approach.

In this book, we instead look upwards and outwards from the perspective of young people, seeking to explore the various kinds of social harm which press down on their lives, the ways in which they construct a sense of meaning for their lives individually and collectively in the context of this harm, and how this may all connect to the problem of physical interpersonal violence. We also explore, historically and analytically, the more misguided ideas about "youth violence" sketched above, as well as drawing out how and why they are harmful. Rather than seeking to find and describe violence between young people as if it is possible to understand it on its own terms, we intend to explore broader questions about harm in young people's lives. This involves an examination of the systems,

policies, institutions and agencies which structure possibilities for children, young people and families, define and constrain their resources, and enrich or diminish their dignity.

Given the inextricable link between social harm and immense economic inequality in Britain, our approach involves considering political economy as much as sociology and psychology. The single most defining feature of our society's development over the past few decades has been the continued magnetisation of power, privilege, and prestige towards those who already enjoy the greatest proportion of those resources, and the ongoing concentration of pain, pressure and powerlessness among those communities and those lives which are already structurally diminished. This parallel enrichment and immiseration forms the structural background of young people's lives today. And in fact, as we go on to argue throughout the book, inequality is not a distant "background" feature of anyone's experience: its symptoms and its harmful effects intrude on children and young people's everyday lives.

We do not intend to write fatalistically about people's lives, nor deny their complex humanity: we regularly see for ourselves young people's considerable ingenuity, talent, passion, resilience and strength in the face of adverse circumstances. We do believe, however, that we should strive to create more equitable societies in which all children and young people grow up within social conditions which allow them to develop and express these capabilities, and to flourish. Alexander (2000 p 226) rightly highlights the temptation to write about young people's lives as if they are 'simply about constraint or simply about creativity'. Our focus on social harm (and structural harm in particular) does entail greater attentiveness to constraint than creativity – we write extensively of the ways in which various kinds of harm limit, restrict and damage young people's lives – but in our discussion of mattering (in Chapter 3 especially) we hope to have done some degree of justice to the richness of young people's inner lives, and to the complexity of their agency. Young people are never passive recipients of social injury, but that does not reduce the importance of investigating the most prominent forms of social

harm which diminish their lives, in order to hold accountable those people and those structures with the greatest responsibility for causing them.

Against the sensationalisation and industrialisation of "youth violence" – we want there to be less exploitation of young people's suffering <3>

The kinds of harmful misconception about young people and violence outlined above do not come from nowhere. It is worth asking a simple question in relation to it: who benefits? As Canning and Tombs have argued: 'Harm is always linked to benefit, whether this is for identifiable agents, institutions and interests, or for maintaining or exacerbating existent, unequal power structures' (2021 p 7). Unfortunately, there seems to be a sizeable cohort of power-holders – certain media moguls, politicians, charity bosses, and senior police officers, for instance – whose interests are served rather well by the continued proliferation of simplistic portrayals of young people and violence. At worst, young people's suffering is both misrepresented and exploited to boost careers, swell funding coffers, and enhance the punitive discretion of authorities. Sensationalised and superficial accounts of "youth violence" can engender the kinds of rage, disbelief and incredulity which regrettably generate clicks, increase newspaper sales, affect the polls, exacerbate authoritarian instincts, and secure votes. This problem is the focus of Chapter 6, where we look at the history of sensationalising and simplistic portrayals of young people, crime and violence, seeking to explore where they have come from, what drives their proliferation, what they look like in the present, and why they are harmful.

We do not wish to rehash lazy narrations of a simple moral panic,[4] or to suggest that all those engaged in discussion of "youth violence" must be motivated by cynicism and self-interest. There is much sincere, empathetic, and sensitive conversation about and reporting on violence between young people, and it is certainly a positive thing if more adults are concerned about the welfare of children

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[4] For a sophisticated and compelling account of the current moral panic surrounding "knife crime" specifically, which is neither lazy nor simplistic, see Williams and Squires, 2021.

and young people. All the more reason, we would argue, to critique the forms of coverage and discussion about youth violence which is harmful and exploitative. A helpful litmus test for any portrayal of issues affecting young people, we suggest, is whether its overall impact is to devalue and denigrate young people, or to uphold their dignity and moral worth – regardless of which specific individual behaviours are the focus. Two different accounts of the same act of violence between young people can be equally honest and damning about the viciousness and disrespect for human life that was involved in the incident, whilst carrying quite different ramifications: one could dismiss young people as merely a menace to be managed, while the other could reckon with the nuanced complexity and difficulty of growing up in twenty-first century Britain. One could be motivated by a kind of distant, armchair disdain, a nose-holding peer down at people, neighbourhoods and communities who are deemed worthy only of curious horror, whilst another could be shot through with genuine compassion and concern. Much of Chapter 6 is dedicated to the analytical exercise of discerning the origins and nature of a particular, connected set of harmful perspectives on young people and violence, which continue to circulate to this day, and which tend to centre on a series of 'bounded receptacles for blame': "youth", gangs, (black) youth culture, dysfunctional families, and the "culture" of poverty. These ideas have highly significant effects on contemporary policing and punishment, and on the practices of public and charity sector agencies, as we will explore in Chapter 6. At worst, they both sensationalise and exploit young people's suffering.

Structure and style <2>

Though the passages above contain references to the content of each chapter, in this section we provide a more comprehensive breakdown of the book's structure. While both authors worked with one another on each of the chapters, chapters 1 and 2 were primarily authored by Keir Irwin-Rogers, and chapters 3, 5 and 6 by Luke Billingham. The introduction, Chapter 4, and the conclusion were equally contributed to by each of us.

Chapter 1 provides a detailed analysis of the latest available data on physical interpersonal violence, and violence between young people in particular. Though we are not naïve to the stark limitations of data on this issue – and crime data more generally – we recognise the vital importance of laying the ground for all that follows by giving as clear a picture as we can of the actual extent and nature of violence in today's Britain. Given that our primary objective is to put "youth violence" in its place, in proportion, and in perspective, we need to begin with a factual account of how much of this violence is occurring, where it is happening, and how it compares to other kinds of violence (data limitations notwithstanding).

Chapter 2 offers a working definition of social harm, particularly in relation to the lives of children and young people. Beginning with a literature review which covers the development of the concept over the past few decades, we then offer the definition of social harm which we use throughout the remainder of the book.

Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of "mattering", which we believe to be a helpful conceptual tool for understanding young people's thoughts, emotions and actions. The idea of mattering centres on the ways in which people seek to establish a meaningful sense of their significance and consequence – both their importance to other people and their influence on the world around them. We also discuss recent and ongoing social changes and global processes which may be making it more difficult for individuals to develop a secure sense of mattering in today's world.

Chapter 4 brings together our concepts of social harm and mattering to consider the lives of young people in contemporary Britain. We examine some of the most significant and damaging forms of social harm which affect young people in this country today, using both quantitative and qualitative data, and discuss the nature of their effects, including on young people's sense of mattering. Composite case studies are included in order to bring to life the ways in which multiple forms of social harm can cumulatively diminish young people's lives.

Chapter 5 draws together the themes of the preceding chapters, exploring the theoretical and empirical connections between social harm, mattering and violence, through discussion of relevant literature from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Although not presenting anything like a comprehensive theory of violence between young people, it is an attempt to explain how social harms (and harmful social structures in particular) can affect the subjectivity of young people (and their sense of mattering in particular), in a manner which can make certain forms of action, including interpersonal physical violence, more likely. The chapter explores how certain kinds of social harm can cumulatively constitute 'social conditions which predictably breed violence', particularly due to the pernicious effects of social harm on young people's sense of mattering.

Chapter 6 is about responses to "youth violence" which we deem to be harmful. In particular we focus on three tendencies: the tendency to demonise young people; the tendency to punish and control young people in ways which are ineffective, disproportionate and counter-productive; and the tendency to engage in unhelpful forms of "child-saving". We first trace a brief history of youth demonisation since the 1800s, before then exploring modes of punitive state action which appear to feed off and reinforce particularly prevalent forms of demonisation, and modes of action in the public and charity sectors which appear to exploit and sensationalise the suffering of young people.

The concluding chapter brings together the main themes and ideas explored in the book. After briefly summarising our main arguments, we describe a 'near-future dystopia', in order to dramatise the dangerous and damaging tendencies that we have identified through the course of the book. The bulk of the chapter is then dedicated to an exploration of the changes we believe are necessary if we are to substantially improve the lives of children and young people in this country. After introducing the "four Rs" of recognition, resources, risk and (state) retribution, and arguing that a more equitable distribution of each should be a central political goal, we go on to describe the more specific changes to policies, systems, and institutions that we believe are needed, ranging from the education system to youth provision to the criminal justice system.

As perhaps implied by this rundown, the chapters of this book can reasonably be regarded as discrete essays, as well as constituent parts of a (hopefully) coherent overall argument. We are aware that different readers will be engaging with this book for a variety of reasons, often focused on quite specific areas of interest, and that this may lead a significant proportion to read only a small number of chapters which most directly appeal. Afflicted as we can both be by an odd kind of academic guilt when we do this ourselves, we would like to encourage readers to be as selective as they wish – we will not be offended, and, unless you are a friend or colleague, it is exceedingly unlikely that we will ever find out.

As this introduction has hopefully demonstrated, we have tried to write this book in an accessible style, so that it is suitable for general readers, school pupils and university students, as well as seasoned academics and researchers. We are aware that this runs a significant risk: it may well come across a tad too plain-speaking for the academic, and a bit too theoretical for the general reader. Such is life.