



## The links between drugs, alcohol, and serious violence: a review of evidence and practice in West Yorkshire

How, and to what extent, has Covid-19 influenced the drug use and alcohol consumption of young people? A Review of Evidence

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# 1 Introduction and Executive Summary

This Review of evidence and practice has been commissioned by the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit (WY VRU) so that they and their stakeholders may better understand the context and interdependencies between substance use and violence among young people and how relationships between generations influence those links. The Review commenced during the development of an Adversity, Trauma and Resilience Strategy for Health and Care Services in West Yorkshire, led by the West Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership's (WYHCP) Improving Population Health Team and the Public Health Lead in the WY VRU. The rationale for the Violence Reduction Units in the UK was to take a 'public health approach' to tackling violence. This means looking not only at the incidences of violence but the conditions in society and the contributing factors in communities that enable violence to occur.

The context of trauma has been a useful lens to focus this Review as both cause and consequence of both substance use and violence. The WYHCP Adversity, Trauma and Resilience Evidence Review (Crowe et al., 2021) lays out clearly how trauma and adversity, occurring in childhood re-emerges not only in the life-course but in the life-cycle of an individual, and may be transmitted generationally as well as culturally. This Review takes that learning and primarily explores how earlier intervention to address trauma could be effective among vulnerable cohorts in the population. The trauma informed approach to the subject also elicited the gendered nature of trauma, how the experience of violence and the experience of services and support or consequences of punishment disproportionately affect women.

The recommendations made in this Review are proposed in the context that most—if not all—services and support will be moving towards individual and collective trauma informed approaches of service delivery with the aim of preventing further trauma.

The Review is structured in four parts:

1. Context and Literature Review – containing an Executive Summary, Overview of all Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations, References
2. Briefing on the Alcohol Harm Paradox – stand-alone paper with Literature Review, Findings and Recommendations, References
3. Briefing on the Impact of Covid-19 on Young People's Substance Use and Violence – stand-alone paper with Literature Review, Findings and Recommendations, References
4. Review of Evidence from Young People and Family Services and themes from mapping services

## 1.1 Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Megan Bennett at the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit and the contributions of colleagues in the West Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership, Forward Leeds, Calderdale Recovery Steps and Humankind.

## 1.2 Evidence Review: The impact of COVID-19 on young people

Despite being at low risk of the most serious COVID-related illnesses, the country wide measures put in place to combat them have had a disproportionately negative impact on young people. Although substance use generally fell among this demographic during this period, we argue that the factors contributing to this behaviour have been greatly exacerbated and may present a burgeoning health crisis. Successive lockdowns have impacted young people's mental health, increased their chances to be witnesses and/or victims of domestic abuse and increased their risk of exploitation by criminal gangs. Furthermore, those from low SES backgrounds who live in poor accommodation have been unable to recover at the same rate as young people from more affluent backgrounds. Youth services, which are uniquely placed to help tackle these burgeoning issues, have been the successive target of austerity measures for the last 10 years and are chronically underfunded and underprepared at a time when they are desperately needed.

In her letter to the Lancet Journal of Psychology, Ellen Townsend (2020) wrote that young people need to be put at the forefront of any recovery plan as they '*...have suffered immensely in this crisis and sacrificed a lot. Moreover, the economic devastation will have an enormous impact on young people who will bear this burden for years to come*'.

### 1.2.1 Recommendations from COVID-19 impact paper

- **Increase investment in youth work.** The youth sector has been struggling with a decade of disinvestment and is perfectly placed to help tackle some of the burgeoning impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic in young people.
- **Recognise SES deprivation as a structural inequality** during equality impact assessments for work and placements, similar to race and gender to help mitigate the disproportionate long term economic impact.

## 2 COVID's Impact on drug/alcohol use in the UK and West Yorkshire

Globally, the rates of drug and alcohol use decreased in 2020-2021; alcohol from 94.0% to 92.8% and illegal substance use from 87.3% to 82.3% (Winstock et al., 2021). In the same period, in the UK, drug and alcohol use has risen. This increase continues a prolonged rise in substance use in the UK for the last 30 years, where now 3 million people report taking a drug each year (HMG, 2021). According to the government's latest drugs strategy, young people have also seen a persistent increase in drug use, with one in three 15-year-olds saying they had taken a drug in 2018 (HMG, 2021).

## 2.1 Alcohol use and its related harm

A recent report from Public Health England (2021) investigated the effect COVID-19 has had on alcohol-related consumption and harm. The report measured alcohol consumption indirectly by looking at trade volume and total alcohol duty changes. The total volume of off-trade alcohol sales increased by 25% in 2020. It is important to note that this increase may not reflect a 25% increase in consumption, but the off-trade market absorbing the on-trade business unavailable during the lockdown. The increase was seen in all types of alcohol, with the greatest increase being in beer (31.2%), spirits (26.2%), wine (19.5%) and cider (17.6%). The report noted that the increase in consumption was disproportionately driven by the heaviest drinkers. The heaviest drinking quintile accounted for 42% of the total increase in sales when looking at purchase volume, with the top two quintiles accounting for 68.3% of the total increase (PHE, 2021, pp. 3–4).

Similar increases were seen in alcohol-related harm. Generally, between 2019 and 2020, unplanned admissions to hospitals decreased by 3.2%. This statistic may not reflect a decrease in the need for acute admissions and may have been artificially reduced by the 'lockdown effect', a COVID induced hesitancy to use the services like hospitals out of fear of catching the virus (PHE, 2021). This is important to note as the lockdown effect may have hidden a more considerable increase in the need for alcohol-related hospital admissions.

Compared to 2019, unplanned admissions due to alcohol liver disease increased 13%, and alcohol-specific deaths rose 20% across the UK in 2020 (PHE, 2021). Although liver disease can take years to develop, most deaths occur due to acute onset chronic liver failure due to a recent episode of heavy drinking, possibly highlighting an increase in negative drinking patterns during the pandemic (PHE, 2021). Data collected from NHS Fingertips further highlights the prevalence of these conditions in West Yorkshire. Rates of hospital admissions due to alcoholic liver disease in Leeds, Calderdale and Bradford exceeded nationwide trends in 2019-2020, with similar trends seen in alcohol-specific deaths (*Liver Disease Profiles*, n.d.). Revolving doors lived experience members highlighted how they believed alcohol would see a disproportionate increase in harm since it remained available throughout lockdown, whereas other substances became increasingly inaccessible (BVSC, 2021, p.10).

## 2.2 How COVID-19 has impacted young people's substance use

While the national statistics show an overall increase in drug and alcohol use over the pandemic, when looking at young people the picture becomes more complex. While young people's drug and alcohol use has been affected by COVID-19, the data is not as clear as in the general population. A YouGov national poll on addiction behaviour (2020) found 4% of children and young adults surveyed have a close relative between the ages of 12-25 who have shown an increase in addictive behaviour

since lockdown. The survey did not discriminate between types of addictive behaviour; still it highlights how the pandemic has increased the propensity of children and young adults to partake in addictive behaviour, such as drug use.

In a report detailing drug misuse in England and Wales by the Office of National Statistics (**2020**), the prevalence of drug use was highest among 16-19y (21.1%) and 20-24y (21%). However, these statistics represent a decrease in drug use compared to 2019. The survey found drug use amongst all age groups fell in 2020, apart from 16–19-year-olds, whose prevalence of drug use increased by 3.1%. Within these demographics, men were more likely to have taken any drug than women (11.9% to 6.9%) and a similar uneven distribution of use was seen in both class A drug use (4.4% to 2.4%) and cannabis use (9.8% to 5.7%) (ONS, 2020).

The report also noted that increases in the frequency of alcohol consumption were related to an increase in drug use. They found rates of drug use were highest in those who consumed alcohol three days a week (14.9%), compared to those who drank one to two days a week (11.7%), less than one day a week (9.2%), and those who didn't drink at all (5.1%) (ONS, 2020). **In addition, they also found that socioeconomic status was a factor, with households who had a yearly income less than £10,400 being the most likely to have taken a drug** (ONS, 2020). The authors also note how increases in drug and alcohol use within this demographic may be masked by the unavailability of drugs and alcohol during the national lockdown.

The recent CREST review of inequalities and serious violence by Lumley and Rolfe (2021) investigated the causes of serious violence in West Yorkshire. Looking at arrests, they found that the number of under 21 class-A drug offences in West Yorkshire had risen by 49% since 2012 (see figure 1); although this places West Yorkshire lower than the national average increase of 62%, convictions of over 21s in West Yorkshire have decreased in the same period possibility indicating less severe offences.

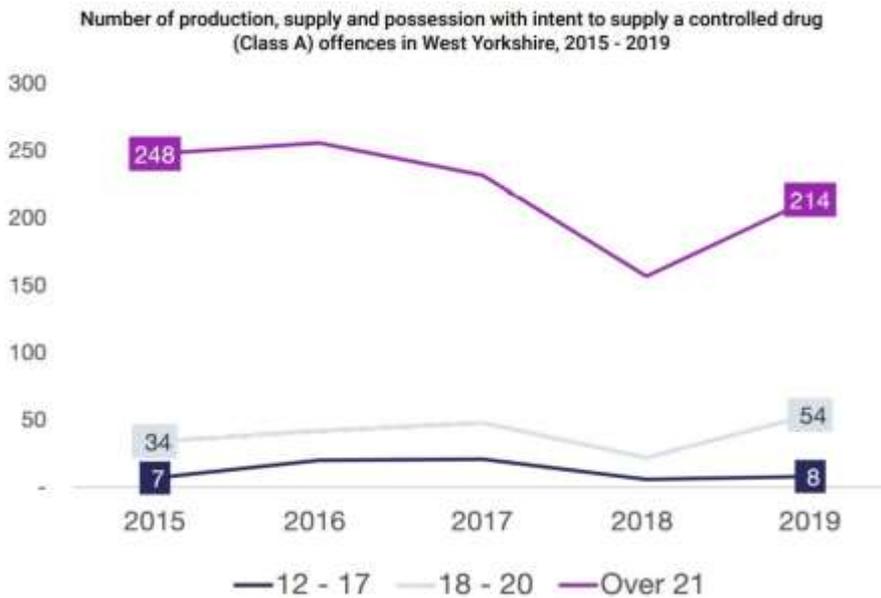


Figure 1: Taken from the CREST review ‘Addressing the root causes of serious violence and exploitation of young people in West Yorkshire’ (Lumley & Rolfe, 2021, p.16)

The CREST review also looked at levels of young people accessing substance misuse treatment. They found that the number of young people accessing these services has fallen since 2010, apart from a slight uptick in 2019/2020 (see figure 2). Generally, the levels of young people in treatment are higher in West Yorkshire than in the rest of the country; however, the authors note that this may be due to a greater provision of services rather than a larger need (Lumley & Rolfe, 2021, p.40).

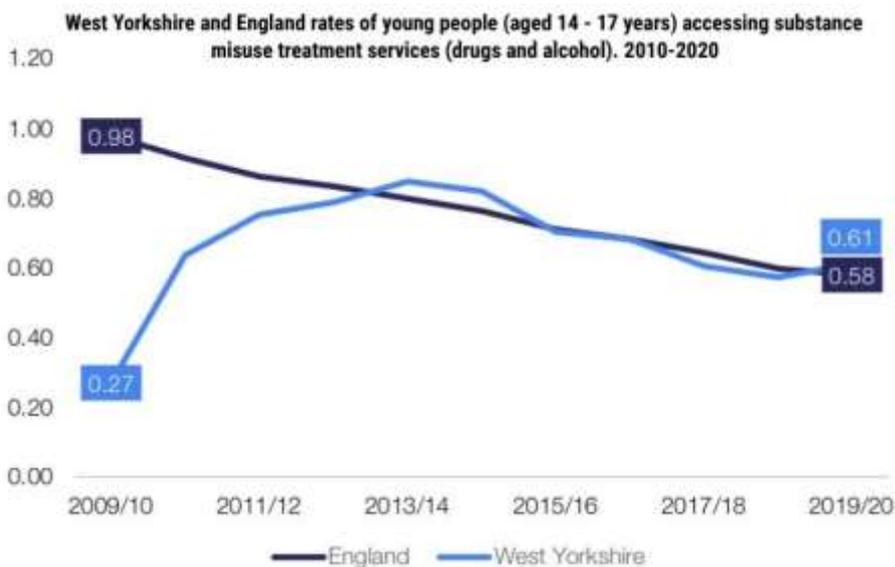


Figure 2: Adapted from the CREST review ‘Addressing the root causes of serious violence and exploitation of young people in West Yorkshire’ (Lumley & Rolfe, 2021, p.40)

Although the trends in alcohol and drug use are complex, there is evidence that the pandemic has amplified the factors that feed into this behaviour. Adverse healthcare outcomes as an adult/adolescent—such as drug and alcohol use—are influenced by childhood experiences (see figure 3). Stressors to both the caregiver and the child can profoundly impact drug use later in life (HIPRT, 2021).

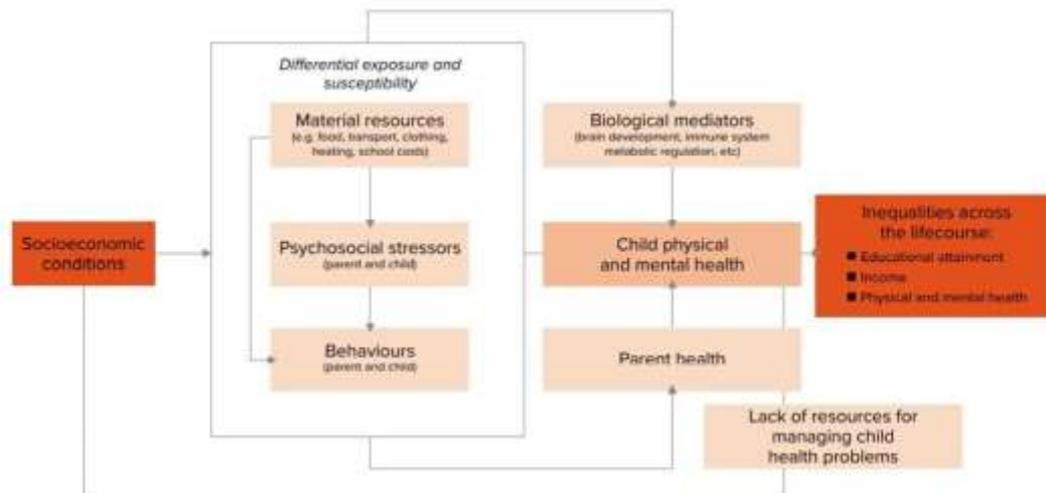


Figure 3: Pathways to inequalities in child health (Health Inequalities Policy Research Team, 2021)

This pandemic has seen an unprecedented upheaval of young people and their lives. This report will examine the various factors in childhood experience which contribute to drug and alcohol use, and how they have been affected by COVID-19. The report will focus on young people’s housing conditions, risk of abuse/neglect, changes in mental health, risk of exposure to violence/exploitation, and how these negative effects have been disproportionately felt by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

### 3 COVID19, housing and young people

Shelter is a fundamental human need, and the negative impact poor housing conditions have on health and wellbeing are well established (Marmot et al., 2010). Children's homes are a key dimension of their wellbeing and development (Dunn, 2020). As well as physical shelter, homes also indirectly affect childhood experiences and relationships through the stress experienced by the adults responsible for their care. These impacts will have been exacerbated by the stay-at-home law implemented during each national lockdown, with those in the worst living conditions being disproportionately affected.

The scale of the problem was highlighted in a recent report by Brown et al., '**Lockdown Rundown Breakdown**' (2020). They estimated that around one million owner-occupied homes and 354,000 private rented homes failed to meet the decent homes standard in the north of England. In Yorkshire and Humber, **one in five homes failed to meet this standard**. They found lockdown had increased the chance that crucial maintenance work, such as broken heating/water and mould, was unattended, as well as an increase in financial stress meeting home payments while unemployed/furloughed. Young people also reported lower satisfaction with housing during the lockdown due to disproportionately living in denser and lower quality private rented accommodation (Judge & Rahman, 2020).

For children, COVID-19 and stay-at-home measures meant that education and exercise were relegated to the home environment. Access to comfort and physical space inside and outside the home became a key component of families' health and wellbeing, as well as influencing children's chances of maintaining their education through access to working space and exercise (Douglas et al., 2020). This meant that those living in a lower quality home environment were more likely to see negative effects on their health and education. Particularly disadvantaged groups were families in temporary accommodation or B&Bs.

A recent paper by Cross et al. (2021) reviewed the evidence of children's wellbeing in temporary accommodation during the pandemic, they found that reports of families feeling unsafe were common. Similar testimonies were found in the Children's Commissioner for England's report 'Bleak houses' (2019). It highlighted how children in temporary accommodation or B&Bs were more likely to live close to drug dealers and vulnerable adults with substance misuse problems. Families described receiving death threats from other residents, finding used needles in bathrooms, child sexual harassment, exposure to racism and children witnessing domestic abuse. These factors all contribute to a feeling of insecurity in both the child and the child's family. Cross et al. concluded by highlighting how many children already barely visible to the state support system before COVID-19 were no longer receiving visits from community services and were not able to access early support from school (2021).

#### 4 COVID-19 and the risk of child abuse/neglect

Stressful and traumatising events in early childhood such as abuse, neglect and household dysfunction are commonly referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Finkelhor, 2020). Research has shown that children who experience four or more ACEs are significantly more likely to suffer poor physical/mental health and engage in drug use later in life (Hughes *et al.*, 2017).

Compared to 2019, 2020 saw an increase in the number of calls to child helplines across the UK (ONS, 2020). The national lockdown was the longest time a child in need would have spent away from friends or trusted adults outside of the home. Furthermore, the stay-at-home laws implemented during this time also meant that children who were already experiencing abuse and neglect were spending more time at home with their abusers.

The unique stress placed on families during the pandemic may have put new children at risk of abuse. While little research has been done to explore the relationship between the quality of a child's housing and their risk of abuse in the UK, in America, Warren and Font (2015) identified a statistically significant relationship between housing instability and the risk of child abuse and neglect. Warren and Font suggest that this may be partly due to the increased stress placed on the caregiver in these circumstances.

The recent NSPCC report '*Isolated and Struggling*' (2020) highlighted some of the caregiver stressors felt by families in the UK during the pandemic. These included financial instability, changes to routine and an increased likelihood of managing multiple responsibilities (childcare, employment, caregiving for sick/shielding). The report warned that the stressors might cause caregivers to form negative coping strategies if not adequately supported. These negative strategies include the onset and maintenance of substance use (Keyes et al., 2012), parental withdrawal or application of pressure on children (Szymańska & Dobrenko, 2017).

The National Association for Children of Alcoholics states that children with an alcohol dependent parent are five times more likely to develop eating disorders, two times as likely to develop alcohol dependence or addiction, and three times as likely to consider suicide (Boyd, 2020, p. 15). In West Yorkshire in 2019/2020, 20% of all children assessed by children's social care had parental alcohol or drug misuse listed as a key factor (Lumley & Rolfe, 2021, p. 40).

West Yorkshire also has one of the highest rates of domestic abuse in the country (40 incidents per 1000 people), almost double the national average (VRU, 2021). Domestic abuse is the most prevalent crime in West Yorkshire, with Leeds accounting for 33% of all offences, 26% by Bradford, 17% by Kirklees and the least from Wakefield and Calderdale which accounted for 15% and 9% respectively (VRU, 2021). Domestic violence increased in WY over the pandemic by 3.8%.

Furthermore, stay-at-home orders and the closure of schools meant more children than ever before were present during incidents of domestic abuse (VRU, 2021, p. 57).

As well as witnessing abuse, young people also experienced an increase in sexual and domestic abuse themselves. The online mental health service Kooth publishes its data on the changes in levels

of activity on its platform over the pandemic. They found that sexual and domestic abuse reports had risen by 46% since the previous year (*Week 14: How Covid-19 Is Affecting the Mental Health of Children and Young People, 2020*). The company also published regional data on the changes in the use of their service over lockdown; they found that in the North East of England, incidents of Abuse had increased 49% on the previous year (*Week 10: How Covid-19 Is Affecting The Mental Health of Children and Young People, 2020*).

The NSPCC report also highlighted how multiple lockdowns might have put children at risk of abuse outside the home environment. The report highlighted how children at home spent more time online and on social media than before; this coupled with the cumulative effects of isolation and lack of supervision, led the authors to conclude that lockdown had put children at a greater risk of online grooming (Romanou & Belton, 2020).

Both in West Yorkshire and nationwide, the lockdown measures used to combat the COVID-19 virus placed a greater number of children at risk of abuse and/or neglect by exacerbating familial stressors and limiting the visibility of children to trusted adults. This combination of loneliness and familial stress may also have exacerbated existing mental health conditions, or created new ones.

## 5 COVID-19 and young people's mental health

Despite being relatively low risk of the COVID-19 virus, lockdown measures have disproportionately impacted young people's mental health. In the CREST report into serious violence (2021) feelings of 'frustration, isolation, anxiety and low self-worth' (p.5) were all used to describe young people's mental health during the pandemic. Data collected in the VRU needs assessment (2021) highlights the prevalence of mental health disorders amongst young people in West Yorkshire. The data shows there were 26,000 children in Leeds and Bradford with a mental disorder in 2017/18; furthermore, between March and April 2020, parents and practitioners surveyed reported difficulty accessing mental health support for children in need when they first started experiencing mental health issues.

A COVID-19 web survey of the UK population conducted by Pierce et al. (2020) compared GHQ-12 scores (a measure of non-specific mental distress in the past two weeks) across a sample of 53,351 participants. They found that GHQ-12 scores for age 16-24 averaged 14.7 compared to age >70, which averaged 10.9. The youngest age group also saw the greatest deviation from previous trends, with GHQ-12 increasing 2.69 above what would have been predicted from 2019, much larger than ages 35+ whose deviation was all <0.6 points. Researchers noted that while it may appear that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused these increases in mental health problems, it is more likely that the

pandemic has exacerbated existing conditions, disproportionately affecting those already most at risk (Hafstad & Augusti, 2021).

Two demographics that were affected disproportionately were women and children with complex needs. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities '*COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing surveillance: report*' (2021) found that between March and September 2020, the majority of individuals in decline were females, especially those with pre-existing mental health problems. The report identified a decrease in wellbeing and an increase in anxiety as key contributing factors. Again, the point raised by Hafstad and Augusti (2021) applies, and it is unclear whether or not women have been affected by the pandemic disproportionately or if this difference mirrors longstanding disparities in levels of mental health between the genders. Another disproportionately affected group were children with complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (OHID, 2021). When parents were asked about how the pandemic has affected their children, parents of SEND children reported '*considerably higher levels of behavioural, emotional, and attentional difficulties than those without*' (p1) over the same period.

Following the easing of lockdown restrictions, studies have found further inequalities in recovery from the mental health problems fuelled by the pandemic. A recent report by Shum et al. (2021) highlighted how low-SES households have been slower to recover than more affluent ones. Reporting of mental health symptoms were similar between the two groups during the lockdown. However, after restrictions were eased, parents/carers from high-SES households reported improvement in their children's mental health symptoms, whereas low-SES households reported little to no change. Studies such as this highlight the need for targeted mental health provisions to lower-SES households who may be less able to bounce back.

The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health problems amongst young people. Those with existing conditions have worsened, and a greater number of young people were put at risk of developing new ones. The collective decline of mental health in young people has brought a larger number of them into the broader demographic which are likely to be drawn into gangs, exploitation, drug use, and may become adults with multiple complex needs in the future.

## 6 COVID-19 and the risk of exploitation of young people

In their most recent drugs strategy, the government highlights the findings of Dame Carol Black's influential drugs review (2020). The strategy detailed how criminal gangs exploit and traffic vulnerable children and young people, often targeting those with drug addiction, poor mental health

and SEND individuals (HMG, 2021, p22). Children involved in criminal gangs are more likely to have a history of substance use, with 81% of gang-associated children and young people having substance misuse concerns identified in their latest youth offending team assessment (CCFE, 2019).

A report published by the National Youth Agency *'Hidden in Plain Sight'* (2020) considered the impact COVID-19 had on trends in young people's criminal exploitation. They found that over 500,000 young people aged 10-17 are exposed to risky behaviour associated with gangs, and 60,000 identify as gang members themselves (NYA, 2020). The report goes on to highlight how the pandemic has increased the number of children exposed to the 'toxic trio' of risk factors that lead children to gang-associated activity: households with addiction problems, poor mental health and domestic abuse) (NYA, 2020).

Reports from the National Youth Agency (2020) suggest there has been a fall in gang activity and children's criminal exploitation during lockdown, in part due to the stay-at-home laws and the inability to move around in public discreetly. This however may not be the complete picture, the NYA report (2020) details how criminal exploitation may have adapted rather than been reduced during the pandemic. Those involved in gang activity became less visible to services and more likely to use private transport for illegal activity. As well, young people became less likely to be reported missing from home out of fear of incurring punishment for breaking lockdown rules. Young people also reported feeling less at risk from the virus than older generations, leading them to spend more time outdoors alone, not in the company of trusted adults (NYA, 2020).

The Lumley and Rolfe (2021) review highlights how drug use amongst young people is a *'good proxy indicator of exploitation by criminal gangs'* (p.15). Figure 4 highlights how the number of drug related arrests in West Yorkshire in under 21s has increased since 2016.

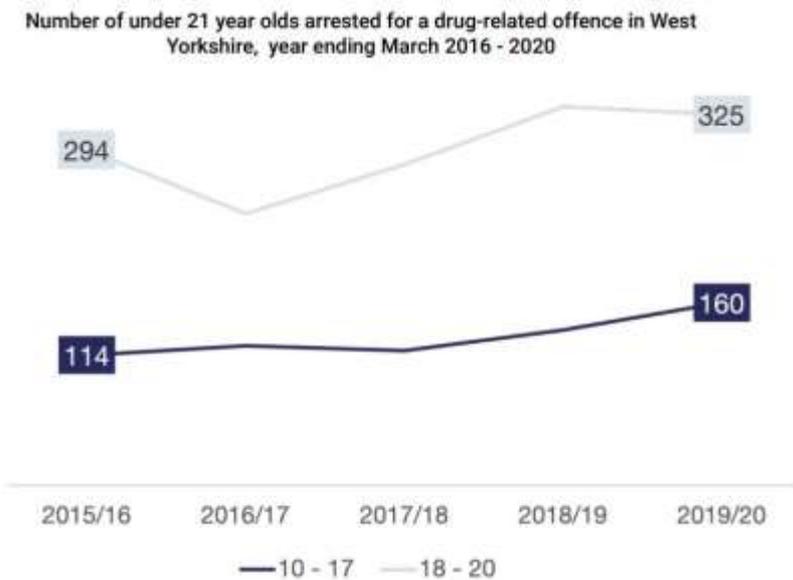


Figure 4: Taken from the CREST review *'Addressing the root causes of serious violence and exploitation of young people in West Yorkshire'* (Lumley & Rolfe, 2021, p.15)

When Lumley and Rolfe (2021) asked stakeholders about the link between drug use and exploitation, many talked about the escalation from taking drugs, to dealing them. A youth worker from Bradford highlighted how *"with boys, drugs is an issue. There is often an escalation from smoking drugs, to running drugs, and then dealing drugs"* (p.15). Another woman's rights advocate from Leeds talked about the connection between young women, drugs and exploitation saying *"Sometimes when a young woman has been exploited, she then ends up recruiting other young girls, normally through enticing them with drugs and alcohol. I think it is to regain a sense of power"* (p.15). These testimonies emphasise how drug use in young people can lead into involvement and exploitation by criminal gangs.

Individuals from lower SES backgrounds are more at risk of becoming affiliated with gang activity. In the Lumley and Rolfe (2021) report the most common reason cited for exploitation and violence was the *'lack of economic opportunities, poverty, and financial hardship'* (p.30). The report notes that the links between SES inequality and violence are complex. However, a common theme within the interviews were of young people from low SES backgrounds engaging in drug dealing as a means to support families, and purchase luxury goods they would not normally be able to afford. According to Lumley and Rolfe, young people in poverty have little access to legitimate forms of earning money, and so *'dealing drugs represents agency and the control to change things in their life'* (p.31). Lumley and Rolfe (2021) assert that the drug trade is inherently violent, and that a *'child selling drugs is always exploitation'* (p.31). Covid-19 has only worsened the problem by further increasing the SES gap. In West Yorkshire, the rate of households claiming Universal Credit has increased from 71 per

1000 in March 2020 to 109 per 1,000 in November 2020 (p.33). The authors argue that worsening inequality will increasingly push young people into a dangerous life of exploitation which is difficult to escape.

## 7 COVID-19 impact on socioeconomic status and inequalities

Discussed above are some of the many ways in which an individual's socioeconomic status has dictated the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their lives. Research has shown that poverty, even when controlling for other factors, is a key contributor to negative healthcare outcomes. A recent study by Lai et al. (2019), looked at data collected from the UK Millennium Cohort, a large representative sample of thousands of children born in the UK in the year 2000. They found that after controlling for other factors, persistent poverty tripled the chance of a child developing a mental health illness in adolescence. Furthermore, individuals who only experienced poverty temporarily, on average had worse healthcare outcomes than those who had never experienced it at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of children in low SES households, by increasing financial instability in the lives of those who care for them. In West Yorkshire the number of households claiming universal credit increased by 54% between March and November 2020 (Lumley & Rolfe, 2021, p. 33) indicating a greater number of families in poorer economic conditions as a consequence of the pandemic.

There is not only a SES divide, but a geographical divide as well. The report '*Child of the North*' by Pickett et al. (2021) investigated the apparent widening of inequalities between northern and southern counties in England due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that children in the north of England had a 58% chance of living in a local authority with above-average levels of low-income families compared to an 18% chance in the rest of England. They were more likely to be in care, with 21 of the 26 local authorities with more than 100 out of every 10,000 children in care being in the north. They were also more likely to feel lonely, 23% in the north compared to 15% in the rest of England; similar disparity was seen in the parents/caregivers, 23% and 13% respectively. Counties in the north of England also saw a larger number of cuts to sure start children centres, £412 per child compared to £283 in the south.

The report highlights how these short-term effects may have large long-term consequences for young people's future economic performance as well. Pickett et al. predict that men in the North will lose 33% more than men living in the rest of England (£3,856 compared to £2,892). Women living in

the north will lose 180% more than women living in the rest of England (£7,996 compared to £2,856). Given population estimates of children aged 5 to 16, this is equivalent to £13.2 billion in lost wages in the north, £4.4 billion for men and £8.8 billion for women (Pickett et al., 2021).

As mentioned above, a large driver of gang exploitation and drug use stems from SES inequalities. The points laid out by Pickett et al. (2021) highlight how the short-term impacts identified during the pandemic may result in further negative long-term impacts on the SES of those who are already most at risk. These problems are further compounded by the growing inaccessibility of youth services across the UK.

## 8 COVID-19 and the impact on youth services

Years of austerity have exposed the dire state of and desperate need for youth services, especially as they play a major role in tackling the abovementioned issues. The sector has long been deprived, and the problem was exacerbated by the two-year delay in receiving the £500m youth investment fund, putting further pressure on an already impacted sector (NYA, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected both sides of the service, limiting user access and placing strain on the providers.

A recent UK Youth (2020) report investigated the impact COVID-19 has had on 1,759 youth service providers across the UK. Their findings are alarming, of these providers...

- 66% reported an increase in demand.
- 83% reported a reduction in funding.
- 57% reported an increase in the cost of delivering the services.
- 64% reported being at risk of closure within the next 12 months.

These impacts however are not felt uniformly across the country. A recent summary of the 2020-2021 national youth sector census by the National Youth Agency (2021) highlighted significant disparities in the amount and type of provisions available to young people based on where they live. They found that high SES areas had twice as much youth provision and 50% more purpose-built buildings than less affluent areas.

The census also covered the many stressors placed on the services by the restrictions put in place to combat the pandemic. These included increased costs, a loss of funds and the requirement to move services online. Staff costs increased as services had to provide a greater number of sessions at a reduced capacity, requiring more staff members to run the same level of service. Additional costs were added to meet the government COVID safety requirements; additional PPE and cleaning occupied more of the staff's time and limited the number of sessions that could be run in a day (NYA, 2021).

In an attempt to maintain the same level of service provision during the pandemic, the youth sector started providing many of their services online. The NYA census (2021) found that 57% of services became partly online while 22% had moved fully online. Of those who couldn't shift to an online platform, the reasons were related to a lack of funding, training, and equipment. Furthermore, the NYA summary (2021) raised questions about digital equality amongst young people. Services moving online disproportionately limited access to those from low SES backgrounds, who were less likely to have access to technology or a private space to participate. These problems were compounded by services losing access to many sources of funding. Stay-at-home orders meant that community fundraisers had to be cancelled, organisations were unable to earn trade money from room hiring or school bookings, and grant funding became less available which made adapting to the new requirements increasingly difficult (NYA, 2021).

Similar findings were seen in drug and alcohol services. A recent review of Forward Leeds conducted by WY-FI included an investigation into the adaptation of the service to the pandemic (Headley et al., 2021). They found that despite moving online, 75% of service users still saw their relationship to the service as positive. Furthermore, 52% of service users actually believed the service had improved during the pandemic. Service users listed greater flexibility, reduced travel costs and the possibility for more participants in each session as reasons for this improvement. Similar to the NYA census, the review also found that this transition disproportionately adversely affected lower SES individuals without access to technology.

Youth services play a crucial role in addressing the impacts the pandemic has had on the mental and physical health of young people. Government restrictions meant that 58% of youth services were operating at a reduced capacity or are preparing to temporarily or permanently close and many young people lost these services overnight (NYA, 2021). The continued underinvestment and stress being placed on these services will prevent the most disadvantaged young people from accessing much needed support.

## 9 A note about vaccine hesitancy in young people

Recent reports detail how young people are increasingly becoming vaccine hesitant. A recent article in the Guardian highlighted how in parts of the UK, over 50% of over 16s are unvaccinated in Birmingham, in Westminster/Camden in London, 30% of the over 12s are unvaccinated (Booth, 2021).

The mixed messages presented in media about the risks of the vaccine, such as blood clots (Mundasad, 2021) and celebrity claims that the jab causes impotence (Lee, 2021); this coupled with

the prevailing message from both the government and the media that young people are at less risk from the virus may explain the hesitancy seen in young people. Another possible explanation is that this disparity between the ages is not a sign of reluctance but rather a delay in uptake. Booth (2021) noted how young people were last in the line to receive the vaccine. While other demographics have had the vaccine available for months, young people have had the least amount of time to book and receive it.

This high proportion of unvaccinated youth can lead to a larger impact on the spread of new COVID-19 strains as they appear. Young people are more likely to gather in large groups, e.g., at school/university or nightclubs/bars and are less likely to feel at risk of catching COVID-19. Vaccine hesitancy in youth may present medium to long term consequences down the line, increasing the chance that a new lockdown will be required, putting further generations at risk. This has been borne out with data most recently becoming available (March 2022) showing the transmission of the Omicron variant cycling with relaxations in restrictions and particularly among young people. Whilst the Omicron variant has been the least harmful variant of the COVID-19 virus to date, the unpredictability of future mutations means that the regime of vaccinations and boosters will have to be maintained and extended through to ever younger age groups in the population.

## 10 Recommendations

COVID-19's effect on drug and alcohol use in young people is complex. This report has highlighted how the factors which feed into these behaviours may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Furthermore, it highlights how those who were most at risk before the pandemic are the ones who have been affected the most. Despite being at the lowest risk of the virus, the various lockdown measures implemented to combat COVID-19 have put many more children and young people in West Yorkshire at risk of becoming adults with multiple complex needs in the future. In a letter to the Lancet Journal of Psychology Ellen Townsend (2020) argued for the prioritising of young people in any recovery effort in place after the pandemic, as '*...they have suffered immensely in this crisis and sacrificed a lot. Moreover, the economic devastation will have an enormous impact on young people who will bear this burden for years to come*'.

The drugs strategy recently revealed by the government '*From Harm to Hope*' (2021) laid out the provisions which will be provided to help tackle youth drug use; the report also emphasised the need for local authorities to identify the most pressing issues in their area, highlighting a need for greater research understanding the locality of the problem in West Yorkshire.

It included both preventative measures, and support for young people and families at risk. The preventative measures focused on the role of schools in the education of young people about the harms of drug use and using already in place services to identify at risk children and provide them with alternative ways to cope with their mental/physical issues. In terms of support, the report highlighted the increase in investment to family hubs and services such as 'Start for life' and the 'troubled family's program' to make support available to more families in need. The government strategy also detailed greater investment in both residential and secure children's homes, increasing their capacity. In terms of youth services, the government is investing £560m into a youth investment fund, which aims to increase the number of safe spaces available for young people while increasing access to sports and culture, although this commitment was recently reduced in early 2022 by an additional £122m (Eichler, 2022), providing another example of the youth sector being persistently undervalued.

#### 10.1.1 Increase provision of mental health services

Young people's mental health has been disproportionately negatively impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence above points to a need for a localised survey within West Yorkshire of both child and adolescent mental health and wellbeing. Identifying districts most effected will help better direct the provision of service to those most in need. Generally, there also needs to be a collective focus on increasing the availability and accessibility of mental health services for young people in need.

The increases in the number of children who may have experienced a form of ACE or trauma during this pandemic put a renewed focus on the need for all sectors to become more trauma informed. Work specifically focusing on developing trauma informed education and schools would be beneficial and is explored in more detail in other sections of this Review (see the sections on Evidence from Young People and Family Services and themes from mapping services)

#### 10.1.2 Increase provision of youth services

The report has highlighted the damage to youth services over the course of the pandemic. In the APPG youth affairs inquiry (2021), the National Youth Agency's CEO testified that '*Up to 3 million vulnerable young people have increased needs exacerbated by the pandemic, it is therefore imperative that we act now to ensure we do not create a 'lost generation'*'. Youth services are a vital lifeline for vulnerable young people. Youth work must be classified and treated as an essential key service. The NYA is calling for Home Office guidance for Violence Reduction Units to include youth services and for Police and Crime Commissioners to embed a youth work response for early help and prevention within public health approach strategies in local areas (NYA, 2021)

### 10.1.3 Ensure SES is considered when conducting equity impact assessments.

In the Child of the North report (2021), it is estimated that the mental health conditions exacerbated by this pandemic could cost the equivalent of £13.2 billion in lost wages in the North, £4.4 billion for men and £8.8 billion for women over their lifetime. In their socioeconomic toolkit (2021), the Revolving doors agency agree that—similar to race and gender—socioeconomic deprivation should be recognised as a structural inequality when conducting equity impact assessments. Measures such as this will hopefully help those who were at the most risk of being negatively impacted by the pandemic with a greater chance to find stability and recover.

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