Article

Mapping Driving Factors of UK Serious Youth Violence across Policy and the Community: A Multi-Level Discoursal Analysis

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Abstract: The discussion of factors driving young people's involvement in serious violence continues to be well documented across policy, news media, and academic research. The government response to riots taking place across the UK in 2011 set a precedent for an increasingly punitive discourse surrounding young people's involvement in criminal lifestyles, as well as the Criminal Justice System's response to the overall issue. In order to develop a greater understanding of the complex breadth of driving factors behind serious youth violence and their discoursal representation, this article presents findings of a multifaceted investigation through the interpretivist paradigm, merging macro-level policy with micro-level community insights. The article commences with an argumentative discourse analysis of a selection of Government and Youth Violence Commission policy documents before drawing on three semi-structured interviews with community-level practitioners in England working within policing and youth work organisations. The findings reveal a complex interplay of socio-environmental factors, poverty, domestic trauma, cultural dimensions, and street-based exploitation positioned alongside constructs of social exclusion and masculinity. The study uncovers a broad issue of systemic marginalisation and reduction in community resources, exacerbating conditions of social exclusion that create a greater propensity for involvement in serious youth violence. The findings support calls for the framing of serious youth violence as an issue of 'public health', encouraging deeper investigation into underlying socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions.

Keywords: serious youth violence; social exclusion; child exploitation; masculinity

1. Introduction

In March 2023, 13- to 19-year-olds involved in a fatal stabbing as victims experienced a peak since digital records began in 1977 [1]. The issue of serious youth violence remains prominent in the UK, with commentary from policy, media, and academic outlets seeking to explain and address the phenomenon. Against a backdrop of ever-changing socio-economic, cultural, and political landscapes intersecting with advancing forms of contemporary digital communication and consumption, the representation of driving factors for serious youth violence has increased in complexity. This reality encourages research to investigate the current and changing conditions driving young people's involvement in violence and criminality whilst considering the ways in which external agents construct and influence the issue.

Exploring which discourses frame youth criminality acts as a key foundation for understanding current representations of driving factors of serious violence. Alongside the growth of capitalist ideology during the 19th century, a collective anxiety was established towards youth from working-class communities, who were framed as a threat to societal productivity, as the term 'adolescence' was coined to mark physical development as well as a stage of psychological instability requiring scrutiny and control [2,3].

The connection between youth criminality, deviance, and working-class ideology continued in representation with early research and conceptualisation from the Chicago

School [4]. This view of deviant practice amongst collective working-class groups laid the foundations for the emerging notion of organised 'gang' activity in relation to violence, which has become and remains a contested issue between scholars [5,6]. The discourse of gangs and violence came to the forefront of public attention in the aftermath of the 2011 riots, where the Conservative government response pinpointed the role played by 'dangerous gang related youth' as deeper issues of poverty and marginalisation driving the riots were left largely unaddressed [7,8]. More recent policy and criminal justice focus on this topic has led to the framing of gang activity as predominantly organised through 'County Lines', a structured illegal supply and distribution of drugs, in turn exacerbating street-based violence amongst young people seeking to defend selling monopolies [9]. Spicer [10], amongst other scholars, has challenged this onus on County Lines, claiming its discussion in policy has led to the oversimplification of such gang activity as a 'product of evil', with such discourses legitimising 'heavy handed' punitive measures against marginalised communities [11] whilst omitting a consideration of exploitation and wider structural factors as exacerbating youth violence. The presence of increased punitive and discoursal control placed on young people in this context, alongside a laissez-faire outlook on the 'white collar' illegal drug trade and the provision of social welfare [10], has led to a liberal paternalistic outlook from government policy towards the issue of serious youth violence. As a result, individual blame is placed amongst marginalised communities, as a discourse of penalisation is favoured above rehabilitative intervention [12,13].

Despite this particular focus on County Lines, a wider academic inquiry has uncovered the relevance of structural and socio-environmental factors in the lives of young people growing up in urban spaces in relation to involvement in criminality. Inter-disciplinary research across geography and the social sciences has highlighted processes of welfare reduction and privatised urban regeneration as facilitating a growing sense of spatial marginalisation and exclusion amongst young people. Young people from London-based studies discuss collective experiences of physical and social displacement from their own areas [14,15]. Thus, it has been recognised that the experience of such conditions can be framed as a wider driving factor for young people contained in spaces of socio-economic disadvantage [16].

Cultural Criminology has made advances in understanding this process on the micro level. Experiences of exclusion and marginalisation converge to construct new forms of socio-cultural capital for disenfranchised young men, where violent displays and low-level criminality are used to navigate 'street cultural spaces' as an alternative means for accessing new economic ventures and maintaining hierarchical positions [17–19]. Scholars have recognised the intersection of masculinity with the production of street-coded violence in this sense, where a psycho-social response is triggered in young men operating in areas limited in relational and material resources as they strive to understand 'how to be men' in spaces of exclusionary living [20,21]. A factor compounding this context is a nexus of abuse, trauma, and exploitation, where it has been identified that young people can become involved in serious violence as a symptom of post-abuse trauma [22]. Individuals experiencing trauma can also become vulnerable to processes of exploitation, leading them into undesired lifestyles of criminality and further abuse [23].

As the nature and representation of these driving factors continue to evolve alongside the emergence of new factors, it calls for rigorous analysis of the conditions exacerbating young people's involvement in serious youth violence. This article reports on a study investigating the macro and micro framing of driving factors of serious youth violence, first through a discourse analysis of key policy documents surrounding the issue [24–26] as a way of uncovering key ideologies that come to shape public perception, as well as the ensuing intervention strategies. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews, the article reports findings from the micro level, representing perceptions of community and criminal justice practitioners as a medium to construct a rich insight into the environments experienced by young people involved in serious violence. These perspectives are analysed and compared with that of policy in order to establish the degree of consistency between

the macro representations and micro realities. This study builds on the findings of Cottrell-Boyce [27] and Smithson and Ralphs [28], who, through an analysis of the 'Ending Gangs and Youth Violence Report' (EGYV) [24], found that gangs take a discoursal position in the policy as a 'suitable enemy', with overall framing towards the issue threatening an overt criminalisation of young people that omits the consideration of more complex driving factors. Similarly, Walsh [29] highlighted comparable shortcomings in the 'Serious Violence Strategy' (SVS) [25], with the strategy lacking attention to micro-level gendered experiences. A broad focus is adopted in this study that seeks to shift away from addressing youth violence at the level of the 'offence' or the 'offender' [30] to considering the broader conditions and lived experiences that are negatively impacting young people's lives and facilitating involvement in violence.

Following the multi-level analysis conducted by this study, various driving factors have emerged that refer to socio-economic conditions, youth support and education, gangs, masculinity, trauma and exploitation, and cultural dimensions, all of which are represented consistently across the samples and the cases within. However, the discoursal framing of these factors is, on the one hand, largely 'individualised' in nature throughout government policy yet more 'externalised' with regards to structural and wider societal issues during the Youth Violence Commission report and micro-level participant responses. An overarching discourse identified is that of social exclusion, an issue that can be understood as the reduction in access to material, relational, political, and structural resources that is becoming increasingly experienced throughout the UK population, significantly amongst 16- to 25-year-olds [31]. Through the experience of reduced access to such resources, alternative ways of living and new regulatory forms of valued capital are produced in environments of exclusion, as violence and criminality become modes for exercising a need for economic gain and a desire for social advancement. However, as found through micro-level perspectives, participation in serious violence cannot be reduced to such desires and needs, where post-traumatic experiences following abuse and manipulation through exploitation have equal bearing on young people's involvement in violent practice. These findings align with a growing body of research that encourages the framing of serious youth violence as an issue of public health [32–34], situating inquiry within 'natural environments' to assess the intersection of social, psychological, and physical experiences alongside conditions of disadvantage and exclusion [35].

2. Materials and Methods

In order to present a rich description and discourse analysis of driving factors, the study has adopted a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm. The central aim of interpretivism surrounds the mapping of meaning, perception, and knowledge from particular contexts referring to a single phenomenon, where existing researcher knowledge is used not to influence the interpretation of such but to guide the line of inquiry [36,37]. Interpretivist research holds the premise that perceptions of particular realities are largely subjective constructs, where knowledge is seen as created through individual experiences, political influences, and social interaction as opposed to reflecting a collection of objective and isolated facts. The study adopted a social constructivist epistemology, understanding the relative nature of knowledge production in relation to perceptions of serious youth violence where geographical, social, cultural, and political positioning come to influence the construction of perspective on the issue [38,39]. Within complex urban environments, there resides a multitude of diverse experiences and situations acting in tandem with macro socio-political forces to create a highly fragmented view of youth violence. Thus, an interpretivist lens is suited to unpack varied perspectives from both macro and micro levels, eliciting a broader and deeper understanding of the phenomenon [40].

To achieve a multi-layered perspective, a case study methodology was adopted [41], selecting particular cases through which purposeful sampling was utilised for the development of 'within-cases' in order to establish enhanced richness and rigour of results through wider representation of perspectives on the issue [42]. Cases selected for the

macro sample include a set of government policies and a report from the Youth Violence Commission (Table 1). These documents were selected to represent significant moments in policy attention towards youth involved in serious violence and gang activity. Ending Gangs and Youth Violence [24] was produced in response to the riots taking place across the UK, a time when youth-based gang activity was at the centre of discourse in relation to rising levels of violence. Gang and youth crime—Home Affairs [43] is a parliamentary report discussing the current impact of the EGYV report whilst giving an insight into how discourse progressed since the original report. Serious Violence Strategy [25] gives insight into macro discourse at a time when knife offences had risen by 70% since 2013, and under-18s involved in fatal stabbings had grown by a third. The Youth Violence Commission report [26] provides an insightful blend of perspectives from local members of parliament, academics, and members of the community, acting—to an extent—as a 'bridge' between macro and micro cases. The review of policy and reports in the context of qualitative research can be referred to as the Document Analysis Method, where documents are treated as data containing the representation of knowledge and belief systems, as well as the presentation of socio-political bias [44]. The data include key information from policies, garnered as quotations taken from sections of the document that discuss causes of serious youth violence, and strategies of prevention and reduction that give insight into broader discourses and ideologies surrounding the issue.

Table 1. Macro sample and cases.

Document	Publisher	Date
Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross-Government Report	Home Office	1 November 2011
Gangs and Youth Crime	Home Office	27 February 2015
Serious Violence Strategy	Home Office	9 April 2018
Youth Violence Commission Final Report	YVC: University of Warwick, The Open University, UK Youth, Local Governments	July 2020

The micro sample, as the second of the cases, comprised community-level practitioners connected with youth violence through their profession, having worked directly with young people affected by the issue. Despite limitations with recruitment during the COVID pandemic, which led to issues with retention following participant dropout due to pressing workplace demands, the within-cases reflect a variety of positions from three participants: a member of the community recruited through a prison service (Participant 1), a senior youth worker (Participant 2), and a UK police detective (Participant 3). These within-cases offer perspectives from the Criminal Justice System as well as youth support systems, providing a breadth of experience from different ideological positions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, allowing for a pre-determined, researcher-guided list of questions to be asked and remaining open to controlled tangents that may produce diverse information and discourse [45]. In addition, the semi-structured format has proven suitable for the sensitive and political topics arising in this study, where the conversational approach adds an empathetic and flexible environment. The use of semi-structured interviews acts to harness a narrative and humanistic inquiry with regard to the issue of serious youth violence. Document analysis at the macro level combined with interview data at the micro level enhances the credibility of interpretivist research through multiple sources [46]. Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA) was adopted as the method of data analysis, which is concerned with the articulation and representation of knowledge and perceptions through various contexts, attempting to reveal hidden meanings and insights [47]. Practically speaking, ADA involves the lifting of key narratives and discourses from the data to form overarching 'discoursal patterns' that pertain to

various driving factors of serious youth violence. Through these discoursal patterns, particular arguments surrounding serious youth violence are highlighted, allowing insights into how issues are constructed from different social and political positions. NVivo 12 was used as a bias-free software for the management of data, ensuring the clear analysis of policy documents and transcripts involving a manual process of selecting key narratives before they were arranged into wider discoursal patterns. Whilst the selection of relevant evidence from the data was made by the primary research, NVivo has been used to track these selections and the wider process, demonstrating the thought processes behind selections and discoursal arrangements [48].

Due to the nature of the discussed topics during the micro-sample data collection, various ethical dimensions have been considered throughout. Informed consent was obtained and assessed as an ongoing process with all participants, with the freedom to withdraw offered up until the point of data analysis. Where interviews involved discussion of personal experiences and details of particular individuals and organisations in relation to criminal activity, confidentiality and privacy have been assured through the use of pseudonyms in transcription and the omission of identifiable information of individuals, places, or groups. Ethical approval was granted for this study by the Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Bath. In terms of the limitations of the study and its methodology, the reduced size of the micro sample has affected the generalisability of the results and findings. Whilst the participants represent different agencies and geographical locations, giving key specific insights to driving factors of serious youth violence, the number of respondents in the study means that the findings cannot be applied as generally as common assumptions across the UK context. In addition, whilst the sample draws from a criminal justice and a youth work perspective, the lack of representation from different outlets and positions across the youth justice system also limits the findings of the study.

3. Results

Findings are presented through the two samples, macro policy-level analysis, and micro community-level analysis. Individual driving factors identified from the data sets are presented in tables and grouped into discursive categories and wider discursive patterns. Each discursive pattern is presented in more detail, drawing on the data to support the discussion of results.

3.1. Macro Policy-Level Analysis

Policy analysis highlighted a range of driving factors (Table 2) that cover environmental conditions, responsibility for individual actions and behaviours, and the nature of gangs. Socio-economic factors are discussed across documents, with government policy tending to focus on the conditions of social breakdown as producing violence, the Youth Violence Commission (YVC) frames the issue of poverty as exacerbating vulnerability to pathways into violent practice and criminality. An additional discursive pattern that is consistent across documents is that of abuse and exploitation leading to serious youth violence. Discussion of this factor centres around the domains of trauma and mental health intersecting with exploitation, as well as a focus on the roots of abuse, highlighting negative experiences at home and poor parenting as playing a role in later involvement in violence. Issues with youth support and education emerge as consistent factors throughout; however, the discoursal framing of such is varied, with government policy taking a bottom-up approach with the blaming of individual practices, and the YVC takes a top-down focus, commenting on the structuring of such services and the reduction of welfare. Social media and cultural factors are discussed in the Serious Violence Strategy and YVC report, correlating with the rise in attention placed on particular platforms and art forms such as Drill music, whilst the presence of gangs as a key driving factor is represented in a way that reflects a growing emphasis on County Line operations. Finally, an additional discoursal pattern pertaining to youth contact with criminal justice practitioners and increasing punitive measures has

been identified, not presented as a driving factor of violence but as a key theme intersecting with the issue.

Table 2. Macro policy analysis results.

Discursive Pattern	Discursive Category	Driving Factors	EGYV (2011)	EGYV Report (2015)	SVS (2018)	YVC Final Report (2020)
Socio-Economic Conditions	Socio-Economic Deprivation and Marginalised Living	Areas of social breakdown facilitating youth violence	X			
		Economic situation having psychological detriment				X
		Gangs and youth violence a product of social disadvantage	X			
		Nature of the housing market exacerbating young people's vulnerability				X
		Poor housing situation facilitating crime				X
		Socio-economic detriments as increasing violence involvement			X	
		Youth Violence positioned in deprived areas	X			
	Experience of Poverty	Conditions of Poverty Facilitating Involvement in Violence				X
		Shame elicited through poverty leading to violence				X
		Social and economic poverty at home				X
		Parent's income as a factor in youth violence			X	
	Unemployment	Young people involved in illegitimate criminal work because of unemployment				X
		Young people lacking employment opportunity				X
		(Un)employment framed as a preventive strategy			X	
Trauma, Abuse, and Exploitation	Exploitation of Vulnerable Youth	Child sexual exploitation as often ignored for criminal activity		X		
		Children in care vulnerable to perpetration			X	
		Increase in vulnerable children			X	
		Violent behaviour facilitated by early exploitation			X	
		Gang activity as child sexual exploitation		X		
	Experience of Abuse and Mental Health	Abuse of youth as a risk factor			X	
		Parental neglect facilitating youth violence	X			
		Sexual and physical abuse at an early age				X
		Youth violence attached to home abuse	X			
		Mental health issues prevalent amongst committers of violence			X	
		Mental health issues facilitating violence involvement		X		
		Mental health trauma ahead of lack of education as a cause				X
	Traumatic Home Life and Parenting	Harsh and traumatic parenting can increase violent involvement				X
		Negative early childhood experiences as instrumental				X
		Parenting classes (home environment as driving factor)	X			
		Secondary experience of trauma				X
		Traumatic home life facilitating gang violence	X			
		Troubled family background as facilitating youth violence	X			
		Youth violence as beginning in the home	X			

Table 2. *Cont.*

Discursive Pattern	Discursive Category	Driving Factors	EGYV (2011)	EGYV Report (2015)	SVS (2018)	YVC Final Report (2020)
Youth Support and Education	Ineffective Provision of Education	Emphasis on teachers to address route causes		X		
		Failed social education of communities causing youth violence	X			
		Placing onus on teachers and parents to prevent youth violence			X	
		Schools as catalysts for promoting and reducing youth violence	X			
		Schools as damaging career prospects leaving youth anxious				X
		Schools as the reason for unemployment				X
		Failure of the education system				X
		Youth violence driven by a lack of education	X			
	Youth Services and Education Structures	Culture of exclusion as facilitating				X
		Access to additional pastoral care is only after exclusion				X
		Educational and pastoral funding cuts				X
		Lack of community opportunities facilitating gang membership				X
		Reduced pastoral support for young people driving later involvement in violence				X
		Reduction of community youth support centres				X
		Significant cuts in youth services				X
		Top-down youth services as negative for vulnerable youth				X
	Declining Youth Behaviour	Behavioural problems as facilitating youth violence	X			
		Disengagement and exclusion from education				X
		Excluded individuals at risk of youth violence			X	
		School exclusion as a marker for increased risk of perpetration			X	
		Individual behaviours as a driver of youth violence	X			
		Knife crime driven by peer influence and pressure			X	
		Alcohol consumption linked to homicide			X	
Culture and Media	Socio-Cultural Drivers	Drill music as encouraging and causing violence			X	
		Knife-carrying and usage for social image			X	
		Premise that Drill is produced by gangs and criminals				X
		Sensationalisation by mainstream media glamourising violence				X
	Social Media	Social media a catalyst and trigger for violent incidents				X
		Social media a vehicle for taunts and promotion of violence			X	
		Social media facilitating opportunity for serious violence			X	
		Social media providing virtual access to 'gang' lifestyle			X	
		Lack of BAME role models in the media				X
		Lack of role models in the lives of those involved in violence				X

Table 2. *Cont.*

Discursive Pattern	Discursive Category	Driving Factors	EGYV (2011)	EGYV Report (2015)	SVS (2018)	YVC Final Report (2020)
Youth and Criminal Justice System	Criminalisation of Youth	Facilitating younger individuals into criminal justice system	X			
		Increased punitiveness for younger offenders	X			
		Introduction of injunctions for 14- to 17-year-olds		X		
		Overt criminalisation of crime committers	X			
		Framing of 2011 riots as gang- and youth-caused	X			
		Members of gangs need to be brought to justice	X			
		Aggressive nature in punishing criminals			X	
	Disconnect between police and youth	Alienation of young people through stop-and-search				X
		Negative police youth relationship as a catalyst				X
		Reduced trust and confidence in police leading to violence				X
		Suppression of Drill by police in fact exacerbating violence				X
Gangs Driving Youth Violence	County Lines and Drug Markets	County Lines causing violence			X	
		Drug market grievances driving violence			X	
		Drug-selling activity promoting weapon-carrying			X	
		Youth violence as a way of maintaining drug market			X	
		Pull of the drug market for those in poverty				X
	Culture and Nature of Gangs	Gangs as inherently criminal and violent		X		
		Gangs are in conflict with other gangs		X		
		Violence through gangs claiming territory		X		
		Gangs as creating violent and criminal cultures	X			
		Highlighting girls and young women as vulnerable to gang membership	X			
		Gangs as preventing community development	X			
		Urban cleansing of gang members ('vaccination')	X			

3.1.1. Socio-Economic Conditions, Home Trauma, and Exploitation

The framing of socio-economic conditions and experience of trauma as driving factors for serious youth violence across policies reflects a difference in the way such issues are discussed in government documents, which take a more individualised approach, compared to the YVC report, which adopts more consciousness towards deeper structural factors. There is a broad sense from government policy that experience of poverty and the conditions of socio-economic disadvantage are instrumental in driving involvement in violence. However, the YVC unpacks this further, detailing the notion of disadvantage more specifically as low household income, reduced access to structural support such as housing provision, and unemployment.

> *"Gangs and serious youth violence are the product of the high levels of social breakdown and disadvantage found in the communities in which they thrive."* [24]

> *"acts of violence begin with an individual feeling a sense of rejection—in this case, rejection by a society that allows some of its young people to grow up in poverty while others enjoy the head-start and benefits that come accompany extreme wealth. Such rejection elicits feelings of shame, to which many young people respond with anger, which then manifests in acts of violence."* [26]

Notably, this discursive pattern of socio-economic disadvantage and poverty is covered significantly more by the YVC report, with government documentation of this issue simply noting the presence of violence in areas characterised by such conditions. The YVC discussion goes deeper to mention the psychological impacts of shame and anger that indirectly lead to involvement in violence whilst also describing the more direct 'push' of socio-economic disadvantage, where lack of employment leads to alternative criminal avenues. Interlinked with the drivers of psychological struggle is that of trauma, abuse, and exploitation. Government and YVC documents recognise the issue of exploitation as playing a significant role in drawing young people into violence and criminality, highlighted as an activity employed by gangs for purposes of recruitment and targeting children identified as vulnerable. The presence of abuse in the lives of young people is also highlighted as a significant driving factor, where resulting trauma is framed as an issue of mental health that is prevalent amongst young people involved in violence.

> *"things like being physically abused, sexually abused, emotionally abused or neglected, living in a house with an alcohol or drug problem, or someone with severe mental health problems. People who've grown up with four of more of those compared to none of those are 10 times more likely by the age of 18 to be involved in violence every year."* [26]

The Ending Gangs and Youth Violence (EGYV) report places a significant focus on the role of the home environment and parenting itself in facilitating young people's involvement in violence. Troubling family backgrounds are discussed, alongside the introduction of parenting classes as an intervention to improve young people's environments growing up, again reflecting the individualised discourse from the government on the issue.

> *"We are also trialling the take up of high quality universal parenting classes through the provision of vouchers for mothers and fathers of children from birth to five years old, in three areas."* [24]

3.1.2. Societal Structures: Provision of Education, Youth Welfare, and Media Cultures

Macro-level analysis revealed the prominence in the framing of youth education and support systems as containing particular driving factors exacerbating involvement in violence. Schools and educational provision as a discursive pattern are discussed by government and the YVC, reporting in a way that once again evidences the contrasts in individualised and wider structural framing of driving factors. Government documents make general comments towards a failed education of young people in communities and schools that has led to increased involvement in serious violence, suggesting that teaching practices within educational environments should be improved in order to deter young people from criminality.

> *"Teachers need to get at the root causes of challenging behaviour . . . had all of this been implemented in a coherent way when Boy X was growing up, he might have expected his conduct disorder to have been identified early on in his primary school career."* [24]

The YVC report, on the other hand, highlights schools as a factor, not from the perspective of individual responsibility but of the system of student exclusion that is in place that does more harm than benefit to young people, where proper rehabilitative and pastoral support would, in fact, do better to prevent involvement in violence. This discourse from the YVC is underscored by the detailing of reduced community networks and youth services that has led to an increased number of young people left unsupported and vulnerable to involvement in violent and criminal lifestyles.

> *"Commission witnesses commented at length on the restructuring brought about by austerity in youth services and how this has affected the support and guidance available to young people at-risk of being drawn into serious violence."* [26]

Regarding the discussion of education provision as a discursive factor, government documents go further in individualised framing of the issue to discuss the increasing presence of poor youth behaviour as exacerbating violence, for example, peer influence

and alcohol consumption. Cross-referenced in this factor that discusses cultural behaviours as promoting violence amongst youth is the introduction of social media and music as catalysts. Serious Violence Strategy and the YVC report address the criminal nature of the genre of Drill music, popular at the time, as sensationalising violence and encouraging the carrying of weapons for the presentation of self-image. Social media platforms are discussed as vehicles for the transference of threats, highlighted as normalising violence in the eyes of young people whilst also acting as a mode of infiltration by gangs looking to exploit young people.

> *"growth in smart-phones between 2011 and 2014 has transformed social media accessibility and created an almost unlimited opportunity for rivals to antagonise each other . . . this may have led to cycles of tit-for-tat violence."* [25]

3.1.3. Gangs and Youth in the Criminal Justice System

The notion of gangs is commonly discussed across documents as an intersecting catalyst. There is somewhat of a progression in approach towards the framing of gangs across government documents, beginning with an identification of them simply as criminal in nature to then highlighting their territorial nature and conflicts, before focussing on a definition and driving factor that surrounds County Lines.

> *"It is clear that gang membership increases the risk of serious violence. Almost 50% of shootings and 22% of serious violence in London, for example, is thought to be committed by known gang members"* [24]

> *"Drug markets cannot be settled through legal channels, so participants may settle them violently . . . for serious violence, drugs and profit are closely linked. Violence can be used as a way of maintaining and increasing profits within drugs markets."* [25]

> *"The fast money that young people can make from drug distribution provides an incredibly powerful pull on those living in poverty, despite the fact that their involvement significantly increases the risk of being the victims or perpetrators of serious violence."* [26]

The representation of this discourse surrounding gangs as a driving factor for serious youth violence is significantly present across government policy, where it is clear that gang organisation and practice is seen as 'fixed' and definable in nature. The YVC report makes less mention of organised gangs, instead opting for a discussion of illegal drug markets as a driving factor. It is accepted across documents, however, that the nature of these markets is producing the conditions for violence to take place though a desire to maintain selling borders and territories. The discussion of gangs as a driving factor is underscored by a discourse on increasing punitive measures placed on young offenders. In addition to general comments surrounding increased punishment of offenders, measures are announced, such as the introduction of gang injunctions for 14- to 17-year-olds contributing to an earlier facilitation of young people into the criminal justice system. Whilst the government adopts a tone of effectiveness towards these processes, the YVC report alternatively argues that increasing criminal justice intervention in communities, particularly surrounding stop-and-search and the censorship of Drill music, is, in fact, exacerbating youth violence through a growing disconnect with and distrust of police action.

3.2. Micro-Level Community Analysis

The analysis of micro community data highlighted a number of driving factors that identify patterns of discoursal intersubjectivity with that of policy (Table 3), demonstrating the extent to which some factors are consistently considered an issue across within-cases. This stage of analysis did, however, lead to the emergence of new factors lacking presence on the macro level. As with policy, socio-economic disadvantage is discussed as a driving factor in the sense of it being framed as a societal constraint; however, participants expand on this domain with a gender consciousness to introduce the concept of masculinity as well as broader discourses of exclusion. This is referenced in a materialistic sense with the protection of resources, as well as through the identification of temporal anxieties faced

by young people. Exploitation is referred to with direct relation to gangs as a driving factor, discussed in more detail alongside practices of County Lines and illegal drug-selling operations. The mention of gangs and exclusion opened up a wider discourse of socio-cultural dynamics in marginalised areas as contributing to the production of violent codes, with such codes referring to actual and symbolic practices of violence as a form of hierarchal establishment and self-preservation for young men suffering in environments of disadvantage. Participants provided detailed explanations of the role of media in glamourising and normalising violence with the generation of fear, not in the sense of a 'moral panic' but rather a feeling amongst young people of a need to arm themselves.

Table 3. Micro community analysis results.

Discursive Pattern	Discursive Category	Driving Factors	Participant 1 (Prison Service)	Participant 2 (Youth Work)	Participant 3 (Police)
Socio-Economic and Educational Disadvantage	Criminality as Alleviation of Socio-Economic Disadvantage	Youth violence adopted to escape economic poverty through easy money		X	
		Areas containing violence characterised by socio-economic disadvantage and deprivation		X	
	Lack of Education and Awareness amongst at Risk Youth	Young people living in social deprivation not aware of other opportunities or different life		X	
		Young people involved in violence lacking in education to know how to better improve their situation		X	
		Young men using violence because they have lacked the education on how to properly conduct themselves	X		
Exclusion and Masculinity	Violence used by Excluded Young Men for Self-Preservation	Violence as a means of self-preservation stems from culture of excluded areas	X		
		Adopting criminality and violence driven by a need for self-preservation	X		
		Violence and criminality manifested as coded practices in excluded and deprived areas	X		
		Violence used by criminalised and excluded young men as a way of maintaining manhood and respect	X		
	Violence and Criminality used to Channel Masculinity	Violence used by young people as a path to manhood where there is a lack of educational and employment opportunities	X		
		Lack of outlets and avenues for young men to apply themselves leads to violence used as a way to enact masculinity	X		
		Criminality and violence enacted as mechanisms for young men to establish themselves	X		
	Biological Traits and Male Adolescence	Biological tendencies coupled with a belief of obtainable wealth leading to involvement in violence			X
		Biological development and adrenaline in teenagers innately facilitating involvement in violence			X
		Youth and adolescent age as the prime for violent practices and hyper-masculine displays	X		

Table 3. *Cont.*

Discursive Pattern	Discursive Category	Driving Factors	Participant 1 (Prison Service)	Participant 2 (Youth Work)	Participant 3 (Police)
Experience of Traumatic Upbringing and Exploitation	Damaging Home and Family Backgrounds	Youth involved in violence coming from single-parent backgrounds		X	
		Youth involved in gangs and violence from 'chaotic upbringing'			X
		Domestic violence as driving gang involvement			X
		Young people adopting violence and criminal practice based upon normalisation in the home		X	
	Grooming and Exploitation of Young People	Young people as victims of grooming into violent lifestyles		X	
		Young people as groomed and trapped within gang practices			X
		Young people as becoming trapped in a process of owing leading to gang involvement			X
		Processes of grooming into gangs as quick			X
County Line Gangs and Territoriality	Gang Involvement Driven Through County Lines and Drug Markets	Gang involvement and practice as driven by County Lines as opposed to 'postcodes'			X
		Drug market feuds as a catalyst for violence	X		
		Young people as immersed in organised criminality		X	
	Violence in Relation to Gang Practice Driven by Local Rivalries	Situating organised gangs and area rivalries alongside youth violence		X	
		Area rivalries having the potential to produce violent environments	X		
		Area rivalries and beefs triggering violence	X		
	Defence and Protection of Local Areas, Markets, and Resources	Violence used to defend areas and resources	X		
		Violence used to defend and protect the status of the area from challengers from elsewhere	X		
Socio-Cultural Status	Violence as Beginning with Banter and Social Challenges	Street violence as triggered by banter and challenges	X		
		Slights and disrespects leading to serious violence	X		
	Violence used to Establish Status in Tough Environments	Youth violence driven by desire for respect and power on the street		X	
		Violence used as way to defend against abusive environments	X		
		Violent practice as a fashion statement		X	
	Projection of Fronts	Young people performing toughness and engaging in violence to escape exploitation	X		
		Young people in deprived urban areas having to project a toughness that leads to violence	X		
		Violence interconnected with 'hardness', a display to maintain status	X		
		Using violence to maintain an image for those observing	X		
	Culture of Fashion and Aesthetic Wealth	Young people adopting a front of having money through expensive clothes		X	
		Urban youth culture of having to appear as aesthetically well-off		X	

Table 3. *Cont.*

Discursive Pattern	Discursive Category	Driving Factors	Participant 1 (Prison Service)	Participant 2 (Youth Work)	Participant 3 (Police)
Normalisation and Glamourisation in Media	Normalisation of Violence through Media	Normalisation of violence in media leading to its proliferation amongst young people			X
		Content of Drill music leading to a normalisation of violence			X
		Social media as breaking down barriers to young people being exploited and manipulated into gangs			X
	Glamourisation of Violence in Media and Locally	Youth violence driven by its glamourisation in Drill music and media		X	
		Criminality as celebrated in film and music and, therefore, glamourised		X	
		Young people's idolisation of local gang members in Drill as harmful			X
		Visual glamourisation on the streets of gang lifestyle luring young people in			X
		Adopting criminal practice comes from its attachment to lavish lifestyles		X	
		Gang members as generally suffering with mental health issues, not the glamourised reality			X
	Media Reporting on Youth Violence Exacerbating the Issue	Young people negatively represented in the media		X	
		Through a normalisation of violence comes a fear that it is more significant than the reality			X
		Negative news media reporting on knife crime leading to proliferation		X	

3.2.1. Socio-Economic Exclusion and Masculinity

Socio-economic disadvantage is viewed as a direct driving factor of serious youth violence, leading to involvement in criminality to make 'easy money'. Participants made specific reference to lack of community education as a more precise driving factor in this context, where young people are lacking in the skills and knowledge to know how to divert themselves away from negative lifestyles.

"Yeah and sadly educationally they have low attainment, so it's young people not having the awareness or the knowledge or the education to understand that actually you know this is kind of the situation that they find themselves in." (Participant 2)

The experience of socio-economic disadvantage as a driving factor is notably extended to notions of social exclusion and masculinity. The issue of serious youth violence at this point becomes cultural, as those in marginalised spaces are forced into self-preservation with a need to defend limited resources as they contemplate their identity as young men in environments that are traumatic physically and psychologically. Participant 1 described violence as a coded practice for young men lacking educational and wider societal support to explore modes of masculinity.

"some of the challenges of being in these areas, where we were, it's known that they are forgotten, they are deprived, they are in particular no go areas, particular codes and expectations . . . where resources are limited and where men have limited avenues to be men and then there's more likelihood violence is used as a resource to do masculinity." (Participant 1)

Participant 3 highlighted the factor of masculinity within a biological domain, mentioning the intersection of brain development amongst teenagers in terms of risk-taking to explain the hyper-masculine and sometimes violent displays from young men.

"young people experience adrenaline different to grown-ups and adults, they enjoy it differently and they get a different hit of adrenaline . . . part of their brain isn't fully developed yet so the prefrontal lobe which is the part of the brain that develops last which is where we understand consequences et cetera those two things together are a dangerous mix of young people wanting to do risky things" (Participant 3)

3.2.2. Gangs and Exploitation: Experiences of Trauma and Territoriality

As was consistent across government policy, all participants from the micro community sample, to some extent, discuss organised gangs as a key driving factor behind a growing number of young people becoming involved in serious violence. This is done through an explanation of their criminal and exploitative nature, highlighting the use of manipulative techniques to broader County Lines processes where feuds over selling rights can lead to violence.

"it's the county lines, the drugs business, we'll have gangs that will recruit young people from other areas, they don't care about the post code where that kid comes from, as long as they belong to their gang, and that gang has a general area that they associate with." (Participant 3)

Participant 1 engaged in a more extensive reflection of 'area feuds', commenting less on organised gang practice and more on general rivalries that exist between those contesting for the control of limited socio-economic resources. In this context, the need to defend oneself and collective localities with the exchange of threats and challenges with others is seen as a vicious cycle driving violence between young men in marginalised environments.

"you will defend that area as if somebody, you know we've all grown up with other bits of the estate coming to try and fight other bits of the estate and it, and I think it's part of that collective identity isn't it is part of being able to defend your manor not having people coming in taking already limited resources . . . if someone comes in trying to kind of sell or setup in your area, then that is a complete liberty, that of course you address." (Participant 1)

Framed as interconnected with gang-driven violence is the discursive pattern of home and family backgrounds as a driving factor, where participants discussed how certain conditions such as single-parent households, chaotic upbringings, and normalised aggression at home can all lead to involvement in gangs and violence. There is a consistent discourse across factors of gang exploitation and experience of trauma through abuse that many young people are trapped in these processes, which leads to involvement in violence, where external environmental conditions are exacerbating catalysts that are out of the young people's control.

"some people it's all they know, they grew up watching family members, parents involved in it, in criminality . . . these young people you know in a lot of respects they are victims, they've kind of been groomed by older people" (Participant 2)

3.2.3. Socio-Cultural Status and Media Influences

A discursive theme emerged of a representation of socio-cultural influences through a discussion of performative 'fronts' and identities adopted by young people. Participants 1 and 2 discussed how, within complex environments that involve exclusionary, exploitative, and abusive experiences, young people have to perform to expectations and manipulative requirements from others as a mode of self-protection and -preservation to ensure respect and safety are maintained. Participants highlighted how the very nature of such environments can be viewed as a driving factor conditioning young people into adopting violent fronts and identities.

"the spaces that you are in you have to kind of have to put on a performance or you become vulnerable, and many people assume vulnerability, then you become exploited, and your life doesn't become worth living . . . if somebody is willing to turn to extreme violence to

*kind of defend themselves, or defend perhaps other more vulnerable people, they will have
a position"* (Participant 1)

Aside from these physical and environmental conditions positioned as driving factors facilitating violent performances, participants also spoke of the influences of various forms of media as promoting and inciting violence. Social media usage in particular contexts is positioned as a driving factor through the normalised presentation of violence and criminality, eliciting a fear amongst young people to arm and defend themselves whilst allowing for a greater propensity to exploitative practices that draw young people into dangerous lifestyles. Participants also commented on the glamourisation of violence as a central driving factor in this context, explaining the manifestation of celebrity-like gang members in communities that are presented in Drill music, where, in turn, vulnerable young people look to model their behaviour based on such identities.

*"If we are talking about violence, the normalisation of violence is everywhere, the more
that we see, in Drill music videos, young people are seeing holding a knife as being a
normal part of being a young person, a normal part of a young person's life, and even if
that's not the case that's what they are seeing twenty-four-seven . . . with that comes a fear
of violence, so a younger person might think there is a bigger knife crime problem than
there actually is, so then they arm themselves because they feel unsafe"* (Participant 3)

4. Discussion

Data analysis highlights a broad discoursal contrast between the macro policy-level and micro community-level cases, where a socio-political doctrine of individualism, arguably resulting from wider neo-liberal ideology, is present in government documents' framing of driving factors, whilst perspectives from the YVC and community sample reflect a wider and increasingly externalised view that considers the influence of particular societal structures and processes in the lives of vulnerable and marginalised young people. The discussion of socio-economically disadvantaged environments foregrounds the representation of discourse in both cases. Government documents, as well as perspectives from participants, mention the visible and material experiences of living with disadvantages such as lack of employment opportunities and reduced socio- economic support that facilitate young people into taking up violence within lives of criminality as a navigation of these conditions. Within such discourse, the convergence of socio-psychological and ecological experiences is recognised in their relation to exacerbating involvement in serious violence. In addition to criminality acting as a direct route to escape a state of disenfranchisement, micro experiences of exploitation, shame, and manipulation emerge in exclusionary environments as driving factors of serious youth violence in their own right. Lauger and Lee [16] discuss this culmination of micro experiences—how gang violence becomes a product of cultural experience and psychological struggle in environments of disadvantage. A young person may be drawn into violence to protect limited local resources as either a personal choice or following exploitative manipulation whilst also engaging in combative and aggressive styles as a traumatic symptom following an experience of disadvantaged and abusive living. Kerig et al. [22] highlight the significant presence of 'post-traumatic stress' amongst young gang members, with Frisby-Osman and Wood [23] also supporting these findings through a cognitive analysis of non-gang and gang members, finding that the latter typically harbour higher levels of anxiety, depression, and moral disengagement.

The findings also reveal the unique interplay between masculine performance and social exclusion as a key driving factor. Participant 1, in particular, drew on the notion of social exclusion and the intersubjective legitimisation of codes of violence. This reaffirms a general discourse from community participants that motivations driving involvement in serious violence within environments suffering from high levels of social exclusion stem from desires to regain autonomy in the garnering of both social and economic capital.

Where key authors in this field, such as Berkmann [49], have commented on the 'practical' nature of violence in exclusionary urban settings, the findings of this study resonate with a more contemporary understanding of social exclusion. This is supported

by Umaña [50], who, through ethnographic study, developed the notion that violence in exclusionary settings goes beyond a medium for the settling of disputes in drug-selling territories but is used as a powerful cultural agent for masculine recognition. As Adam Baird [21] furthers in a UK context, the engagement in serious youth violence and gang activity can simply be a route for 'doing masculinity', where conceptions of such have become distorted for such young men lacking in direction.

Community participants did not shy away from the framing of this issue as 'cultural', not simply mechanistic and practical in nature. Serious violence is not just 'transactional' in this sense for the navigation of conditions of disadvantage; it is a product of psychological damage embedded through coded exclusionary experiences where young men are exploited and antagonised. Supporting the arguments presented by Baird [21], masculinity is discussed in the findings in relation to education and relational resources, where young men lack guidance and suitable outlets for 'being men'. The framing of youth education and support systems became prominent across cases in a way that continued to reflect a government perspective of individual responsibility, in contrast to YVC and community cases discussing the wider structural issues present that exacerbate involvement in serious violence. Through the presentation of this factor, in accordance with an introduction of increasingly punitive measures placed against young people, discourses in government documents reflect notions of Liberal Paternalism in their approach to serious youth violence. As Loic Wacquant [51] discusses, the generation of heavier forms of penalisation can often lead to an exacerbation of disadvantage and social polarisation where violence only becomes a more embedded cultural code. This process of Liberal Paternalism is explained through the reduction of welfare services as explained by the YVC report and Participant 2 as a youth work advocate, implementation of gang injunctions for younger offenders, and mention of responsibility for violence reduction placed on school activity and teachers. Through such measures, government policy reflects a laissez-faire position on approaching the root causes of serious youth violence, where attention to deeper structural factors is omitted.

However, a shift in understanding is present between the EGYV report, in the framing of youth involved in criminality as "those refusing to exit violent lifestyles" [24], and the SVS, as it highlights the need to "catch young people before they go down the wrong path" [25]. This language highlights the subtle development of awareness towards the notion that serious violence is not always a desirable choice made by young people but rather participation in such can often be the end product of a complex process of manipulative exploitation, a process that has increasingly been positioned alongside the practices of gangs involved in illegal drug trade and trafficking markets [52–54]. Whilst the presence of organised gangs has been highlighted as a central driving factor in exacerbating serious youth violence, it can by no means be understood as a factor in isolation, as analysis of cases has revealed the growing intersection of media and culture with such issues. Social media and Drill music are discussed as outlets, on the one hand, producing glamourised criminal identities [55] and promoting involvement in violence whilst acting as a mode for further exploitative intrusion in the lives of vulnerable young people. However, the YVC framing of this issue synchronously refers to the needless criminalisation of Drill [56] as a part of a growing disconnect between communities, its young people, and policing powers as a driving factor of increasing serious violence, respectively.

As serious violence is discussed by community participants as significantly interconnected with aesthetic and visual displays in exclusionary settings, we can come to understand the representation of driving factors across cases as culminating in a set of 'street cultural performances' [17,18] that have attached to them experiences of abuse, disadvantage, exploitation, trauma, and hardship. These performances are associated with the manipulation of youth by organised trafficking gangs as a more direct pull into lives of criminality where youth are forced into coherence with codes of violence. On the other hand, the emergence of conditions of exclusionary and marginalised living inhibits a more passive emergence of involvement in violence; as community support and material

resources decrease in opportunity, young people concurrently become involved in serious violence as a practical, psychological, and socio-cultural response. It is imperative to understand that whilst young people in exclusionary environments may immerse themselves in serious violence as a way of cohering with localised criminal 'styles' and 'codes', as Sandberg and Fleetwood [57] describe as alternative means of acquiring economic capital, the protection of the self and the 'locality' in a psycho-social sense also plays an integral role [58]. As discussed by Ebony Reid [59], there is a propensity for young people to become trapped physically within certain spaces and processes of criminality, but also in a psycho-social sense, where young people in this context develop a 'temporal anxiety' [60] through fears of exploitation and a constant need to protect oneself in an environment that has inhibited a sense of abandonment. The nature of the driving factors presented in this article supports an urgent need for the framing of serious youth violence as a public health issue [32–35], where an assessment of educational and psychological support for young people is vital alongside an inquiry into how the notion of 'community' can be restored across urban spaces.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight a complex array of driving factors that identifies a growing connection between participation in serious youth violence and experience of living within exclusionary spaces. The emergence of particular social and cultural codes within such areas appears to have led to a growth in territoriality and performative culture culminating from a rise in varied gang activity and a need to defend dwindling material resources whilst upholding a sense of masculine identity for young men. Findings suggest that amongst vulnerable youth positioned in this context, there has been a growth in the perceived necessity to involve oneself in serious violence. On the one hand, as a result of increased exposure to manipulation by exploitative gangs presenting criminality as a desirable lifestyle, and on the other, through a fear of violence constructed through media normalisation that has led to more young people believing they must arm themselves for self-protection.

However, following the discussion of wider factors referencing experiences of certain hardships, street territoriality, and street cultural media in settings of social exclusion, the notion of 'gangs' in relation to serious youth violence cannot be fixed in definition, nor can it be solely discussed in relation to 'County Lines' activity. Therefore, these findings call for further research into the practical and psychological detriments of living in areas characterised by high levels of social exclusion, a concept that we can further understand through the research of Dykxhoorn et al. [31] as a reduction in material, relational, political, educational, and structural resources. Further research must also continue to seek an understanding of contemporary processes within street cultural settings in order to pinpoint the micro processes that prompt young people to involve themselves in serious violence.

As discussed, a limitation of this study is the reduced micro sample size, preventing generalisation of results. The size of the sample itself leads to a reduction in the ability to apply the findings generally across the UK context, whilst the lack of perspective from different youth justice outlets and a wider set of cultural and geographic communities also reduces the diversity of responses. Therefore, future research should look to engage in similar work with a greater range of respondents from a variety of positions across the youth justice system, hearing from participants who intersect with young people affected by serious violence at the points of diversionary efforts, custody, and rehabilitation. Furthermore, future work in the context of serious youth violence should seek to embed itself in communities, collaborating with those most affected and involving perspectives of young people themselves, who are not necessarily offenders but individuals deeply and directly connected to the experience of the factors and conditions discussed in this study. Due to the sample size, the study was unable to garner diverse ethnic perspectives reflective of the rich range of demographical backgrounds present across the UK. In drawing on communities for participation, future studies must look to integrate voices that represent the

Afro-Diasporic perspective and Asian and Eastern European experiences of those residing in UK geographies. The Balkan perspective is one that particularly lacks representation in terms of the phenomenon of serious youth violence. Finally, as the practical nature of violence in exclusionary areas as a mechanism for the maintenance of illegal drug markets and processes of trafficking has been more consistently documented, the findings of this study that point towards serious youth violence as a psycho-cultural construct should be further investigated. The intersection of cultural processes and traumatic responses is one which requires qualitative inquiry and health-based policy intervention.

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