

Thematic Review Briefing Vulnerable Adults Review

Critical Events

In the summer of 2017, a tragic series of events unfolded, claiming the lives of three teenage boys within a four-week period. By the end of 2017, two more boys had also passed away, all of whom were known to services for safeguarding and/or criminal concerns. In response to this emerging trend, partners were prompted to identify other adolescents who were at risk.

Subsequently, a total of 60 vulnerable adolescents from Croydon; 23 girls and 37 boys, were identified as a concern. Consequently, the CSCP commissioned a thematic review which aimed to explore the lives of these young people, to shape and enhance future intervention strategies.

Insights

51% of this cohort came to the attention of Children's Social Care between birth and 5 years of age.

75% of boys were affiliated with gangs, showing the widespread nature of gang involvement among them.

85% of girls were victims of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), and all had experienced episodes of going missing.

Safeguarding Concerns

Safeguarding concerns encompassed a broad spectrum of vulnerabilities and well-being issues, extending beyond the confines of their homes. These concerns include:

- Being a perpetrator or victim of knife crime and/or other criminal activities like theft and assault
- Being a perpetrator or victim of drug related incidents
- Frequent and high number of missing episodes
- Victims of sexual exploitation and/or criminal exploitation
- Indicators of gang membership or affiliation
- School exclusions and/or poor attendance
- Concerns about risks to physical or emotional care & family dysfunction
- Known parental vulnerabilities including mental health issues, domestic abuse, criminal behaviour or imprisonment.
- ED presentations for assault and stab wounds, or substance misuse

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Findings

Collaboration between children and adult services often fell short in achieving a shared understanding or effective plans to support the child or family. Interventions primarily focused on reacting to immediate behaviours, neglecting underlying needs and community-based risks.

There was a concerning over-representation of black boys of Caribbean heritage, prompting questions about potential biases in support allocation. School exclusions, including from primary school, were prevalent, with all excluded primary school children later having criminal convictions. Transition to secondary school posed challenges, with many experiencing deteriorating behaviour leading to placement in Pupil Referral Units or Alternative Provisions.

Mental health referrals were widespread, spanning from early childhood to adolescence. A majority of the cohort experienced involvement in criminal activities as either offenders or victims, ranging from thefts and assaults to knife crime and drug offenses.

A quarter of the cohort were subject to multiple Child Protection Plans, and three-quarters became looked after at some point, suggesting a pattern of failed or unsustainable interventions that did not adequately address emerging risks. A poignant remark from one looked-after young person, aged 15, underscores the perceived inadequacy of intervention: “Where were you when I was 6?” — highlighting the sense that support came too late and was insufficient.

Improving Practice

- Partnership actions to address the complex challenges faced by vulnerable adolescents encompass:
- Early Help and prevention strategies are deemed critical to intercept issues before they escalate.
- Recognition and timely response to a child’s emotional and well-being needs are imperative for effective intervention.
- An integrated, whole systems approach must be adopted across agencies, families, and communities to ensure comprehensive support.
- Schools play a central role in multi-agency interventions, serving as vital hubs for identifying and addressing various needs.
- Disproportionality linked to ethnicity, gender, and deprivation demands focused attention and concerted action to mitigate disparities.

Early Years (0-6) Children were profoundly affected by adversities at home stemming from their parents’ own complex issues, which hindered their capacity to provide nurturing, support, and meet attachment needs. Unfortunately, interventions tended to be short-term and failed to integrate the needs of both parent and child. Early intervention and prevention strategies must prioritize addressing trauma and supporting attachment needs to foster healthier development.

Childhood (6-12) Schools were viewed as crucial in a child’s life, yet often remained unaware of difficulties at home. Responses to challenging behaviour frequently led to exclusions and referrals to various services. The transition from primary to secondary school emerged as a critical period for children, but planning for this transition was not always comprehensive.

Adolescence (12-16) The pace and complexity of needs drove responses from agencies, with interventions primarily focused on achieving stability and control in the short term. However, a whole-system approach to integrating needs and services was lacking. Risky behaviours tended to escalate during this period, exacerbated by long-term emotional and mental health needs. Moreover, the absence of trusted adult relationships often influenced behaviours, with adolescents frequently treated as offenders rather than victims.



Reflect on the findings and discuss the implications for your practice/team. This information should help to inform the steps you and your team will take going forward.

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