

PE1947: Address Scotland's Culture of Youth Violence

External Committee engagement session with the petitioner and families with lived experience

Introduction

Members of the Committee, Jackson Carlaw MSP (Convener) and Alexander Stewart MSP, met with families at LoveMilton Community Centre.

The families shared their individual experiences with youth violence in the community and the impact it has had on their lives.

Abbie's story

The Committee heard about the experiences of three victims during the session. The text below is the statement provided by Angela Jarvis, Abbie's mother.

"Abbie had met a new friend. She was reassured by this friend that she would keep her safe. This friend knew Abbie had social anxiety. This friend made Abbie feel secure. Abbie loved her.

The said friend text Abbie to meet at the park, so nothing unusual.

At the park the friend had waited to attack. No warning. No fall out beforehand. Just a cold and calculated attack. The first attack, blows to the head, Abbie couldn't process, when she got up she tried to get away. Then came the second attack, more blows to the head and face, Abbie began seeing stars and wanted to vomit but managed to get up to run.

This led to a chase and another attack resulting in Abbie becoming unconscious, you would think the attack would stop them, but it didn't, it continued.

When I found my daughter, I couldn't process it. Her face looked deformed. I wanted to vomit. I felt faint. I was too scared for a minute to touch her. She was covered in blood and vomit. She couldn't speak, she was in and out of consciousness. I was so scared.

Adrenaline kicked in and I managed to think fast. I got her to the hospital, trying to hold her up with one hand and drive with the other.

[Referring to photographs:] This is my daughter when she would wake up and say she is scared, please don't call the police mum she will kill me. [...] I assured her she won't ever have to see this girl again. This is a serious crime, the girl will be locked away for this. Abbie still passing out and coming round again.

There wasn't one bit of her face and head that had not been kicked or punched. The bruises I just kept finding. Inside her mouth was all torn. Her head was disfigured.

[Referring to photographs:] This is the day CID arrived, this is the day I had to sit with her and hear that the likelihood is that no consequences would be given to this girl. My heart broke in two again and my daughter's fear was horrendous. My baby was broken and my heart was shattered.

My eldest boy had travelled up from England and said "see mum, I told you we should have dealt with the consequences, the system is useless."

I always thought that the police were there to protect and the justice system served justice. I couldn't process this.

Doing my homework afterwards, I learnt this girl had attacked no less than 20 children and was well known with the police and in fact I still continue to get videos or stories of attacks weekly.

Why do no consequences still stand? This is something I don't understand.

Since the attack which happened in October last year, Abbie has felt let down by the world. She has attempted to leave this world twice and won't leave the house without me [there] with her. She has lost an education through fear of school and being around teens. She has no trust. Outside is a frightening place and not a place of fun and laughter that she can enjoy before adulthood.

My son is angry and I have had to counsel him. He wanted to take things into his own hands because he sees the pain Abbie continues to suffer.

Abbie's youngest sister can no longer go where she used to go play with her friends through fear this girl will attack her.

At least we had a bit of peace of mind that we managed to get bail [i.e. the attacker was granted bail only subject to conditions, including keeping away from Abbie].

In February the said girl approached our property with a gang of boys to stare and intimidate.

Phone police. Bail is broken. There is no bail.

I still don't know to this day why there is no bail, as a victim's mum and as a victim, you don't matter. As a perpetrator, they know what's going on.

We were let down again.

Abbie's PTSD went through the roof. Having dreams of being chased. Jumping at her own shadow. And wanted to be anywhere but at her home she used to love.

Abbie has been in 24 hour care. Even moving her into my room to always be there for her.

And as a mum I am constantly thinking "how am I going to keep my daughter alive?" How can I show her that the assault was wrong?

Police Scotland told us to just keep ourselves safe, lock the doors and contacted Victim Support which provide us with three cameras.

Cameras that record. Which, yes, is evidence. But we had evidence of her beating my child almost to death, so what good are cameras that show evidence of her coming to our home?

It was providing us with a small sense of security.

In the meantime, the perpetrator attends school, has made new friends, can go out and enjoy her teenage life, and in fact continue to inflict violence and fear on others. Whilst Abbie is locked up. No education. No counselling. No friends. No summer being out enjoying herself. Often no sleep while she continues to process. Abbie feels let down by all the services. Abbie is going to go on a child protection plan because she hurts herself, but no child protection plan is in put in place when a child hurts others.

The perpetrator has all the protection. You can't share her name, you can't approach her or provide your own punishment for the crime. But

she can continue to message, intimidate and beat Abbie again if she likes and her life won't change.

If this was your child, how would you feel? Would you agree that the perpetrator should have all of the protection and no consequences?"

M's story

Members then heard about an attack on another young girl by the same perpetrator. Her experience was similar in that the perpetrator and her friends brought M into their group. M shared that the perpetrator was known for being violent but that she became friends with her because she felt that would give her protection.

On the day of the attack, M was at a shopping centre with the group and began to realise the attack was coming when they tried to convince her to leave the shopping centre (so as, she assumed, to be out of view of CCTV).

M alerted her mum by text, who then contacted the shopping centre security to beg them to prevent any attack until M's dad could arrive. Her mum was informed that the security guards could not intervene unless an attack had begun, and they were splitting it up – there was nothing they could proactively do to prevent the attack from happening.

M was attacked by the group in the shopping centre and it was broken up by the security guards.

Her mum emphasised a lack of police action following the attack. She was initially told the attacker would be charged and believed this, particularly as there is CCTV footage of the attack to use as evidence, but she has not been given an incident number and has not had contact from the police in months since the attack.

K's story

K's mum told Members about how her daughter was attacked on a school bus on the way home one day. She shared that K was scratched, had her hair pulled out and was stamped on by the attacker. Within an hour, her mum had been sent seven videos of the attack. The police and school explained that the consequences they could put in place were limited as the perpetrator was 12 years old. By way of punishment, the perpetrator was issued with a one-day in-school exclusion as her only

sanction. K's mum emphasised a lack of support from the school, sharing that while the perpetrator receives daily counselling through the school, K only received three sessions. K is now escorted between classes and cannot leave the school grounds at lunchtime, while the perpetrator has none of those restrictions.

K's mum shared that her daughter is now quiet and withdrawn. K no longer goes out after school with friends, suffers from anxiety, and has given up previous hobbies she enjoyed. Her siblings have also been attacked, and she receives constant messages containing threats and insults both while at school and at home.

Causes of youth violence

The group expressed concern about a lack of discipline culturally and recognised that young people are still "figuring out who they're going to be as adults" between the ages of 12 and 14. One parent stated that a lot of young people are "given up on at home because they don't have the discipline or structure", she believes that those young people are then left without direction.

In the cases shared during the session, there were no drugs or alcohol involved and therefore did not appear to be a cause of any attack.

The participants felt that social media platforms have a role to play as young people can feel encouraged to participate in and film violence with a view to sharing it online. The parents believe that social media platforms allow violent videos to be circulated without accountability as parents do not receive responses to their communication with the platforms. The group felt that social media platforms should have a responsibility to remove videos containing such violence.

However, participants also noted that not all attacks are recorded.

Impact on victims

The participants raised concerns about the lasting impact on victims, including their families. In particular, they emphasised that the impact is exacerbated by a lack of support from formal structures within both the education and justice systems.

The families shared their fears over the safety of their children in the local community and the young people stated that they can no longer go outside without fear. One parent added that living in a small community “makes it difficult to get distance and space” from perpetrators.

When considering the mental health impact of violence, parents shared their fears over losing their children to suicide and noted that the waiting list for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services is significant.

One mother asked:

“What society do we live in when we can’t keep our kids safe?”

In one instance, the child did not receive support from the school, which has left her scared to walk between classes alone. The parent stated that the system “was created to support the perpetrator” and that this is done at the “expense of victims”.

The group shared that at the time of reporting, families had been reassured by the police that action would be taken. However, communication stopped soon after that point. The group expressed that not being informed about the process made them feel more vulnerable to the perpetrators.

A significant sentiment from the group was that the lasting impact on victims following a violent attack is exacerbated by a lack of consequences for the perpetrators. One expressed the view that nothing will change until a child is killed or a parent takes matters into their own hands and is imprisoned for assault.

Consequences

Throughout the session, participants emphasised a lack of consequences as the key issue for consideration. They shared concerns about rehabilitation in the community, noting that such interventions fail due to insufficient resources, which results in more violence occurring. It was suggested that for some individuals, it is necessary to remove them from the community and provide rehabilitation where they are separated from the victims.

Frustration about the justice system was expressed, with details of circumstances in which the police were unable to proceed with criminal charges due to the age of the perpetrator, including incidents with video footage and where an individual had attacked multiple people. The

police had been unable to take further action because the perpetrators were under 15 years old. In one instance, the perpetrator went on to attack more people.

More broadly, there was a sense among the group that the police hear about online threats of violence so frequently that “they become immune to it” and have stated to a concerned parent that “nine times out of ten” no attack occurs as a result of online threats. The parent’s reaction was to wonder “what if my child is the one (out of ten)?”

Another parent said of the violent children: “They are laughing in our faces – they have all the power, and they know it”. Some of these children are also attacking adults, stealing from shops and starting fires. The girl who attacked Abbie and M is now reported to be carrying a knife.

Initially the families had thought that their situations would be handled by the justice system but were left asking “what’s the point in contacting the police?”

The group discussed the impact of family and home life on perpetrators, reflecting that some parents are unable to acknowledge their child’s behaviour while others recognise the issue but feel unable to bring forward consequences at home. They emphasised the importance of parental responsibility to bring forward consequences, noting that their own children are aware that it is wrong to be violent towards other people.

When discussing the approach taken by schools, it was noted that teachers are not permitted to intervene in fights or violent attacks. By way of punishment, single day in-school exclusions were noted as common occurrences but that in other circumstances they could only provide in-school counselling for the perpetrator.

Overall, it was felt that the justice system should look at each situation on its individual circumstances and bring forward different consequences for different incidents.

Prevention

The participants felt that schools and the police should be better supported to stop violence from happening and that when perpetrators

face consequences this will reduce the likelihood of more violence occurring in the future.

The importance of youth work was raised but with the caveat that it is “very difficult” to run such work due to funding and safeguarding requirements. One parent stated that “youth groups and individuals are trying to make a difference but it’s difficult”.