



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Eight *Children and Young People: parental neglect, youth violence and gang culture*

The Call for Evidence

The Commission launched its Call for Evidence in October 2021 as the first major step in our inquiries. It provided an opportunity to engage with a wide range of people aged 18 and over, faith communities, and organisations working with children and families in England in thinking about some of the key issues relevant to the Commission's work. These are described in our first Briefing paper.¹

We are analysing the responses thematically and sharing the emerging themes through a number of discrete briefing papers. In reporting the emerging themes the Commission is not commenting on them at this stage, but simply sharing them with a wider audience while using them to inform our thinking and to guide the various Commission activities that are taking place to dive more deeply into the evidence.² The briefings we share may well spark additional conversations, which we would welcome.

About this Briefing

The Commission is examining the factors that promote strong relationships, stability, safety and sustainability within families and households and the conditions in which children can thrive and reach their full potential. The Commission explored a number of questions in the Call for Evidence to help us understand these factors. In Briefings Six and Seven we reported on the responses to questions about the factors in family life that either help or inhibit children and young people to flourish, and how parents can be supported to promote the mental health of children and young people, and to protect them from harm. In this briefing we turn our attention specifically to questions about the role that the Church of England and other faith groups can play in tackling parental neglect, youth violence and gang culture.

We invited respondents to provide examples of initiatives and programmes locally and nationally that are known to tackle these issues. We received information about a range of initiatives and programmes which the Commission is reviewing carefully as it undertakes further evidence-gathering activities. We are very grateful for all the responses we have received.

¹ *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing One - The meaning of family*, March 2022

² *ibid*



In your experience or that of your organisation, how can the Church of England and other faith groups seek to tackle parental neglect?

Context

Every child deserves to be loved, cared for and protected. However, the NSPCC indicates that 1 in 10 children have experienced neglect

Every child deserves to be loved, cared for and protected. However, the NSPCC indicates that 1 in 10 children have experienced neglect.³ The NSPCC defines neglect as ‘the ongoing failure to meet a child’s basic needs and the most common form of child abuse. A child might be left hungry or dirty, or without proper clothing, shelter, supervision or health care. This can put children and young people in danger. And it can also have long term effects on their physical and mental wellbeing.’⁴

There are four kinds of neglect: physical neglect when a child’s basic physical needs are not met; educational neglect when a child is not receiving an appropriate education; emotional neglect when the child does not receive the nurture, stimulation and loving care that is needed; and medical neglect when a child does not receive the health and dental care needed for a healthy development.

It is not always easy to spot a child who is neglected in some way. Warning signs can be missed or hidden from people outside the family. These include: poor appearance and lack of appropriate hygiene; health and developmental problems, such as skin conditions, tiredness and missing school; changes in behaviour, such as being unable to concentrate or becoming withdrawn or aggressive; and family issues, such as inadequate housing or being left alone at home.⁵ Children do not necessarily speak about their personal family circumstances or admit there is a problem to other people. The coronavirus pandemic and the associated lockdowns meant that most children were not in school and fewer people will have seen children who are at risk of parental neglect.

Being neglected can have serious short and long-term effect including mental health issues, running away from home, and getting involved in drugs or criminal activities. While any child can be neglected, the NSPCC points to certain groups of children being more at risk than others. These include: children born prematurely; those with a disability or complex health needs; children in care; and asylum seekers. Children are also at risk of neglect if their parents are involved in drug or alcohol misuse; have mental health problems; or learning needs. Poverty and domestic abuse also increase the risks of parental neglect.

³ See: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/neglect/>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*



The Commission is exploring how children and young people can be protected from various kinds of harm, including parental neglect, looking specifically at how families can be supported. Hence our question in the Call for Evidence about the ways in which churches and faith groups can provide support for families in their community. Most respondents to the question indicated that they believe that churches and other faith groups can and should be supportive of families where children and their parents are vulnerable. In this briefing we share the key themes emerging from the responses.

Raise awareness

In order to raise awareness of the issue, there needs to be a greater understanding of the warning signs and how to spot them:

- *Spot the signs. Find out and understand what the child's needs are*
- *Raise community awareness of the stresses parents may be under*
- *Keep in close touch with all families not just the obvious ones. There are vast areas of child neglect which are not obvious*
- *Raise awareness and train those who come into contact with children on what to look out for and what to do*

Provide support to families and children that are struggling

There was universal agreement that churches and faith communities should be able to provide support:

- *Keep encouraging parents. Keep offering support ... Offer support networks for both parents and their children*
- *Provide parent support through chat groups/courses - face to face or on-line. Support families in need practically and spiritually*
- *Raise up volunteers and advocates to befriend and support parents/families. Run parenting courses*
- *[Provide] support groups for struggling parents...open a nationwide conversation about how parenting is an acquired skill*

Several people talked about the importance of talking about child neglect so that providing and receiving support is normalised:

- *Make sure there are sermons/talks on this, I've been going to Church my whole life and I don't think I've really heard one ... Make sure that there are things in place/people who could support such neglect and a good system to know what to do*
- *Proactive support within the community. Consider employing outreach community workers to support new families. Supportive group activities. Befriending activities*



Working in partnership

Several responses pointed to the importance of church groups working in partnership with other agencies, such as schools and social services, and not necessarily attempting to tackle parental neglect by themselves:

- *The Church of England can get involved with supporting policies about tackling parental neglect by working collaboratively in partnership with other services/agencies to learn more about the impact of parental neglect on children. Also the Church of England can run study days for clergy, lay people, young people and parents to raise their awareness*
- *Churches running parent, carer and child groups in their churches can help. But reaching those who may not have the parenting skills or may neglect their children because of their own needs and issues e.g. drug/alcohol misuse is hard ... it needs special expertise and systems to enable this to be done well and safely*
- *[Churches can support] by teaching parenting skills. By contacting social services when there is serious neglect. By befriending families and helping them in difficult situations*
- *Work with partners, don't get involved unless fully trained. Find church volunteers, especially older members of congregations to become volunteers, they are great listeners and comforters*

Loving and healing

We heard a good deal about the importance of not judging people and how faith groups should show love to families that struggle with parenting:

- *By attending to the parents and teaching them they are loved so they can love their children*
- *Consider that some of the parents who neglect have many traumas and issues such as abuse and additional needs, and their support might need to start with their own healing*
- *Try to get alongside those who are vulnerable or not coping in our communities. Be clear about who to call or involve in terms of statutory agencies if the situation requires, while being alongside people in that journey*

Summary

There was acknowledgment that it is not easy to know which children might be at risk of or are suffering from parental neglect. Some respondents said they did not think there were any children being neglected in their community, so it was not an issue they had considered. Overall, however, there was agreement that it is an issue that should be talked about more and that everyone should be aware of the signs of possible child neglect, that support should be offered in a non-judgmental way and that faith groups should work in partnership with others:



- *[Provide] open access toddler groups and groups for young children, etc. Educate- being aware of the signs and raising concerns. Work closer with schools*

Others argued for churches and faith groups to form a better connection with other agencies and have a place at key meetings:

- *There needs to be better connection with faith institutes and support services. Faith-inspired institutes need to have a place at the table when Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) meetings take place ... A range of training services that can be provided in collaboration with the police, schools, and the local authority that focus on safeguarding and child protection for parents, GPs who identify mental health issues in parents to refer them to family support services ...*

One respondent suggested that we should be asking a different question:

- *'How can we journey with hurting, struggling families?' To which we would offer; forming trusted relationships over a long period of time, being present, being involved/included in networked support training of individuals*

In your experience or that of your organisation, how can the Church of England and other faith groups seek to tackle youth violence and gang culture?

Context

There has been increasing concern about the numbers of young people who are involved in violent activities, who join gangs, who carry knives, and who get caught up in the criminal justice system.

The Children's Society has reported that more children, some as young as six or seven, are involved in carrying drugs as part of county lines activities,⁶ and that phone lines associated with drug deals almost tripled during the coronavirus pandemic.⁷ While young people aged 14-17 are most likely to be targeted by criminal groups, primary school children are seen as easy targets because they are less likely to get caught. The grooming might start with children being asked to 'keep watch' but it can soon escalate to requiring them to stash weapons, money, or become drug couriers.⁸ While children from any community can be groomed into county lines, those from poor households and those who regularly skip school or have problems at home may be more at risk. The activities of these children are often hidden from their parents. The Innovate Project⁹ suggests that children who are already at risk in the home are at greater risk outside the home, which can include criminal and sexual exploitation, including county lines activities and joining gangs.

⁶ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/child-criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines/what-is-county-lines>

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ See: The Innovate Project Lefevre, M and Firmin, C . (2022) Universities of Sussex and Durham www.theinnovateproject.co.uk



The Youth Justice Board has reported that between April 2019 and March 2020, 4,400 knife and offensive weapon offences were committed by children.¹⁰ Although this was 5 per cent lower than ten years ago, the number of Knife or Offensive Weapon offences remains 46 per cent higher than five years ago. Moreover, in the period April 2019 and March 2020, of the 49,100 proven offences committed by children, the main offence type was Violence Against the Person, which accounted for 31 per cent of all proven offences by children.¹¹ In 2019, 24 children aged 17 or under were murdered with a knife or sharp object - the highest number in over a decade.¹²

The Commission on Young Lives, reporting on the Department for Education's 'Children in Need' data, has revealed that 12,720 children in England were identified by social services as being at risk of criminal exploitation by gangs in 2020/21.¹³ The Commission on Young Lives warned that the number of children referred to social services in respect of gangs is likely to be the tip of the iceberg, because referrals to social services inevitably fell during the Covid-19 lockdowns when children and young people were largely out of sight of the statutory agencies. Within this context, the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households is looking at ways in which the Church of England and other faith groups can play a role in tackling the problems of youth violence and gang culture. A number of themes emerged from our analysis of the answers to our question.

Teaching, learning and mentoring

There was considerable consensus that it is important for faith communities to understand the issues and to offer learning and mentoring in the community:

- *Raise awareness of issues, work with and assist organisations who work with these groups. Become involved with groups that tackle and campaign on these issues*
- *Training, awareness of vulnerabilities, and have ex-gang members who are Christians in paid roles to work with young people. They need people who have been there too*
- *Mentor young people. Embrace youth and young people within a spiritual family*
- *Ensure learning offered is reflective of the current challenges faced in society by the younger generation with regards to their faith and its relevance to modern life*

Building relationships with young people

Almost all responses referred to the importance of the church and faith groups forming relationships with young people rather than turning away from those who are involved in

¹⁰ Youth Justice Board (2021) *Youth Justice Statistics 2019-2020*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² https://benkinsella.org.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAjwj42UBhAAEiwACIhADhclO1tEmemwfm6CGi2XN8cmYuWoz7_2KFDlzUhXCbhGXGk1LZ6bihoCUsOQAvD_BwE

¹³ <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/new-figures-reveal-12720-children-in-england-were-identified-by-social-services-as-being-at-risk-of-criminal-exploitation-by-gangs-in-2020-21/>



criminal activities or who might look threatening. This requires understanding of their situation and how they might become groomed into county lines or gang culture:

- *Build relationships. Too often we react with fear towards "hoodies" rather than building bridges*
- *It must always be about engaging with these situations, getting involved and standing alongside. There are powerful advocates for faith within these communities who are offering alternative visions for how to live - giving more positive kinds of connection, belonging, and belief*
- *Work with young people, provide activities and support on their terms, care for and value them*
- *Address stereotyping – support inclusion, equality, aspiration, opportunities for enrichment*

Providing activities

Many respondents talked about the need for more positive activities for young people being available in the community, and frequently referred to the role of youth clubs, many of which closed during the coronavirus pandemic and some have not re-opened:

- *Offer an alternative programme of events for youth to be suitably occupied, feel connected and like they belong; develop a mentoring programme; prepare them for and help them find meaningful work; develop an apprentice scheme where they can have a sense of achievement*
- *Provide healthy activities of all sorts for youth who are bored or unhappy to get involved in*
- *Encourage young people to engage in activities during the week in Church buildings - sports, games, discussions, musical activities. Activities which "take youth off the streets"*
- *[Provide] more youth groups, with more leaders who can easily identify with those who are most vulnerable*

Providing safe non-judgmental spaces for young people

Throughout the Call for Evidence responses to a wide range of questions there are pleas for churches to adopt a more non-judgmental approach to supporting individuals and families who are vulnerable. Many people regard the church and other faith venues as needing to be safe places for people to go and seek support:



- *Provide safe spaces for children and young people to congregate. Many moons ago there were youth clubs often provided by the church in deprived areas which helped and supported young people to be involved with their community*
- *Provide positive role models and safe places for young people to go. Free WIFI Safe journeys home from school. Provide a place of belonging*
- *Gang culture provides a form of belonging for young people who lack any sense of identity and belonging. Well-trained youth leaders, pastors and counsellors who can provide groups for young people to belong to, giving them a sense of family and of meaning, makes a difference to these issues*
- *Provide appropriate, safe places for young people to meet and socialise, with good role models of all ages*
- *Providing youth clubs and hubs for people as safe havens and advice centres is key, as is making sure they are open and/or available at youth-friendly times. An online presence is also key here*
- *Provide groups for young people to belong to, giving them a sense of belonging*

Working in partnership

There is clear recognition that the Church of England and other faith groups cannot tackle youth violence and gang culture by themselves, but need to work with statutory and voluntary agencies in a coordinated way:

- *The Church of England can get involved with supporting policies about reducing and eradicating youth violence and gang culture, and work collaboratively in partnership with other services/agencies to learn more about the impact of youth violence and gang culture. Also the Church of England can run study days for clergy, lay people, young people and parents to raise their awareness*
- *[Churches should] work closely with schools, youth organisations, police. Offer constructive alternatives e.g. relevant and appropriate youth provision, maybe training for young people in certain skills. Offer 'safe places' for young people to meet*

Summary

The Call for Evidence responses indicate that there is considerable support for churches and faith groups to do more to work alongside young people at a time when the numbers becoming involved in faith has been dwindling. Rather than being judgmental there is a need to be more aware and more understanding of the challenges faced by young people and the ways in which they may become involved in criminal activities. We received examples of initiatives that are working alongside young people with a call for these to be more widely available.



There is recognition, too, that while the church cannot tackle these issues alone and that working with young people is a specialist area, nevertheless, the faith communities can offer care, support and fun activities:

- *This is a specialist area but we should be showing we care and offering support in brokering support services where they are needed. Where there are youth groups operating, this enables young people to have an alternative and safe place to meet and they may be less likely to be groomed and persuaded into the gang culture*
- *Create fun youth spaces, get them off the street, feed them, listen to them, accept them, most of what society or sadly the Church can fail to do. That is where Jesus would be. We are sometimes easy to judge over showing love*

There were calls also for faith groups to work together to support young people and to provide role models:

- *Start now and promote interfaith initiatives , be seen to work together and be the role model for a more trusting and understanding society*

Professor Janet Walker OBE

May 2022