

PE1947: Address Scotland's Culture of Youth Violence

External Committee engagement session with 6VT

Introduction

Members of the Committee, Jackson Carlaw MSP (Convener) and Alexander Stewart MSP, met with a group of young people at the Edinburgh Youth Café 6VT. The young people shared their understanding of the key issues raised in the petition, noting that the majority of participants had experienced a form of violence from another young person.

Generally, the group had experienced forms of violence both in-person and online. Participants stated that they feel scared to walk home at night and that Edinburgh City Centre is a particular area of concern. In terms of behaviours, participants indicated that carrying knives and stealing motorbikes are common issues.

The group felt that the type of individual who may become violent towards another young person would have come from challenging circumstances and would present with a group of people who likely "feel terrified as well".

Causes of youth violence

Participants believed that for some people violence can be a means of 'showing off' in some social settings, especially among 13- to 20-year-olds who might be vulnerable to peer pressure.

Poor mental health was identified as one of the root causes of youth violence. The group shared that young people are taught to "push feelings and emotions down", leading them to abuse drugs and alcohol in order to "numb the feelings". It was stated that being under the influence of substances with unmanaged emotions then causes violence between young people. This group believes that not treating poor mental health creates a cycle which causes youth violence, leading to more young people with poor mental health as victims of such violence.

The group noted that it is easier to access illegal drugs than it is alcohol as a young person. In particular, the group stated that owing money to

drug dealers can cause individuals to become victims of violence if they are unable to pay off debt.

The group discussed the impact of social media on both perpetrators and victims of violence. They stated that social media algorithms can suggest violent videos when an individual has not actively sought to view such content. Participants shared that they are exposed to violent content relatively frequently which made them desensitised or, at times, overwhelmed.

Impact on victims

Many participants felt that a lot of people are “let down by the justice system” and don’t feel supported during the reporting process. The group shared their sense that even if they reported a crime and spent a substantial amount of time giving testimonies, the likelihood of “anything being done about it” was very low.

All of these issues were thought to be more severe in sexual violence cases where taboo, disbelief, and low conviction rates are seen as significant additional barriers to reporting crimes and reaching just outcomes.

One participant stated that the justice system process can leave victims feeling vulnerable and in the end, victims are “expected to continue on with life as if nothing happened”.

When asked what they would do in the event of an attack, one participant stated that she would go to 6VT. The group agreed with this sentiment, affirming that 6VT is a safe space where they could seek support without judgement and receive good advice. A staff member also highlighted that 6VT is a remote reporting site, meaning that staff can assist with reporting a violent incident to the police and a statement can be taken on the premises.

Prevention

When discussing what stopped them from turning to violence, especially as they had experienced part of the violence cycle, participants shared a number of preventative interventions in their lives. The interventions included attending 6VT as this gave one participant “something to focus on” and the group expressed that similar services could play an

important role in community building, personal development and, by extension, violence prevention.

One participant had found an interest in music and joined a band. Another shared that his older brothers were involved in gangs, which made him want to “step up and be different”, while others agreed that seeing family involved in violence put them off going down that route.

Participants emphasised the need for a comprehensive approach to mental health and community support; particularly through early interventions, perhaps provided by guidance teachers who could support in building young people’s capacity to deal with difficult emotions in ways that do not include resorting to violence. In this context, addressing long waiting lists for mental health support was seen as a priority.