

Dez Holmes – Director, Research in Practice

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Safeguarding adolescents is a complex business at the best of times, and of course these are not the best of times...

Covid has highlighted a number of issues related to safeguarding adolescents that deserve our attention:

Whilst focus is often on extra-familial harm – intra-familial harm and EFH are by no means mutually exclusive. The experiences that can potentially render a YP more vulnerable to criminal / sexual exploitation and youth violence – things like social isolation, violence within the home, educational disengagement, material deprivation – have by no means abated during Covid. Indeed, for many families and young people, they have been amplified. Lockdown doesn't keep you safe if your home is not a safe space. And whilst some YP have had harmful relationships and contexts disrupted, other YP have had protective relationships – with professionals, friends - fractured or severed altogether.

Schools, colleges and other educational settings are a vital source of support. As every DCS in the country knows, education is a crucial part of the protective structure we need for safe adolescents. Many queried the decision not to name education as a statutory safeguarding partner in local MA Sg Arrangements... certainly, this policy decision does not reflect the lived reality of local leaders in 2020.

We at Research in Practice facilitated some action research, holding focus groups with many local partnerships to understand how Covid was affecting YP's safety. We heard many examples of how those who seek to exploit our YP have adapted rapidly. We heard that in some local areas YP were being given takeaway delivery uniforms (even health worker uniforms) in order to move around more freely, we heard that some exploitation had been displaced to new places and spaces – disused hotels, empty shops, in one case show-homes. We heard how some local colleagues were seeing young adults being used in place of children to move drugs – further highlighting the need to develop more transitional approaches to safeguarding teenagers. Some local areas have found increased use of prescription drugs – perhaps a consequence of disrupted drug supply lines. Overall, what struck me was the pace and agility with which exploiters were able to adapt... if only statutory local services were given the freedom and funding to adapt and innovate so quickly.

Now, we must be cautious – much of these insights are better understood as anecdote of intelligence – rather than robust evidence. But what is clear - as Debbie said - is that the complex issue of safeguarding young people grows increasingly complex. The pressure on local areas to act with pace must not obscure the need to pause occasionally. The media and political attention this issue understandably evokes must not drive knee-jerk responses. Local areas must of course be adaptive – but not reactive.

And to be fair, local areas have adapted valiantly in so many ways. The widespread adoption of virtual service delivery is a key example – with almost every area describing how youth work, family support, youth offending and social care intervention and assessment were now being delivered virtually. This is to be commended. But we should also acknowledge that in a crisis, practice can pull ahead of strategy. There are important ethical considerations for leaders here – how can virtual working be done in a way that ensures staff and YP safety? Online working, done well, is an opportunity to reinforce online safety (an issue of particular importance, with intelligence suggesting that online exploitation could be increasing under Covid, and that a very high proportion of indecent images online are self-generated by YP themselves). What kind of strategic oversight and data

governance is required to ensure digital professionalism? And we must consider the issue of digital poverty and exclusion – a free laptop makes little difference if there's not enough money on the electric meter.

And we know that poverty makes you poorly – so let's turn to YP's mental health. Young people are particularly vulnerable to poor mental health – and we must recognise the connections between safety and wellbeing here. According to work published by the superb Association of Young People's Health three quarters of mental health problems start under the age of 24. The pressures of growing up in a pandemic, the increased anxiety – including exam anxiety (though I'm sure students are grateful for an additional 3 weeks exam preparation time) coupled with the huge uncertainty in the labour market are contributing to a ticking time-bomb for YP's MH. With around just 6% of all MH funding going to CYP, it is clear to see we have a problem.

One thing that can help us to see the interdependencies within adolescent safeguarding is more sophisticated use of data. With local leaders providing more data than ever to national govt, and growing calls from many quarters to better understand which YP are at risk and why, we need to have a sensible conversation about data. We do not simply need more data, we need to enable local areas to capture and use better data. Introducing requirements to record and report on – for example, 'how many YP are at risk of CCE in local authority X' – will yield little improvement if we cannot first agree a shared understanding of what constitutes CCE Vs County Lines Vs 'gang involvement', or square off differences between policy definitions and legal definitions – or indeed agree how we are all defining 'at risk'. In relation to CCE in particular, without this careful thinking – which must be done in collaboration with the sector – we could be storing up a range of ethical issues. Indeed, any blunt tool, produced without consultation to capture YP at risk of youth violence runs the risk of being nothing more than a racial profiling tool.

And, no, predictive data modelling is not going to be the silver bullet here. The stark and somewhat painful wake-up call of A-level grading has helped us to see that algorithms are no replacement for professional judgment, and indeed can have structural inequalities 'baked into' them.

As we return to a period of heightened restrictions and mounting social concern, we must take care not to allow groups who are already heavily policed and scrutinised - black and minority ethnic YP, those in care and/or experiencing poor mental health - to bear the brunt of increased policing powers. We cannot address adolescent harm without attending to issues of equality and diversity. We need to confront the uncomfortable fact that – in some areas - mistrust, fuelled by structural injustice, is impeding our ability to engage communities in the collective endeavour of keeping our kids safe.

Seeing the interconnectedness of issues is key to an effective response. We must not conceptualise youth safety as distinct from issues of poverty, wellbeing, education, justice or health. We need joined up policy solutions, co-developed with those we serve, empowered local systems-leadership and long-term sustainable funding. As Sarah's presentation highlights, childhood experiences can influence adult behaviours. Whilst we should never assume that a YP experiencing harm will go on to present harm to their children – we do need to acknowledge that some of the young men Sarah discussed are the boys we are currently working with now. Our best local leaders are striving to span service boundaries and taking a lifespan perspective to safeguarding – rather than the somewhat arbitrary notion of defining need according to birthday. We must keep pushing at this, challenging though it is.

On a day like today, it seems especially important to focus on that which brings hope...

Some courageous leaders are seizing the opportunity of Covid to fundamentally question the very purpose of practice, of statutory intervention. Recalibrating the system goal from one of responding

to adolescent harm, to one of tackling root causes of harm. The much mooted but often misunderstood 'public health approach' to youth violence and exploitation takes on new meaning in the context of a pandemic. We now see more clearly than ever that what's needed is a focus on people over politics, engagement with evidence over ideology.

The challenge of adolescent safeguarding demands that local areas have a whole place highly integrated system of support – rather than discrete and fragmented services. A system in which communities, voluntary sector, grass roots orgs and faith groups are an integral part of that system. Covid has shown us that this is possible. Many councils and partners are experiencing stronger relational ties than ever before – and have worked to share power so that communities are enabled to exercise true leadership. This is a fantastic bedrock upon which to build whole place whole person safeguarding approach.

Despite the gruelling challenges facing local areas, the appetite for innovation is remarkable. Over the past few months, I have had the pleasure of spending time with local areas determined to push ahead with ambitious plans to enable a more effective approach to safeguarding young people and young adults. Camden, Birmingham, Kensington & Chelsea, Hertfordshire, Wakefield, Bexley, Sheffield, Devon, Hammersmith & Fulham, Thurrock – to name just a few. The energy and tenacity of local areas is awe-inspiring.

When I spoke to conference last year about CCE, I said that we cannot inspect or arrest our way out of it, but rather we must lean in to the complexity. This remains the case. Learning from the first year of the Tackling Child Exploitation Programme suggests that the leadership approaches needed to respond effectively to CE / EFH are those that embrace complexity, are collaborative by design, and are adaptive – driven by learning, never by ego. Covid (and other recent events) demonstrates powerfully that performative, muscular, headline-grabbing gestures are no substitute for thoughtful, compassionate, ethical, reflective leadership. The kind of leadership that happens locally every day. With no fanfare and scant resource.

Thank you colleagues for everything you and your teams do, every day, to keep young people safe. Keep picking the right battles.