



<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Policing Performance Committee</b>
<b>Date</b>	<b>16 September 2025</b>
<b>Location</b>	<b>Video Conference</b>
<b>Title of Paper</b>	<b>Violence Affecting Children &amp; Young People</b>
<b>Presented By</b>	<b>ACC Mark Sutherland, Local Policing West</b>
<b>Recommendation to Members</b>	<b>For Discussion</b>
<b>Appendix Attached</b>	<b>No</b>

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of Police Scotland's approach to tackling violence affecting children and young people.

The full update will be presented to the Scottish Police Authority at the Policing Performance Committee on 16 September 2025.

Members are invited to discuss the contents of this paper.

## 1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1. Violence is not a singular issue but the result of a range of interconnected factors – ranging from individual behavioural traits and family dynamics to societal pressures and systematic inequalities. The long-term consequences extend beyond the victims and their families, and perpetrators, placing demand on public services including policing, health and education. Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been growing concern about the changing nature of violence impacting on children and young people. Effective prevention necessitates addressing the root causes, strengthening protective factors and building resilience. The police cannot solve this issue alone and there is a need for policing, local authorities, third sector and beyond to work together to do all we can to prevent violence and associated harms affecting children and young people.
- 1.2. Over a single weekend in May 2025, two separate incidents on Scotland's beaches drew national attention – the murder of a 16-year-old male on an Ayrshire beach and reports of significant violence on Portobello beach in Edinburgh. This followed soon after the murder of a 15-year-old boy in Glasgow in March of 2025. These tragic and troubling events, involving young people, understandably raised concerns around children and young people's safety in public spaces and the role of social media in organising large gatherings and changing behaviours
- 1.3. The incidents prompted widespread media and political coverage and discussions around safety, supervision and community responsibility. The First Minister brought together key stakeholders – including police, Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU), government ministers, educators and a cohort of young people with experiences of violence – for summits aimed at exploring the issues and enhancing the coordinated and collaborative approach to reducing the impact of violence on children and young people.

## 2 GOVERNANCE AND ASSURANCE

- 2.1. ACC Mark Sutherland, Local Policing West, is the Forces strategic lead for violence, anti-social behaviour and stop and search. ACC Sutherland is supported by a dedicated team within Policing Together who provide strategic coordination, policy development and support. ACC Sutherland chairs a strategic oversight group with a tactical delivery group chaired by Supt Joanne McEwan from Policing Together. Where appropriate, papers and key decisions are routed through the Operational Policing Management Board under

DCC Connors. ACC Sutherland also chairs a dedicated violence affecting children and young people sub-group which has a dedicated operation name, Operation Stardrop.

- 2.2. Both groups combine the support of Policing Together and Local Policing Divisions along with key partners from the SVRU, British Transport Police and the Scottish Institute for Policing Research.
- 2.3. Addressing this systemic issue is delivered at a local level through a collaborative approach, with effective Community Planning Partnerships underpinned by strong partnerships, effective local policing and local scrutiny at divisional level.

### 3 VIOLENCE TRENDS

- 3.1. Over the last two decades, Scotland has experienced a significant reduction in violence, with recognition of the impact made through Scotland's 'public health approach' to violence reduction. Scotland remains a safe place to live, work and visit and violent crime is at historically low levels with homicides at record low levels and attempted murders and serious assaults also at low levels compared to recent years. However, there remain concerns about some aspects of violent crime committed by young people and often committed against other young people. More recently violence in and around education settings has become a focus with some areas of violence and associated offences increasing.
- 3.2. When discussing this topic, we should be clear that the vast majority of children and young people will not and have no intention of involving themselves in violence. We should also be assured that the number of serious violent incidents remains low. When looking at recorded crime we see that levels of violence has largely remained the same over the last 6 years and has actually decreased over the last 12 months. We have however been monitoring some notable changes in behaviour such as a rise in instances of violence in educational settings. The average age of offenders has also reduced slightly, and we have also observed that, whilst still very much the minority, more young females are becoming involved in violence.
- 3.3. The reporting period for Q1 2025/26, has seen an overall decrease in the level of violence involving children and young people compared to last year<sup>1</sup>. There were **1,914** violent crimes where an

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<sup>1</sup> Figures are taken from Police Scotland's recorded crime data as it was in July 2025. This data is subject to change, particularly as the means of identifying crimes for which children have been accused comes from the

accused was a child identified during the quarter, compared to **2,301** last year. The proportion of violent crime (where an accused is identified) that involved a child was **17.5%** compared to **19.5%** for the same period last year.

- 3.4. There has also been a decrease in children identified as an accused for weapons offences during this quarter, with **436** offences recorded compared to **475** last year. The majority (**57.3%**) related to the use of weapon during another crime while the rest were for possession. **52** weapons offences during this period occurred in schools compared to **43** for last year. These were mostly in secondary schools although **11** crimes took place in primary schools.
- 3.5. The majority of violence involving children occurs in city/town centres and commercial premises, although there is also a considerable volume linked to care and educational settings. While most violence by children is targeted at other children - care workers, teachers, emergency workers and retail staff are also subjected to it. Despite encouraging year-to-date reductions in weapons offences and overall violent crime there has been an increase in attempted murders perpetrated by under 18s in the first quarter of this year.
- 3.6. Serious assaults for which a child has been an accused have decreased **40.9%** in the first quarter of this year. There were **55** serious assaults recorded during Q1 involving a child under the age of 18 compared to **93** in the same period last year. The **55** crimes this year involved **57** accused under 18, while last year the **93** crimes involved **149** accused. The proportion of serious assaults (where an accused is identified) involving under 18s was **17.7%** this year compared to **19.5%** last year. The proportion of total offenders that were under 18 was **19.3%** (down from **22.1%**) last year.
- 3.7. Attempted murders where a child has been accused have increased to **17** in this year, in comparison to **5** in the same period last year. These seventeen crimes involved **20** children and accounted for almost a quarter (**23.6%**) of all attempted murders where an accused has been identified. This proportion last year was **7.2%**.

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successful detection of recorded crimes. As a result, figures may increase when crimes originally recorded during the quarter one period are detected and accused data identified later.

## 4 PREVENTION & INTERVENTION ACTIVITIES

- 4.1. Police will and should have a role in enforcement and upholding the law to keep people safe. Our key focus however must be on prevention, working with partners and young people to reduce the drivers for offending, re-offending and victimisation.
- 4.2. Prevention and intervention work is undertaken by all local policing divisions across Police Scotland with support from specialist and business support functions such as our crime and performance analysts and intelligence reporting. Policing Together's Children & Young People Team and the SVRU have built strong relationships with partners and education across Scotland. Local Policing Divisions supported by this national approach work collaboratively to identify emerging trends and produce materials and initiatives that can be utilised at a local and national level.
- 4.3. The SVRU also work on standalone initiatives in key locations across Scotland, working with communities and delivering campaigns to prevent violence in young people. One such example is 'Quit Fighting for Likes' which highlights the risks of sharing violent content through social media.
- 4.4. Police Scotland has developed the National Violence Prevention Strategy for Police Scotland 2025/26; the four key priority areas are:
  - Violence and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) at transport hubs
  - Violence at educational and care settings
  - Carriage of weapons
  - Preventative pathways and interventions
- 4.5. As part of the wider initiative, Police Scotland's Violence Prevention Licensing and Coordination Unit (VPLCU) are developing a National Toolkit to support local policing divisions and partners to provide effective prevention and intervention relevant to incidents involving weapons in schools. The VPLCU have engaged with partners in education and an Advisory Group has been established to strengthen the collaborative approach, focussing on safeguarding children and the wider education community as well as continually improving prevention and intervention activities.
- 4.6. The dedicated subgroup, Operation Stardrop, drives and coordinates efforts to address violence affecting young people, with a targeted focus on the four key themes as highlighted. The group operates with clearly defined activities and measurable outcomes



aimed at developing, capturing and disseminating best practice and learning across the pursue, prevent, prepare and protect strands – both within the organisation and in partnership with external stakeholders. Each one of the 13 policing divisions works from a tailored analytical product, specifically designed to inform decision-making, prioritise resources and shape interventions in line with their Youth Violence Tactical plans. This alignment ensures that operational activity is intelligence-led, locally relevant and strategically coordinated, enabling divisions to address the root causes of violence affecting young people while responding swiftly to emerging threats.

- 4.7. There are of course many examples of effective prevention and partnerships across the country at both a local and national level with work undertaken by all divisions across Police Scotland.

**G Division** – One Glasgow Initiative is a multi-agency program aimed at diverting children and young people from crime, violence or who are at risk of offending. It is a police-led initiative working across the partnership spectrum and uses a whole systems approach.

**U Division** – Established a Divisional Youth Violence Governance Group which provides dedicated patrols, weekly taskings from Local Area Commanders and utilises intelligence and proactive Engagement with Elected Members.

**E Division** – Edinburgh also have the VOW project, who have mentors to be able to work with children and young people. The Sidestep project in Edinburgh, which is lottery funded in conjunction with PS and Edinburgh Council can identify children and young people on the cusp of SOC and help to divert them to more positive pathways.

- 4.8. Police Scotland also has a strong focus on community and youth engagement. It is important that we do not over-police or criminalise our young people and promote positive relationships. Our community policing approach in this regard is underpinned by our Youth Engagement Officers, previously known as Campus Officers. These officers who are usually a collaboration between education and policing are located within schools up and down the country. While having a policing purpose, they play an important role as part of the wider education team to engage with and educate young people on a range of safety matters, including violence. Officers support national campaigns such as 'No Knives Better Lives' while building positive and lasting relationships.

- 4.9. Our community focussed violence prevention model sees Police Scotland working hand-in-hand with the Scottish Violence Reduction unit and Medics Against Violence, through initiatives such as school engagement officer development days, the Quit Fighting for Likes campaign, hospital-based Navigator outreach and local multi-agency schemes including Do the Right Thing and Supporting Opportunities for Life programmes to build trust and promote safe, resilient communities and deter violence at its roots.
- 4.10. The approach to violence and the connected challenge of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), involving children and young people, is not a matter for policing alone and the intersection between policing and a range of partners and services is critical to a holistic approach. ASB crime involving children and young people has seen a reduction of **circa 5%** in 2025/26 YTD compared to the previous year.
- 4.11. We know that ASB tends to be dominated by adults rather than young people. However, when children and young people do engage in ASB this tends to be in the open space and involving threatening and abusive behaviour. This ensures that it holds a somewhat disproportionate space in terms of awareness and consequently in public discourse and concern. Locally available services for children and young people also features as an area of challenge. In the recent report on anti-social behaviour from the ASB Independent Working Group, commissioned by Scottish Government, the authors highlight inconsistent investment in youth services, many of which have closed and failed to re-emerge since the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, they articulate the need for a stronger funding model for youth services to sustain safe spaces and developmental outreach.<sup>2</sup>

## 5 LOOKING AHEAD

- 5.1. Police Scotland has collaborated with Fearless (youth section of Crimestoppers) on a number of children and young people focused safety campaigns. For example, ahead of bonfire season and to support the police response under Operation Moonbeam, VPLCU in partnership with Fearless and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will present at a webinar for school engagement staff on the dangers of fireworks and the legislation which was introduced to combat this. In addition, further workshops have been arranged for young people in Edinburgh to educate them on these issues and to

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<sup>2</sup> Anti-social Behaviour – Whose responsibility? Towards a more effective response to anti-social behaviour in Scotland.

highlight the impact disorder has had on organisations such as Edinburgh Zoo and Lothian buses.

- 5.2. Understanding the changing nature of violence and ASB affecting children and young people is critical to shaping and improving our approach to prevention. Police Scotland has been supported by the Preventions Hub at Edinburgh Futures Institute and ongoing engagement with a range of partners including Academic colleagues to consider available research and work towards systematic, evidence-based synthesis of findings across multiple studies. This is intended to enrich our understanding of violence affecting young people and ground our activity in evidence, theory and critical reflection – showing not just what is being done but why it matters and how we can improve outcomes for all.
- 5.3. An academic workshop hosted by the Edinburgh Futures Institute on 27 August, brought together academics, researchers and police, to examine young people in conflict with the law and wider societal and community challenges. Led by Professor Susan McVie, Clair Thomson, Police Scotland's Collaboration Manager and ACC Sutherland, the group also included dedicated youth engagement professionals to ensure the lived experience and voices of young people were heard to inform the outcomes. The group explored areas such as the pandemic, social media, vulnerability, the changing culture of gangs, existing supporting research and where the gaps remain will drive an evidence review and future research proposals.
- 5.4. Clear aims were set to guide future research and shape a collaborative response. These include ensuring academic research informs future priorities, translating research into practice and strengthening collaborative networks. Further, a commitment to reviewing the role and effectiveness of school engagement officers, building a coalition of voices to advocate for impactful initiatives and addressing gaps in social media engagement by identifying what strategies resonate most effectively.
- 5.5. Violence in Scotland remains at historically low levels and year to date data reflects a continued stable or improving picture overall. This reflects the long-standing commitment from policing and partners in Scotland to prioritise a public health approach with a commitment to understanding the root causes of violence to support sustainable harm reduction. We recognise that some aspects of violence amongst children and young people, particularly in care and educational settings remain an area of concern.



- 5.6. This is reflected in our national strategic approach which sets out clear areas of priority and supports a partnership approach at both a national and local level. Divisional Commanders and local officers know their communities and continue to work tirelessly with local people and partners to deliver tailored intervention and prevention so that children and young people in Scotland can feel safe, supported and involved as we continue to focus on this important and complex area of public safety.

## **6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1. There are no financial implications in this report.

## **7 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1. There are no personnel implications in this report.

## **8 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1. There are no legal implications in this report.

## **9 REPUTATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1. Whilst it remains the case that most young people do not engage in violence, the impact of violence, and particularly those incidents that are serious in nature and involve the tragic loss of life, cannot be overstated. Police Scotland plays a vital role in addressing violence affecting children and young people and it is essential that is done fairly and proportionately with a focus on safeguarding children and young people from harm. Reducing the harms associated with violence relies on early and effective interventions to address the root causes. That is not a matter for policing alone. A targeted and balanced approach, in collaboration with a wide range of partners, ensures public confidence in conjunction with our key partner agencies.

## **10 SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1. There are no social implications in this report.

## **11 COMMUNITY IMPACT**

- 11.1. Our policing approach shapes how safe and supported young people and the wider community feel. Responding to violence in a fair and proportionate way helps maintain trust whilst punitive or blanket

measures risk alienating young people and damaging community relationships. Balancing appropriate enforcement with engagement, support and prevention is critical to maintaining resilient communities and trusted relationships between policing and young people.

## **12 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

12.1. There are no equality implications in this report.

## **13 ENVIRONMENT IMPLICATIONS**

13.1. There are no environmental implications in this report.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Members are invited to discuss the contents of this paper.