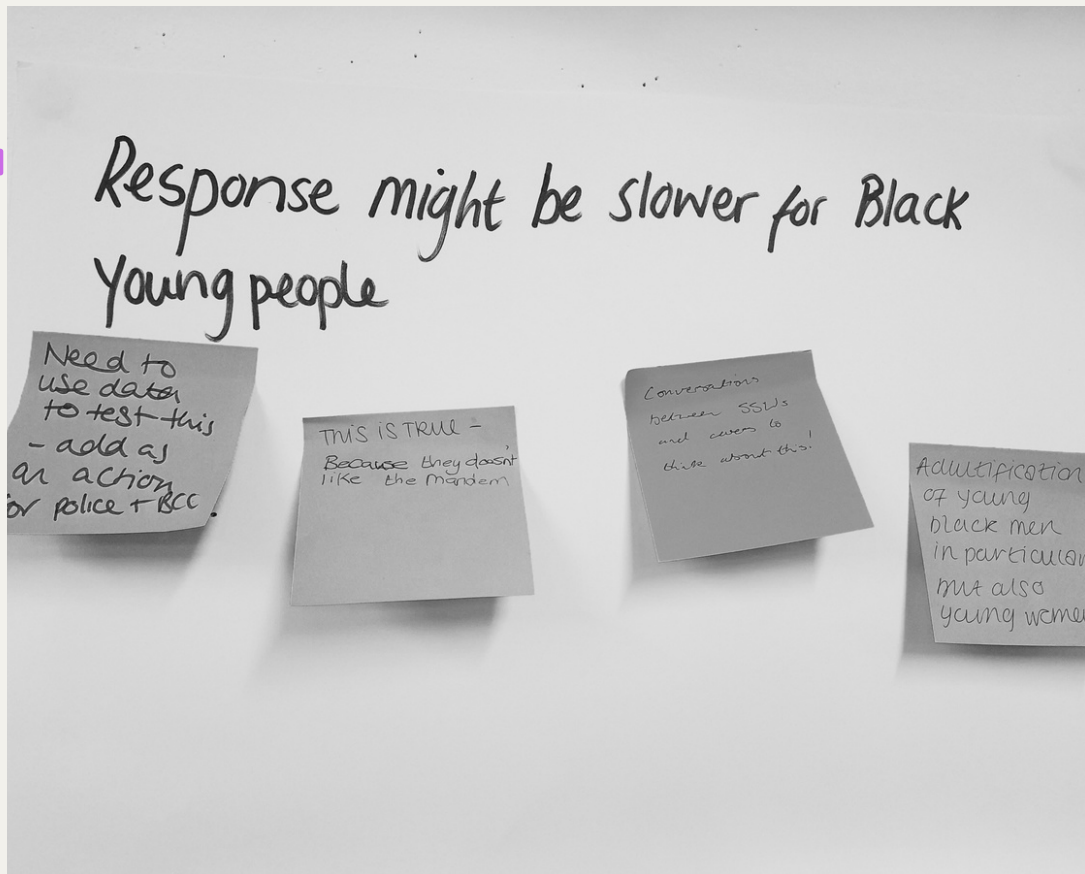


The Next Chapter



Building Safety: Understanding inequalities in young people's experiences of extra-familial harm and protection



Reflecting on our learning from the Contextual Safeguarding programme to date, and the learning from the Building Safety project specifically, this mini-briefing lays out how and when protection responses to extra-familial harm look different for different groups of young people – and includes suggestions from young people, carers, community organisations, and statutory professionals about how to design fairness and safety into protection responses.

The briefing also explains how learning from Building Safety has been used to update the Contextual Safeguarding domains, with a specific focus on safety and fairness in protection responses to extra-familial harm.

This project is part of the Contextual Safeguarding programme's 'The Next Chapter' project. The Contextual Safeguarding research programme is based at Durham University. For more information about the research and to find resources from this project please visit: www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk

Inequalities, Extra-familial Harm and Protection

The Contextual Safeguarding framework has been piloted in nine local authorities in England and Wales between 2019 and 2022 as part of the National Scale Up project. National research projects have developed the evidence-based for the framework in relation to: harmful sexual behaviour in schools; the use of out of area placements to safeguard adolescents from extra-familial harm; the role of the voluntary and community sector in safeguarding young people from extra-familial harm; and, the international application of the framework with refugee and ‘street connected’ young people. These studies revealed multiple opportunities for Contextual Safeguarding to support a child welfare response to adolescents who experience significant forms of harm outside of their families and family homes - they have also surfaced some challenges to implementing the framework, including multiple inequalities in young people’s experiences of extra-familial harm and protection. These have included:

- Education providers admitting they have overlooked the needs of Eastern European children and their families, resulting in a lack of protective support in relation to community-based harm.
- Observations by professionals that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are experiencing violence and exploitation and are housed in areas where there are no youth services and where there are high levels of community tensions.
- Disproportionate representations of Black boys in county lines safeguarding and police cohorts, with limited evidence that they are safeguarded through this profiling.
- The commissioning of ‘gangs’ services for Black boys and young men that do not match what professionals understand their needs to be.
- White British young people being described as ‘our indigenous young people’ (compared to immigrant young people) by multi-agency partners.
- Observations by professionals and young people that child welfare/protection responses are slower for Black young people.
- Observations by professionals that young Black people experience discrimination from social care, policing and education.
- Indicative evidence that Black young people are over-represented in cohorts of young people that have been ‘relocated’ in response to extra-familial harm.
- Observations by professionals that issues related to poverty, including overcrowded housing or loss of tenancy, are linked to family breakdown and young people being ‘missing’ or harmed outside the home.

- Reports by girls and young women that they experience significant harmful sexual behaviour in schools and that protection frequently involves them being asked to change their behaviour.
- Reports by young people that they are discriminated against or harassed in the community based on their appearance (i.e., wearing a hijab) and that there are limited protections in place in relation to this.
- Observations by professionals in the voluntary and community sector that young people feel unsafe because of interactions with the police, social workers, and immigration enforcement.
- The profiling of working-class communities as being prone to violence, as criminal and as a 'drain on resource'.
- Professionals noting that a lack of resource and deeply held biases by multi-agency partners results in young people with disabilities being disbelieved or being criminalised when they experience harm beyond their families.

Building Safety Case Study: Inequalities in the Missing Response

Building Safety was a collaborative project between young people, carers, community organisations, and professionals who worked together over 6 months to co-design safety and fairness into Bristol City Council's missing response for young people in care who are at risk beyond their families. Almost a quarter of young people reported missing in Bristol in 2022 were young people in care, despite making up only 0.6% of young people in the area. Boys in care who were recorded as Black, Asian, Mixed-Race and Arab were reported missing more regularly than their peers. This reflects national figures that tell us that young people in care, and Black young people, are over-represented in missing reports.

When young people are missing from care it can increase their exposure to harm and their interactions with police and other statutory agencies. Young people in care and Black young people already have far more interactions with the police and the criminal legal system than their peers - increasing their risk of criminalisation. Building Safety asked: does the current statutory and police-led missing response contribute to safety or risk in young people's lives? This is what we learnt.

Young people in care are removed from informal support networks

...reducing guardianship and increasing escalation to statutory and police process. Including more trusted (non-professional people) in safety planning; keeping young people in familiar areas; providing more support for carers with risk assessment; and fostering mutual support between carers could help. Professionals need to show more interest in young people, their lives and experiences.

Young people in care are subject to double standard

...experiencing low levels of care alongside high levels of statutory restrictions (e.g., semi or fully independent placements whilst subject to strict curfews). Specialist training for carers, mutual support networks for carers, and reflective spaces with supervising social workers could support a more nuanced response. Care settings should provide care, alongside choice and appropriate independence.

“If it was a Black girl, they'd take their time probably by ten minutes or something to - it's just. It's like a favouritism, in a way.”

(Consortium Member, Building Safety)

Welfare responses are slower for Black young people (especially boys)

Boys in care recorded as Black, Asian, Mixed-Race and Arab were reported missing from care placements at a higher rate than their white peers, but the type of response they received was thought to be different - responding to perceived risks and not need. This was linked to adultification of Black boys and young men in particular, but also Black girls and young women, and to 'favouritism' and 'racism'. Disparities need to be tracked and further conversations had between agencies and communities to explore discrimination in services.

Police treat you differently depending on your background

If the police know that young people are from an area that is viewed negatively, they will treat them negatively. This was due to assumptions about young people's involvement in criminal activity due to the neighbourhoods they have grown up in. This can impact how the police interact with young people in the streets, including when they have been reported missing. The availability of non-police guardianship; young people being collected by people they know; and welfare-informed and trauma informed training, were suggested as an antidote to this.

Building safety and fairness into the missing response: prompts for local and national leaders

The Building Safety project produced a full set of practice principles and recommendations to support local areas to build safety and fairness into their missing response for young people in care who are at risk beyond their families. They are published in the report *Building Safety: Co-designing safety and fairness into the missing response for young people in care who are at risk beyond their families* (Wroe, 2024). This report is available at contextualsafeguarding.org.uk. In addition:

Oversight

Are young people in care more likely to be reported missing? How is this informed by 'race', gender and age? Black young people, particularly boys, are more likely to be viewed as at risk, but less likely to be treated as vulnerable. Local areas should have oversight of disparities in responses.

Responses

Is the missing response proportional to the risk? Does it build safety around young people or control their behaviour through statutory processes - increasing their interactions with the police and other agencies and isolating them/increasing their risk of criminalisation?

Investment

Do you invest in communities, and in the community-based and youth work organisations that young people and their communities trust. This increases guardianship around young people, mitigating the need for unnecessary escalation to the police and statutory services.

Building Safety and Fairness into the Contextual Safeguarding Domains

Building Safety explored the role that statutory services can have in building safety or creating risk associated to extra-familial harm. Learning from Building Safety has been used to update the Contextual Safeguarding domains, with a focus on building safety and fairness into protection responses to extra-familial harm.

Domain one: Target

When targeting the social conditions of harm:

- It is important to look for safety (and how to enhance it) as well as for risk/harm.
- Over-intervention and unhelpful services can be a source of harm in extra-familial contexts.
- Assessing and building safety in extra-familial contexts also means including and enhancing the provision of, and access to, universal services and organic support networks.
- It is important to consider non-professional relationships in safety building.

Domain two: Legislative framework

A child welfare response must also:

- Be proportional - over and under-involvement of services and carers can contribute to harm.
- Create the conditions in which young people can live safely, don't use statutory frameworks to control their behaviour. Avoid risk-averse environments that can lead to avoidable 'non-compliance' issues, causing more problems for young people via placement breakdowns/breaching of YOT orders etc.
- Evidence parity in how thresholds are applied in relation to perceived vulnerability and risk, and gender, 'race', care status and background.

Domain three: Partnerships

Include partners who have reach into extra-familial contexts and importantly:

- Are people and organisations that young people, families and communities trust.
- Include family members, friends and other non-professionals.
- Are resourced to be consistent, available and practically helpful.
- Are not considered harmful and unhelpful by young people.
- Collaborate with young people to create plans that are coherent, wanted and helpful.
- Are rooted in love, care and respect for young people.

Domain four: Outcomes

Contextual outcomes should be measured in relation to the extent to which they:

- Build safety around young people through their chosen and trusted networks of people and places.
- Increase care around young people.
- Reduce unnecessary over-professionalisation of young people's lives.
- Increase universal provision that is accessible, flexible, available out of hours and trusted by young people.
- Achieve safety for all young people and do not discriminate on the basis of care status, gender, 'race', and perceived background.