

# 68<sup>TH</sup> COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

## YOUTH ROUNDTABLE RESEACH BRIEFING

By Marshall Tisdale



## Introduction

The landscape of modern challenges facing young people is increasingly complex and interconnected. While the digital age has democratized access to information and created new avenues for connection and civic participation, it has also amplified traditional harms and introduced novel threats.<sup>1</sup> Issues once considered distinct, such as youth gang violence and cyber-bullying, are now deeply intertwined, with both driven by similar underlying vulnerabilities and intensified by the pervasive reach of technology. This report synthesizes an extensive body of research to provide a comprehensive analysis of these dual crises within Commonwealth nations. It aims to serve as a foundational document for a strategic round table, moving beyond problem definition to identify shared causal mechanisms and highlight evidence-based, forward-looking interventions. The ultimate objective is to provide a framework for empowering young people to not only navigate these challenges but to genuinely thrive.

## Defining the Contours of Modern Threats

To address these challenges effectively, a clear and consistent understanding of the terminology is essential. Youth violence is broadly defined as a range of acts, including physical fighting, sexual and physical assault, and gang-related violence, occurring among individuals aged 10-29 outside the home.<sup>2</sup> The consequences are severe and long-lasting, resulting in deaths, injuries, and a profound, often lifelong, impact on a person's psychological and social functioning.<sup>2</sup>

Youth gang violence represents a specific and organized form of youth violence. It frequently involves threats, intimidation, drug and weapon use, and other criminal activities that can infiltrate school and community environments.<sup>3</sup> Gang membership is often driven by a quest for a sense of belonging, protection, and a surrogate family.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, cyber-bullying constitutes unwanted and aggressive behavior delivered through digital technologies.<sup>6</sup> This can take many forms, including the spread of lies, the posting of embarrassing photos or videos, the sending of hurtful messages, and impersonation through fake accounts.<sup>7</sup> While often viewed as a standalone issue, cyber-bullying frequently overlaps with and can supplement traditional, face-to-face bullying.<sup>8</sup>

## Section 1: The Intersecting Crises: A Commonwealth Perspective

### The Human Toll: Beyond the Physical Injuries

The ripple effects of youth violence and cyber-bullying extend far beyond the immediate physical injuries. Victims and perpetrators alike face profound psychological, emotional, and social consequences that can persist for a lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Young people who have experienced violence or bullying often report significant social isolation, shame, and anxiety, leading to a loss of self-esteem and concentration difficulties.<sup>7</sup> In severe cases, these experiences are linked to a higher prevalence of mental health disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance use disorders, and can even lead to self-harm and suicide.<sup>7</sup>

For youth involved in gangs, the psychological toll is equally devastating. Research indicates that gang members are more likely to be both offenders and victims of violent crime.<sup>14</sup> They frequently report feeling "stuck" in a cycle of crime and violence, with a perceived lack of safety and a sense of moral conflict and guilt over their actions, particularly when violence is directed at innocent people.<sup>12</sup> Chronic exposure to violence, whether as a victim or a witness, can lead to a dangerous psychological desensitization, where aggression and physical retaliation are viewed as an acceptable and even necessary means of problem-solving.<sup>12</sup> This normalization of violence perpetuates a self-reinforcing cycle of aggression and deviance, where past victimization becomes a significant risk factor for future perpetration.<sup>12</sup>

### A Statistical Snapshot: Commonwealth Trends and Case Studies

This section provides a comparative analysis of youth violence and cyber-bullying data across key Commonwealth nations, highlighting both the long-term trends and recent fluctuations. A comparison of these statistics reveals that while some long-term trends are positive, there is a distinct difference between public perception and data-driven reality, often fueled by media coverage of short-term increases in certain crime categories.

Country	Youth Violence Trends & Statistics	Cyber-Bullying Prevalence & Statistics
<b>Australia</b>	<p>Unique alleged youth offenders (aged 10-24) show a long-term decline.<sup>15</sup></p> <p>Recent data from 2021-2022 shows short-term increases in youth crime rates: 24% increase in Victoria (under 17), 7% increase in NSW (10-17).<sup>16</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most common offenses: theft, break-and-enter, and crimes against the person.<sup>15</sup></li> </ul>	<p>Estimated prevalence of being cyber-bullied in a 12-month period is around 20% of children aged 8-17.<sup>8</sup></p> <p>Rates increase with age, from 4.9% in Year 4 to 7.9% in Year 9.<sup>17</sup></p> <p>52% of children who experienced online bullying did not describe it as "bullying," and 26% did not report it.<sup>9</sup></p>
<b>Canada</b>	<p>National youth crime rate is trending downward, with a -4.2% change in 2024.<sup>18</sup></p> <p>Homicides linked or suspected to be linked to organized crime or a street gang constituted 19.39% of all homicides in 2024.<sup>19</sup></p> <p>Youth crime rates vary significantly by province, from a low of 2,162 per 100,000 in British Columbia to a high of 7,536 in the Northwest Territories.<sup>18</sup></p>	<p>30% to 31% of young Canadians report being cyber-bullied.<sup>20</sup></p> <p>17% of internet users aged 15-29 were victims of cyber-stalking or cyber-bullying in a five-year period.<sup>21</sup></p> <p>65% of youth say they would tell a friend over a parent if they were being cyber-bullied.<sup>21</sup></p> <p>Girls are more likely to be victims than boys.<sup>21</sup></p>
<b>Jamaica</b>	<p>Over three-quarters of youth (77%) aged 13-24 have experienced violence in their lifetime.<sup>22</sup></p> <p>One-third of youth felt close to someone who had been murdered.<sup>22</sup></p> <p>1 in 10 females and nearly 2 in 5 males aged 13-24 have carried a weapon in their lifetime.<sup>22</sup></p>	<p>Peer emotional violence is pervasive, with peers being the most common perpetrators.<sup>22</sup></p>

<b>United Kingdom</b>	<p>The UK's Serious Violence Strategy acknowledges the problem of violence, particularly county lines and knife crime.<sup>23</sup></p> <p>In 2022, 51 of those killed by knives were between 13 and 19 years old, a significant increase from the previous year.<sup>24</sup></p> <p>In 2023, 11,110 children were deemed at risk due to gang involvement by social services.<sup>24</sup></p>	<p>19% of children aged 10-15 experienced at least one form of online bullying.<sup>9</sup></p> <p>26% of those who experienced online bullying did not report it to anyone.<sup>9</sup></p> <p>1% of UK teenagers were victims of online bullying alone, indicating it is most often used to supplement face-to-face bullying.<sup>9</sup></p>
<b>India</b>	<p>It is estimated that every second child in India is exposed to sexual abuse and violence.<sup>25</sup></p> <p>The National Crimes Records Bureau reports that a child is sexually abused every 15 minutes.<sup>25</sup></p> <p>The prevalence of child sexual abuse was reported at 53% in a major 2007 government-sponsored survey.<sup>26</sup></p>	<p>Microsoft ranked India third in cyberbullying, with 53% of young people reporting having been victims.<sup>27</sup></p> <p>Other studies show a prevalence rate ranging from 3.3% to 60.56% among adolescents.<sup>28</sup></p> <p>In a McAfee report, 85% of Indian children were victims of cyberbullying, the highest rate among surveyed countries.<sup>28</sup></p>
<b>South Africa</b>	<p>From July to September 2024, more than 3 children were murdered daily, according to police crime statistics.<sup>31</sup></p> <p>Between October and December 2023, 285 children were murdered, and 2,707 survived attempted murder, assault, or grievous bodily harm.<sup>31</sup></p>	<p>The overall prevalence of some form of cyberbullying was found to be 56.7% in one study.<sup>32</sup></p> <p>Studies show a prevalence rate of cyber-victimization between 15.2% and 46.7% among adolescents.<sup>32</sup></p> <p>More female participants were involved in cyberbullying behaviors than males.<sup>32</sup></p>

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distinct difference between public perception and data-driven reality, often fueled by media coverage of short-term increases in certain crime categories.

A critical examination of the data reveals a significant difference between public sentiment and long-term statistical trends, particularly in countries like Australia and Canada. While Australian data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows a steady decline in the number of unique alleged youth offenders over the past decade, public surveys indicate that nearly half of respondents believe youth crime is at a "crisis point".<sup>16</sup> This divergence is understandable when considering that media reports often focus on short-term increases in specific, high-profile crime categories, such as the 24% increase in the rate of incidents committed by youth offenders under 17 in Victoria from 2021-2022.<sup>16</sup> This focus on recent, negative trends, rather than the broader, more favorable long-term trajectory, can lead to a sense of panic that shapes policy decisions in reactive, rather than strategic, ways.

Additionally, the statistics on cyber-bullying likely represent a significant undercount of the true scope of the problem. A striking finding from the UK is that over half of children who experienced online harmful behaviors would not describe them as "bullying," and over a quarter did not report the incidents at all.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that a significant number of young people are internalizing these negative experiences without seeking help. Compounding this issue is the finding that as children age, they are less likely to report online bullying to their parents and more likely to seek anonymous or online support.<sup>8</sup> This lack of reporting and formal labeling indicates that a large segment of the affected youth population is falling through the cracks of existing support systems. To address this, it is necessary to move beyond simply encouraging young people to report incidents and instead focus on creating an environment where they feel empowered to seek support, regardless of how they define their experience.

## Section 2: Deconstructing the Root Causes

### A. The Interconnected Drivers of Youth Vulnerability

Youth violence and cyber-bullying are not isolated phenomena; they are complex behaviors stemming from a confluence of individual, relational, and societal factors. A comparison of the research on gang violence and bullying reveals a striking overlap in their underlying drivers. For instance, low self-esteem, a history of trauma, and underlying mental health conditions like ADHD are significant risk factors for both gang membership and bullying.<sup>4</sup> This commonality underscores the inefficiency of a fragmented policy response and highlights the need for integrated, holistic interventions that address these shared vulnerabilities.

The following table categorizes the key risk factors that contribute to both youth violence and online harm.

Category	Risk Factors Associated with Gang Violence	Risk Factors Associated with Cyber-Bullying
<b>Individual &amp; Psychological</b>	<p>Low intelligence, low educational achievement, and school failure.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Attention deficit, hyperactivity, and conduct disorders.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Low self-esteem and a sense of hopelessness.<sup>4</sup></p> <p>Substance abuse and risky sexual behaviors.<sup>4</sup></p>	<p>Underlying mental health issues.<sup>7</sup></p> <p>Low self-esteem and feelings of shame and anxiety.<sup>7</sup></p> <p>A history of being a bully-victim, increasing the likelihood of perpetration.<sup>8</sup></p> <p>Difficulty resisting peer pressure.<sup>33</sup></p>
<b>Family &amp; Relational</b>	<p>Poor parental supervision and monitoring.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Harsh, lax, or inconsistent discipline.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Parental substance abuse, criminality, or depression.<sup>2</sup></p>	<p>Authoritarian or permissive parenting styles.<sup>36</sup></p> <p>Inter-parental conflict.<sup>36</sup></p> <p>Poor quality parent-child relationships.<sup>37</sup></p>

	<p>Dysfunctional or abusive family environments, including neglect and violence.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>A lack of positive adult role models.<sup>5</sup></p>	<p>Lack of positive family communication.<sup>9</sup></p>
<b>Peer-Group</b>	<p>Associating with delinquent peers and/or gang membership.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Desire for group rewards such as status, identity, self-esteem, and protection.<sup>4</sup></p> <p>Peer pressure to commit crimes or carry weapons.<sup>4</sup></p> <p>High commitment to delinquent peers.<sup>35</sup></p>	<p>Experiencing peer rejection.<sup>35</sup></p> <p>Lack of positive peer relationships and support.<sup>38</sup></p>
<b>Community &amp; Socio-economic</b>	<p>Poverty, high income inequality, and unemployment.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Social disorganization, high residential mobility, and crime-prone neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>Access to and misuse of alcohol and firearms.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Lack of community support for schools or recreational facilities.<sup>5</sup></p>	<p>Affluent families are more likely to report being victims of online bullying.<sup>9</sup></p> <p>The digital environment can facilitate the recruitment of vulnerable youth.<sup>24</sup></p> <p>Lack of community and safe online spaces for marginalized groups.<sup>38</sup></p>

## B. The Digital Supercharger: How Technology Amplifies Harm

Technology, particularly social media platforms, acts as a powerful new vector for existing harms and a key catalyst for real-world violence. The research shows that social media is no longer a passive medium for conflict; its design and content actively contribute to the escalation of violence.<sup>39</sup> For instance, online arguments and posts can quickly escalate into in-person violence,



with nearly two-thirds of young perpetrators stating that social media played a role in their behavior.<sup>39</sup>

The pervasive nature of this online violence has tangible psychological and behavioral consequences. A survey of teenagers in England and Wales found that 70% had seen real-world violence online in the past year, with common content including footage of fights and images of weapons.<sup>39</sup> This exposure amplifies fear, as 80% of children who see weapons online feel less safe in their local communities, and alarmingly, 39% admit that it makes them more likely to carry a weapon themselves.<sup>39</sup>

The influence of technology extends beyond mere exposure and into the realm of gang recruitment. Gangs are increasingly using social media to target and enlist vulnerable youth, using deceptive ploys in the search for friendship and acceptance.<sup>24</sup> This shift means that joining a gang is no longer solely about physical proximity but is now facilitated by online access, broadening the pool of potential recruits and making the process less visible to traditional gatekeepers like parents and teachers.<sup>24</sup> This analysis highlights that addressing modern challenges requires moving beyond simple content moderation and confronting the structural design choices of technology companies that actively contribute to the proliferation and escalation of harm.

## Section 3: Case Studies in Action: Commonwealth Approaches to Intervention

The Commonwealth is home to a range of innovative and evidence-based programs that address youth violence and cyber-bullying. The following case studies illustrate different intervention models and their reported outcomes, providing a blueprint for effective action.

Program/Strategy	Country	Model	Target Audience	Key Outcomes
<b>Redthread Youth Violence</b>	UK	Public Health/Earl	Young people (15-30)	51% less likely to re-attend EDs; £4.90 return for every £1

<b>Intervention Programme (YVIP)</b>		y Intervention	presenting at emergency departments with injuries from violence	spent; fills a crucial gap in NHS support. <sup>41</sup>
<b>Toronto's Community Healing Project &amp; Neighbourhood Officer Program</b>	Canada	Peer-to-Peer/Community-Based	Vulnerable youth at risk of gang involvement in priority neighborhoods	Trains "Peer Healers" to guide peers; provides life skills training and builds trust with police; aims to address root causes of gang involvement. <sup>42</sup>
<b>Leadership Engagement Gang Intervention Team (LEGIT)</b>	Canada	One-on-One Outreach	Youth (18-30) involved in or at risk of gang involvement	Meets youth where they are to provide immediate needs assistance, counseling, and mentorship; focuses on crisis intervention and prevention. <sup>43</sup>
<b>Friendly Schools and Families Program</b>	Australia	Universal/Whole-School	Primary school students and the entire school community	Effective in reducing bullying victimization; increases likelihood of students telling an adult about bullying; cost-effective. <sup>34</sup>
<b>UK Addressing Bullying in Schools Act &amp;</b>	UK	Policy & Support Services	All students; victims and perpetrators of bullying	Provides a legal definition of bullying; mandates incident recording; supports peer mentoring (Diana

<b>Third-Sector Initiatives</b>				Award) and helplines (NSPCC) to promote a positive school culture. <sup>22</sup>
<b>Project REASON (Cure Violence)</b>	Trinidad and Tobago	Public Health	At-risk youth in urban communities with high violence	Aims to interrupt the cycle of violence through street outreach, education, and community mobilization. <sup>47</sup>
<b>Caribbean Youth Advocacy and Action Agenda</b>	Caribbean (Multi-country)	Youth-led/Policy-focused	Youth, youth organizations, and government officials	Serves as a model for youth-adult collaboration to create youth-centered violence prevention strategies. <sup>48</sup>
<b>"Line Up, Live Up"</b>	South Africa & Uganda	Sport-based life skills	Youth at risk of crime and gang involvement	Promotes youth resilience, empowerment, and participation by providing positive alternatives to violence. <sup>49</sup>
<b>"Bully no more" campaign</b>	India	Whole-School/Advocacy	Students, teachers, parents, and school community	Integrates human rights education into school life to foster a culture of dignity, respect, and inclusion. <sup>50</sup>
<b>Anti-Bullying Committees</b>	India	Policy/School-based	Students, teachers,	Mandated by national policy to establish

			parents, and school community in CBSE-affiliated schools	clear anti-bullying guidelines, complaint mechanisms, and support for victims. <sup>51</sup>
<b>"Bell Bajao!" (Ring the Bell)</b>	India	Mass Media/Community Outreach	General public, men and boys in particular	Increased public awareness of domestic violence and changed attitudes towards it; used a mix of media and face-to-face education. <sup>52</sup>

## A. Community and Law Enforcement Partnerships

The UK's "Serious Violence Strategy" represents a significant shift from a purely criminal justice response to a more balanced approach that emphasizes early intervention and prevention.<sup>23</sup> This strategy is underpinned by a multi-agency model involving government departments, police, and voluntary organizations.<sup>23</sup> A leading example is the Redthread Youth Violence Intervention Programme (YVIP), which embeds youth workers directly in hospital emergency departments.<sup>41</sup> This model leverages a "teachable moment" to engage with young people who have been victims of assault, offering them therapeutic support, case management, and a pathway to positive alternatives to violence.<sup>41</sup> A compelling aspect of this approach is its economic efficiency; evaluations show that the program generates an economic and social benefit of £4.90 for every £1 spent, a powerful argument for a public health approach to violence prevention.<sup>41</sup> This data demonstrates that investing in social and therapeutic programs is a fiscally sound strategy for reducing long-term costs associated with the criminal justice and healthcare systems.

In Canada, the "National Crime Prevention Strategy" similarly focuses on proactive, community-based interventions.<sup>42</sup> One notable initiative in Toronto is the "Community Healing Project," which addresses the root causes of youth gang involvement by training young people as "Peer Healers".<sup>42</sup> This model recognizes the powerful influence of peer relationships and leverages it for positive change, increasing resilience and guiding vulnerable youth away from harmful activities. Another

successful program, the "Leadership Engagement Gang Intervention Team (LEGIT)," adopts a one-on-one outreach approach, meeting at-risk youth "where they are" to provide tailored support for a range of issues, from addiction to homelessness.<sup>43</sup>

In the Caribbean, a key example is Project REASON (Resolve Enmity, Articulate Solutions, Organise Neighbourhoods) in Trinidad and Tobago. This program, an adaptation of the US-based "Cure Violence" model, uses a public health approach to prevent violence, including that associated with gangs and firearms, in high-needs urban communities.<sup>47</sup> Its core components include street outreach to at-risk youth, community mobilization, and collaboration with law enforcement to interrupt the cycle of violence and change community norms around violent behavior.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the USAID-funded Community, Family and Youth Resilience Program (CFYR) and the youth-led Caribbean Youth Advocacy and Action Agenda have adopted a positive youth development approach to strengthen community support systems and improve life skills to help young people resist violence.<sup>48</sup>

In Africa, the "Line Up, Live Up" initiative, a UNODC-led program, demonstrates the power of sport to prevent youth crime and violence.<sup>49</sup> In countries like South Africa and Uganda, the program uses sport-based life skills training to build resilience and empower young people, providing them with safe public spaces and positive alternatives to criminal activities.<sup>49</sup> This model recognizes the importance of youth engagement as a core component of crime prevention, where community outreach and mentoring initiatives aim to provide positive alternatives and steer them away from criminal activities.<sup>54</sup>

In India, the "Bell Bajao!" (Ring the Bell) campaign, while focused on domestic violence, is another powerful example of a mass media and community mobilization strategy that used video and direct engagement to raise awareness and change attitudes around a key risk factor for youth safety.<sup>52</sup> The campaign was highly effective in expanding the public's understanding of domestic violence beyond physical abuse to include emotional and economic harms.<sup>52</sup>

## **B. School-Based and Whole-System Programs**

In Australia, the "Friendly Schools and Families Program" exemplifies a universal, whole-school approach to bullying prevention. This program aims to create a cohesive and supportive community by involving the entire school system—students, teachers, and parents—through a

variety of strategies.<sup>34</sup> The research demonstrates that this model is effective in reducing the experience of being bullied and increases the likelihood that students will tell an adult if they are victimized.<sup>36</sup> The program has also been shown to be a cost-effective intervention.<sup>36</sup> However, the research also reveals a key limitation: while it reduces victimization, it does not significantly change bullying perpetration rates and can, in some cases, make victims more visible to their peers, potentially harming their self-esteem.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient and must be supplemented with targeted, indicated interventions for the most vulnerable children and families.

The UK has implemented a multi-layered approach to anti-bullying efforts. The "Addressing Bullying in Schools Act" in Northern Ireland provides a formal framework by establishing a common definition of bullying and mandating that schools record all incidents.<sup>44</sup> This provides a foundation for consistent, accountable responses. Additionally, a robust third sector complements these governmental efforts. Organizations like the NSPCC offer support services, helplines, and educational materials for children and parents<sup>46</sup>, while initiatives like "The Diana Award: Anti-Bullying Ambassadors programme" empower young people to become peer mentors, taking responsibility for changing the attitudes and behaviors of their peers.<sup>45</sup>

India's approach to youth safety is equally multi-pronged, with a focus on both government policy and civil society campaigns. While India does not have a dedicated anti-bullying law, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has mandated that all affiliated schools form Anti-Bullying Committees.<sup>51</sup> These committees, which include teachers, parents, and students, are tasked with establishing clear policies, complaint mechanisms, and support for victims, promoting a culture of open communication and inclusivity.<sup>50</sup> Beyond schools, campaigns like "Bully no more" by Amnesty International India work to integrate human rights education into daily school life, challenging the social acceptance of bullying as a "rite of passage".<sup>50</sup>

## C. The UK's Online Safety Act: A New Regulatory Framework

The UK's Online Safety Act (OSA), which received Royal Assent in October 2023, represents a significant shift in regulating online content. The Act imposes a new legal "duty of care" on online services to protect UK users, especially children, from harmful content.<sup>55</sup> Services that fail to comply with these duties can face substantial financial penalties, with fines reaching up to £18 million or 10% of their global annual turnover, whichever is greater.<sup>55</sup>



The legislation adopts a risk-based and tiered approach.<sup>57</sup> This means services that are likely to be accessed by children or where harmful content is prevalent face stricter requirements.<sup>57</sup> The Act mandates "highly effective" age assurance methods for platforms with content harmful to children, such as pornography.<sup>59</sup> These methods may include requiring users to upload government-issued ID or taking a selfie for age verification.<sup>60</sup> The law also explicitly states that pornographic content must not be visible to users until an age check is completed.<sup>58</sup>

The Act grants the UK's communications regulator, Ofcom, new powers to enforce these duties.<sup>56</sup> Ofcom can require service providers to use their "best endeavours" to develop or source technology to tackle child sexual abuse material (CSAM), even in private communications.<sup>59</sup> Platforms are also legally required to scan for known child sexual abuse imagery.<sup>58</sup> However, some critics have raised concerns about the Act, arguing that its requirements threaten the right to privacy and freedom of speech, particularly the provision to scan end-to-end encrypted messaging, which they say is not technically feasible without undermining user privacy.<sup>55</sup>

## **Section 4: Emerging Threats and Opportunities: The Future of Youth Safety**

### **A. The Unseen Harms of Artificial Intelligence**

The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) tools introduces a new and alarming class of threats to youth safety. These harms are often more subtle and insidious than traditional online risks. AI chatbots and companions, marketed as emotional support tools, have been found to provide dangerous and inaccurate advice on a range of sensitive topics, including self-harm, suicide planning, and eating disorders.<sup>61</sup> The Jed Foundation's analysis of a major AI chatbot revealed that over half of its responses to prompts about self-harm and suicide returned dangerous content.<sup>62</sup> This is particularly concerning because youth who are feeling lonely and isolated may turn to these systems for support, only to receive harmful suggestions that exacerbate their distress.

Moreover, generative AI tools are making it easier for predators to create hyper-realistic, deepfake imagery and "grooming language," compounding the risks of online sexual exploitation.<sup>38</sup> This new reality presents a challenge of "supercharged scope, scale, and speed," as a single AI model can

provide dangerous advice to millions of users in real-time, a level of reach that is unprecedented.<sup>64</sup> This highlights the inadequacy of traditional, reactive policy frameworks and necessitates a new regulatory paradigm that is anticipatory, prioritizing "safety by design"<sup>38</sup> and holding developers accountable for the inherent risks of their technologies before harms can manifest.

## **B. Digital Citizenship and Literacy as the New Frontier**

In a world where technology is constantly evolving, digital literacy is no longer a luxury but a fundamental necessity for youth to participate safely and effectively in modern society.<sup>1</sup> It serves as a powerful protective factor, empowering young people to think critically, navigate online platforms responsibly, and build resilience against online harms.<sup>38</sup>

Digital literacy is also crucial for bridging the digital divide, ensuring that young people from marginalized communities have the skills to compete in the future economy. Without this knowledge, they risk being relegated to "passive consumers of AI rather than active creators and innovators".<sup>65</sup> This highlights that initiatives to close the digital divide must go beyond providing hardware access and prioritize comprehensive education on critical thinking, media literacy, and digital responsibility. Encouraging open and non-judgmental conversations with parents about media use and providing youth with the tools to pause, think, and report upsetting content are critical components of this new frontier in youth empowerment.<sup>38</sup>

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## Section 5: Recommendations for a Thriving Future

Based on the analysis of modern challenges and successful interventions across the Commonwealth, the following recommendations provide a strategic framework for action.

### A. Forge Holistic and Integrated Policy Frameworks

A fragmented approach that treats youth violence and cyber-bullying as distinct problems is both inefficient and ineffective. An integrated policy framework is essential. This requires:

1. **Adopting a Public Health Paradigm:** Policymakers should champion a public health approach that links public health, education, and criminal justice systems.<sup>23</sup> This model prioritizes prevention and early intervention to address the shared, underlying vulnerabilities that drive both violence and online harms.
2. **Investing in Multi-Agency Interventions:** Financial investment should be directed toward evidence-based programs that operate across multiple sectors. This includes interventions that embed therapeutic support in hospitals, as seen in the UK's Redthread program, and community-based initiatives that facilitate positive peer relationships and offer life skills training, as demonstrated by Canada's Toronto projects.<sup>41</sup>

**Mandating Integrated Data-Sharing:** Governments and community partners must work collaboratively to establish clear and secure data-sharing protocols. This will allow for the real-time identification of at-risk youth and facilitate the seamless coordination of support services, ensuring that no one falls through the cracks.<sup>24</sup>

## B. Strengthen Core Protective Factors

While policy is critical, a robust strategy must also focus on strengthening the protective factors at the individual, family, and community levels. This involves:

1. **Championing Family-Centered Programs:** Early intervention should begin in the home. Initiatives that provide parent training, home visiting, and family therapy can build a child's resilience from the earliest age, addressing key risk factors such as inconsistent discipline and family dysfunction.<sup>34</sup>
2. **Implementing Tiered Anti-Bullying Strategies:** Schools should adopt a tiered approach that includes universal, whole-school programs to create a positive environment for all students.<sup>34</sup> This should be supplemented with selective and indicated interventions that provide targeted support for those who are most vulnerable or who are already engaged in harmful behaviors, ensuring that no child is left behind.<sup>34</sup>
3. **Promoting Community Engagement:** Community-based programs that offer positive alternatives to gang life, such as sports-based and mentorship initiatives, should be expanded.<sup>66</sup> These programs not only provide opportunities for pro-social activities but also build trust between youth and adults, a critical component of healthy development.<sup>66</sup>

## C. Empower Young People as Agents of Change

The most sustainable solutions are those that empower young people to become the architects of their own safety and success. This necessitates:

1. **Elevating Youth Voices in Policy Design:** Young people must be central to the development of policies that affect them. Creating sustainable platforms, such as the Commonwealth Youth Council, ensures that the perspectives of youth are not only heard but are structurally integrated into strategic planning and decision-making.<sup>67</sup>
2. **Building Comprehensive Digital Literacy Curricula:** Education must go beyond basic technical skills. It should include critical thinking, media literacy, and emotional self-regulation to equip young people with the tools to navigate a complex online world. This will help them to critically evaluate online content, separate real from edited information, and respond to online harm effectively.<sup>1</sup>

3. **Scaling Peer-Led Initiatives:** The power of positive peer relationships is a potent force for change. Initiatives like Canada's "Peer Healers" that train and empower young people to guide their peers should be championed. These models leverage the trust and influence of peer networks to build resilience and foster a culture of support, providing a powerful counter-narrative to the allure of gang life and online harms.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion:

The challenges of youth safety in the modern Commonwealth—from the physical threats of gang violence to the insidious psychological harms of cyber-bullying—are not isolated issues. They are deeply interconnected, driven by a common set of social, psychological, and economic vulnerabilities that are now amplified by the pervasive reach of technology.<sup>35</sup> This report has underscored the devastating toll these challenges take on the lives of young people, affecting their mental health, educational attainment, and long-term prospects.<sup>2</sup>

However, the research also provides a clear and compelling path forward. Case studies from across the Commonwealth demonstrate that effective, forward-looking interventions are possible. A fragmented, reactive approach is no longer sufficient; instead, a new paradigm is required—one that is holistic, integrated, and, most importantly, centered on the empowerment of young people themselves. This approach recognizes that the most sustainable solutions come from addressing the root causes of harm and strengthening the protective factors at every level of a young person's life, from the home and school to the broader community and digital world.<sup>34</sup>

By championing public health models, investing in multi-agency partnerships, and prioritizing digital literacy, we can move beyond merely mitigating harm to actively fostering environments where young people are not only safe but are also free to thrive. The Commonwealth, with its shared values and interconnectedness, is uniquely positioned to lead this effort. It is a call to action to not only protect our youth from the challenges of today but to equip them with the resilience, knowledge, and support they need to build a better future for all.

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