

Investigating the link between social media and youth violence

A suggested research framework



**THE
LAB**

ENDING
YOUTH
VIOLENCE



**THE
BEHAVIOURAL
INSIGHTS
TEAM**

Background and introduction



The Ending Youth Violence Lab

- **Mission** - To catalyse a step change in understanding and tackling youth violence.
- **Organisation** - Incubated at the Behavioural Insights Team. Funded by philanthropist Stuart Roden and the Youth Endowment Fund.
- **Activities** - 1. Identify promising projects which seek to address youth violence. 2. Fund the development and delivery of those projects. 3. Conduct research to assess how delivery has gone, ways to make it even better, and the potential for further evaluation.
- **Priorities** - The Lab focuses on the *earlier stages of generating evidence*. Our primary focus is funding, developing, feasibility testing and pilot testing interventions designed to support young people at risk of getting caught up in violence. We support interventions to the point they are ready for a full-scale randomised control trial. The Lab also has a focus on *innovation* - working in areas where there is not yet much evidence, developing new ideas, and developing new approaches that address unmet needs and fill gaps.



Research framework

- **The approach** - This deck is an initial attempt at identifying some of the most pressing questions relating to social media and youth violence. We outline 6 issue areas (explanations of how social media may influence violence) and 4 stages of research to investigate each.
- **The aim** - In the short-term, we want to start a cross-disciplinary discussion between those interested in building our understanding of these issues and how we might better support young people. In the longer-term, a research agenda that will increase our understanding of this issue, generate effective solutions, be implemented in policy, and reduce youth violence.
- **The Lab's role** - Given that these issues are relatively recently emerging, the limitations of the existing evidence-base, and the Lab's focus on the earlier stages of developing evidence and on innovation, the Lab is well placed to play a role in this. In the short-term this will involve facilitating conversations between research groups, and may involve conducting literature reviews to get on top of the issue and shape further work. In the longer-term, we want to develop and evaluate solutions. Given our organisational priorities, we are unlikely to be able to fund work outside of this.

We want to see the development and implementation of a research agenda that will **increase our understanding of this issue, generate effective solutions, be implemented in policy, and reduce youth violence.**

Background and introduction

Social media and youth violence

- **Context** - Use of social media is widespread. As of 2022, research suggests more than six in ten young people between 3 and 17 used social media (63%); for older age-groups social media use is almost universal (97%)¹.
- **Link to violence** - Some studies suggest that there is a link between social media and youth violence. Its role is frequently highlighted in the media in reporting around violent incidents, and social media is often cited as a potential explanation for why certain types of crime are increasing.
- **What we know** - High-quality evidence on this issue is essential. Without it, there is a risk that we're not paying enough attention to a critical issue and missing important opportunities to intervene effectively and reduce youth violence and crime. Alternatively, there is a risk that a focus on social media is a red herring, and we should focus our efforts elsewhere. However, the research in this area is in its early stages and is ongoing, with conflicting findings and a lack of consensus about the nature of any potential issues and ways to address them.

¹Ofcom (2022). [Children and parents: media use and attitudes report](#).

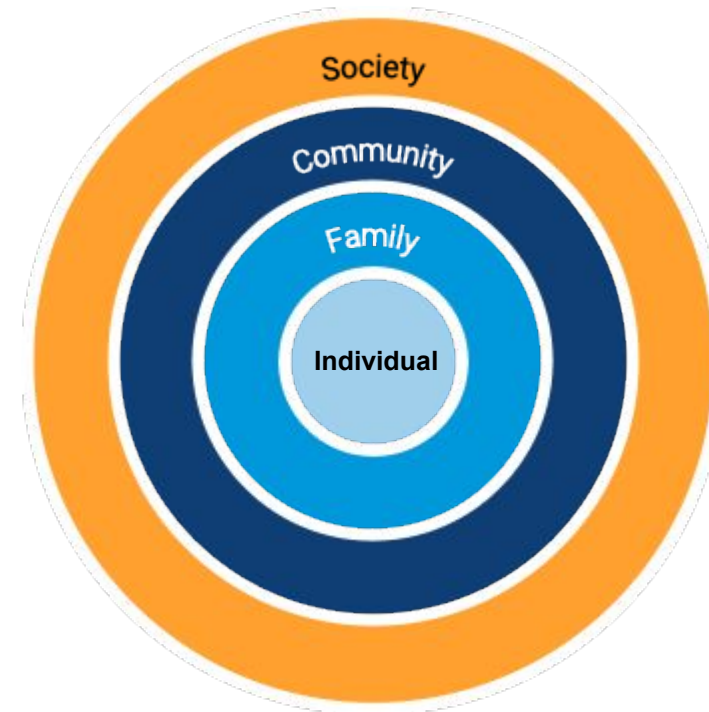


Social media and levels of intervention

Youth violence is the result of multiple complex factors, interacting at different levels - from the individual to society.

The Lab's initial projects focus on manualised interventions that target the individual or family levels. However, as our strategy makes clear, over time we want to expand our work and test the effectiveness of approaches that act at different levels.

The mechanisms for addressing the issues highlighted in this research framework cover a wide territory, from those that would operate at an individual level (i.e. supporting young people more resistant to the potentially pernicious impacts of social media) to those that would need technological change, new policies or regulation.



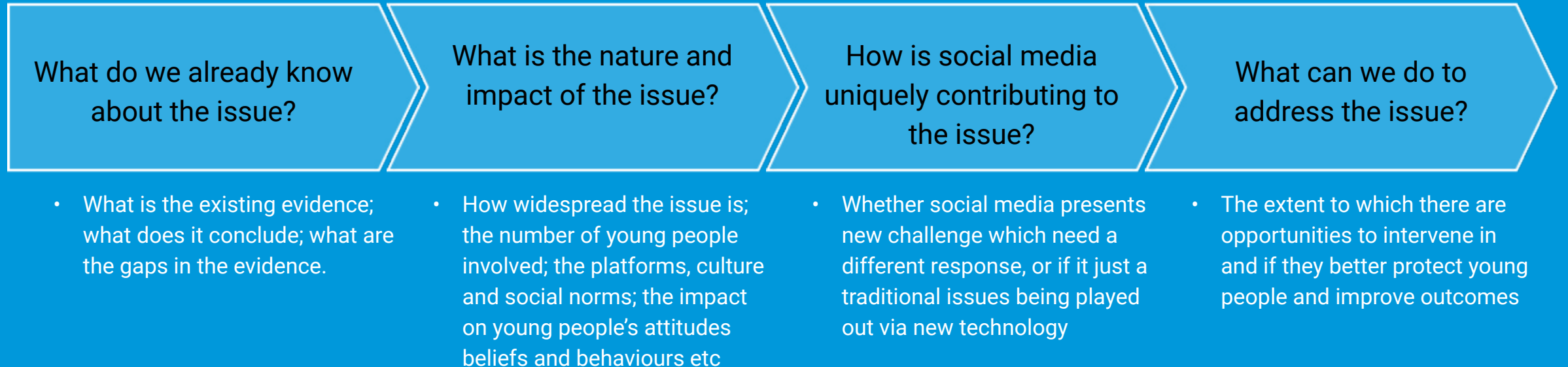
Our research framework proposes investigating issues and designing solutions at the level of the **individual, family, community and society.**

Potential issues to investigate



We propose a package of research activity around each of these explanations for how social media may have an **influence on youth violence** (both positive, and negative). There may be others worth exploring and these will be refined and added to.

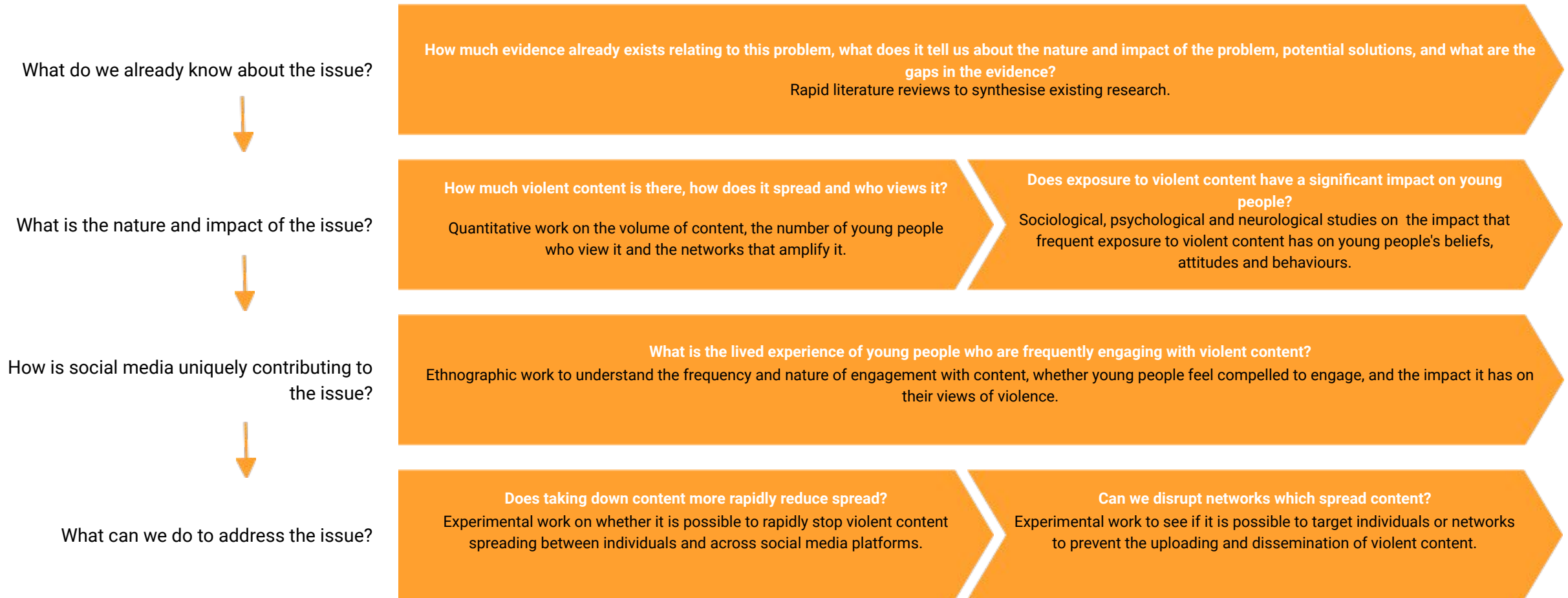
Approach to investigating issues



For each **issue**, we propose a package of research activity involving four **research stages**. We start with taking stock of existing evidence, and then proposing primary research where required to build the evidence-base. The following slides break this down against each issue.

Issue 1 - Social media spreading violent content which may lead to violence.

Exploring the volume and spread of violent content, the level and nature of young people's exposure, the impact it has on their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours and if there are opportunities to intervene to limit the spread or impact of this content.



Issue 2 - Social media facilitating and escalating hostility and conflict which may lead to violence.

Exploring the extent to which social media genuinely generates or escalates conflict, and if there is sufficient 'signal' in online content to identify real world conflict before it occurs and intervene to prevent it.



Issue 3 - Social media and technology making it easier to identify, target and locate individuals which may enable and lead to violence.

Exploring whether technologies such as GPS data on apps and live streaming make it easier to commit acts of violence, and if there are simple steps which can be taken to effectively address this.

What do we already know about the issue?



How much evidence already exists relating to this problem, what does it tell us about the nature and impact of the problem, potential solutions, and what are the gaps in the evidence?
Rapid literature reviews to synthesise existing research.

What is the nature and impact of the issue?



What are the apps or features of apps that may facilitate violence, and how often have these been implicated in violence?
Desk work and qualitative work with young people to understand the extent of the problem plus case studies to understand how often these features have been used implicated in violence.

How is social media uniquely contributing to the issue?



Does social media features such as live data streaming and GPS tracking produce unique threats to young people which require new approaches to education or intervention?

What can we do to address the issue?

Can social media companies take steps such as disabling GPS tracking to better protect young people from be targeted?
Experimental work to test whether disabling features of encouraging others to helps improve safety/reduce violence.

Issue 4 - Social media increasing vulnerability to violence directly, by facilitating recruitment of young people into violent lifestyles.

Exploring the extent to which social media is used to target and recruit young people, and whether we can identify young people who are genuinely at risk of committing violence or being groomed into violence through the content they are engaging with, and if there are opportunities to intervene to offer support.



Issue 5 - Social media increasing vulnerability to violence indirectly, by worsening risk/protective factors

Exploring if social media plays a role in negatively affecting marginalised young people's subjective wellbeing by undermining their sense of mattering to others and being consequential in the world, and developing and testing approaches to addressing any issues identified.

What do we already know about the issue?



How much evidence already exists relating to this problem, what does it tell us about the nature and impact of the problem, potential solutions, and what are the gaps in the evidence?
Rapid literature reviews to synthesise existing research.

What is the nature and impact of the issue?



Does prolonged use social media have a pernicious impact on young people's sense of influence and mattering?

Deep qualitative work to understand the nature of content vulnerable young people are engaging with and if prolonged exposure to certain content can undermine sense of mattering.

What is the volume of highly targeted advertising content that young people who are exposed to online?

Quantitative work to understand volume of advertising young people are exposed to on social media, how it is targeted and the impact it has.

How is social media uniquely contributing to the issue?



Does exposure to social media content engender different biopsychological responses in young people when compared to other forms of media and advertising?

Sociological, psychological and neurological studies on the impact that social media advertising has on young people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors about material goods and their place in the world.

What can we do to address the issue?

Are there ways to protect or 'inoculate' young people against the psychological harms?

Experimental work to test approaches which seek to equip young people to less engaged with and more resistant to the most harmful forms of online content.

Issue 6 - Social media supporting young people to avoid violence through providing alternative sources of entertainment and affirmation.

Exploring the extent to which social media can be a positive influence on vulnerable young people's lives, by - for example - providing alternative sources of entertainment, and alternative means to meet peers, and to pursue status and respect, in a safe environment

What do we already know about the issue?



How much evidence already exists relating to this problem, what does it tell us about the nature and impact of the problem, potential solutions, and what are the gaps in the evidence?
Rapid literature reviews to synthesise existing research.

What is the nature and impact of the issue?



What are the positive ways in which young people use social media to mitigate violence?
Qualitative work on the ways in which young people use social media and their views on how un can be a positive influence on their lives and the lives of their peers.

How is social media uniquely contributing to the issue?



In what ways can social media can complement real world interaction or provide opportunities and experiences not available to young people in the offline world?
Deeper work on the value and meaning social media has to the the lives of young people and how it supports their conception of themselves, others and society.

What can we do to address the issue?

Are there changes which can be made to the way social media platforms operate so they provide greater levels of support to young people at risk of violence?

Can young people at risk of violence be supported to use social media in a positive and nurturing way which will help reduce vulnerability?

Next Steps

We want to work with other organisations to advance this research agenda. We think some key next steps are:



Refine the framework

Workshops, roundtables and discussions with a wider range of experts to further develop the framework.



Initial literature reviews

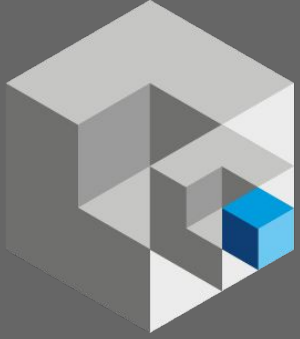
For each issue area, conducting an initial set of rapid literature reviews to establish how much evidence already exists, what it tells us about the nature and impact of the issue, potential solutions, and where there are gaps in the evidence we could usefully fill with primary research



Building partnerships and seeking funding

Coordinate partnerships and funding to implement the research framework.

We want to hear from and engage with others working on this issue. Please get in touch at: eyv.lab@bi.team



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