

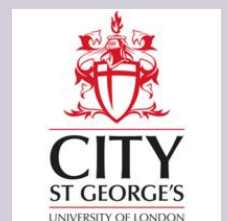
EVALUATION REPORT

SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme

Feasibility study report

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October 2024



About the Youth Endowment Fund

The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) is a charity with a mission that matters. We exist to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in violence. We do this by finding out what works and building a movement to put this knowledge into practice.

Children and young people at risk of becoming involved in violence deserve services that give them the best chance of a positive future. To make sure that happens, we'll fund promising projects and then use the very best evaluation to find out what works. Just as we benefit from robust trials in medicine, young people deserve support grounded in the evidence. We'll build that knowledge through our various grant rounds and funding activities.

And just as important is understanding children's and young people's lives. Through our Youth Advisory Board and national network of peer researchers, we'll ensure they influence our work and that we understand and are addressing their needs. But none of this will make a difference if all we do is produce reports that stay on a shelf.

Together, we need to look at the evidence and agree on what works, then build a movement to make sure that young people get the very best support possible. Our strategy sets out how we'll do it. At its heart, it says that we will fund good work, find what works and work for change. You can read it [here](#).

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About the evaluator

The evaluation team consists of academic researchers from several university institutions, including University College London, City St George's, University of London, and Middlesex University. We have a strong track record of conducting timely, rigorous and novel research to provide an understanding of inequalities in health. Our research is wide ranging across a number of public health concerns, particularly family health and wellbeing, child development, the development and evaluation of community-based interventions, and health inequalities and social justice. The project was jointly led by Dr Anita Mehay and Professor Richard Watt, with expert support from Aile Trumm and Dr Tim Weaver. You can contact the co-lead: anita.mehay@city.ac.uk

The project

SFSC:Safer Lives is an adapted parenting programme that aims to reduce children's involvement in violence. Adapted for this project from the more established Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC) programme and delivered by the Race Equality Foundation (REF), the SFSC:Safer Lives programme provides a six-day training programme to facilitators who then deliver weekly group sessions to 6-10 parents and carers. Sessions last 3 hours each and are delivered over 13 weeks. Sessions focus on providing parents/carers with strategies to enhance relationships, manage behaviour, understand children's development stages, meet children's needs, and support parents and carers to understand their own ethnic culture and family context. Sessions also feature content focused on the drivers of children's involvement in violence. The original SFSC programme is universal and provides parenting training to all parents of children aged 18 years or under, particularly for ethnically diverse populations. SFSC:Safer Lives is targeted, and delivers to the parents and carers of children aged 11-18, who are in contact with Youth Offending Teams (YOTs). In this project, two SFSC:Safer Lives programmes were delivered; one in Lambeth and Southwark, and one in Hackney.

YEF funded a feasibility study of the parenting programme. This aimed to establish the optimal design (including methodology and measures) for a potential future impact evaluation of SFSC:Safer Lives. Specifically, it explored the feasibility of SFSC:Safer Lives, analysed which aspects of the original SFSC may require refinement, developed and tested a recruitment and retention process, evaluated the feasibility of measuring behaviour and offending, examined overall reach, uptake, retention and acceptability of SFSC:Safer Lives, and produced a logic model for the programme. The evaluation used a range of qualitative methods including focus groups with seven parents and carers and interviews with all three facilitators. The evaluation also analysed process data and children were asked to complete a questionnaire featuring potential outcome measures (including the International Self-Report Delinquency (ISRD-3) measure, and the Self-report Early Delinquency (SRED) instrument). The evaluator employed a rapid-cycle testing design, meeting regularly with the delivery team at the REF to share data, and adapt the intervention. 12 parents and carers took part in the programme at this feasibility stage, and the study ran from August 2023 to June 2024.

Key conclusions

During this project, the REF adapted the original SFSC programme to include content explicitly focused on the drivers of violence involving young people. Facilitators received an additional day of training on this content (in addition to 5-days SFSC training).

Twelve parents were recruited to SFSC:Safer Lives and two programmes were delivered (each to six parents/carers). This met the minimum acceptable target for reach (although the desired initial target was higher at 16-20). Challenges to recruitment included fewer referrals from YOTs, and a short recruitment timeframe.

Parents/carers attended an average of 7.5 sessions out of a possible 13 (54%) and out of a target of nine. Of the 12 parents who started SFSC:Safer Lives, seven attended eight or more sessions. Reasons for non-attendance often related to challenges in parents'/carers' lives, such as shift work and working multiple roles. The non-attendance of parents may have impacted how quickly the groups were able to form bonds.

Facilitators reflected that parents/carers in both groups had complex needs. The immediate and acute challenges parents/carers are facing may pose challenges to completing the delivery of the curriculum. Parents/carers and facilitators perceived that the programme increased parents/carers' knowledge of their children's lives, and allowed them to feel supported and gain confidence in their parenting practices. They also perceived initial, early improvements in parent/carer-child relationships.

There were some initial data collection challenges when collecting baseline self-report data from young people. These included a lack of time between recruitment and delivery and limited access to mobile phones for some young people. Once engaged, the young people did complete most of the questionnaires; however, some of them questioned the acceptability of the self-report offending measures. Future research would need to assess the acceptability and appropriateness of other outcome measures relating to offending.

Interpretation

12 parents were recruited to SFSC:Safer Lives and two programmes were delivered (each to six parents/carers). This met the minimum acceptable target for reach (although the desired initial target was higher at 16–20). Challenges to recruitment included lower-than-expected referrals from YOTs (with local YOTs referring 30 parents compared to an initially expected 40), and the short timeframe given to recruit. REF also reported that it faced challenges converting referrals to recruitment since some referrals had incomplete contact details or other referrals were out of date (as parents/carers were no longer in contact with the YOT). Only 40% of referrals were converted into recruited participants (lower than the anticipated 50%). Recruitment was facilitated by good relationships between parents/carers and YOTs, and meaningful, personalised early conversations between the SFSC:Safer Lives facilitator and parents/carers. Facilitators were part of the community and resided in the programme's target areas which also supported the building of trust and relationships.

Parents/carers attended an average of 7.5 sessions out of a possible 13 (54%) and out of a target of 9. Of the 12 parents who started SFSC:Safer Lives, seven attended eight or more sessions. Reasons for non-attendance often related to challenges in parents'/carers' lives, such as shift work and working multiple roles. Non-attendance of parents may have impacted how quickly the groups were able to form bonds. Creche facilities were provided and were important to allow parents/carers with young children to engage. One of the venues was more conducive to delivery; the size of the room and effective audiovisual resources supported group work. The other community venue was still appropriate but lacked a sufficient enough private space.

Facilitators reflected that the highly targeted groups (that only included families involved in YOTs) meant that there was a high concentration of parents/carers with complex needs. Challenges facing parents/carers included young people going missing, some young people being subject to high levels of violence, and some parents/carers themselves being the target of violence by their child. REF's observations of sessions noted that there was a risk that these immediate and acute issues presented challenges for facilitators in completing the curriculum. Facilitators noted that they would not have been able to manage larger groups with this level of need and that groups may have been more effective if they contained a greater number of parents/carers with a mix of varying levels of need. Facilitator training was described by SFSC:Safer Lives deliverers as well-structured but simultaneously demanding. Facilitators did appreciate the structured nature of the programme, in addition to the ongoing support they received after the initial training. Facilitators were also provided with one-to-one supervision meetings by REF; these were deemed to be critical given the emotional impact of the work and the need to deal with any potential safeguarding incidents.

Parents/carers and facilitators perceived that the programme increased parents/carers' knowledge about their children's lives, and allowed them to feel supported and gain confidence in parenting. They also perceived early improvements in parent/carer-child relationships, and noted that this was supported by better communication techniques. The programme was perceived to be particularly helpful in supporting parents/carers to understand the context in which their children live. Participants also appreciated how well facilitators listened to their problems and challenges, before providing practical solutions.

11 out of 12 children completed the baseline questionnaire; 8 completed the follow up. There were some initial data collection challenges when contacting and collecting baseline self-report data from young people. These included a lack of time between recruitment and delivery and limited access to mobile phones for some young people. Some young people also challenged the acceptability of some of the questions posed (with some questioning their relevance and disliking being asked direct questions about offending behaviours through short, closed questions). Parents also noted that it may be challenging to get children to accurately complete questionnaires due to their length. Once engaged, young people did complete most of the questionnaires.

YEF is currently considering whether to proceed with further evaluation of SFSC:Safer Lives. It will consider the findings of this evaluation, in conjunction with the findings of a larger, impact evaluation of the universal SFSC programme on a range of children's health outcomes (due to be published in 2025).

Introduction

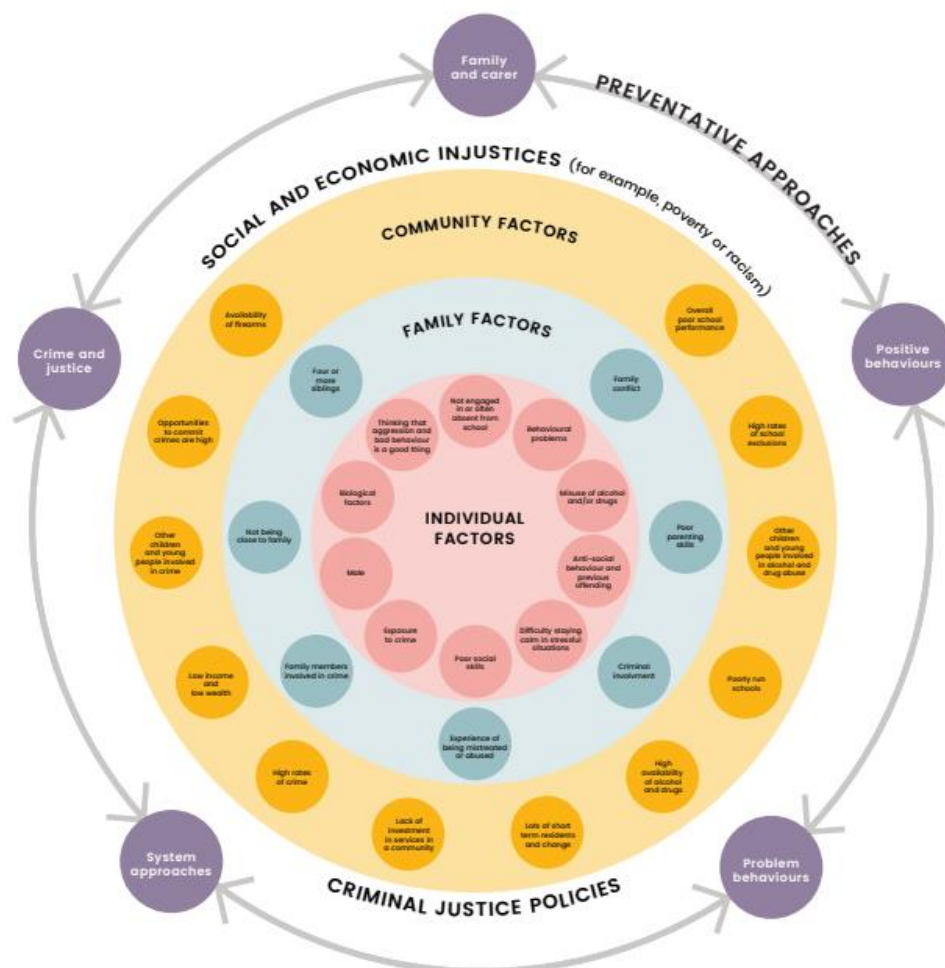
Background

Youth violence can have a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. In England and Wales, there has been a significant increase in serious violence committed by young people, which has inevitably led to a rise in the number of victims as well (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Serious violence affecting young people is higher compared with a decade ago, particularly those relating to knife crime (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). In 2022/23, 99 young people aged 16–24 were victims of homicide compared to 87 in 2012/13. In 2022/23, 467 young people were treated in hospital for knife or sharp object injuries – a 47% increase from the 318 instances in 2012/13. Recent findings from a large survey of 7,574 young people report that 16% had been a victim of violence and 44% had witnessed violence in the past 12 months – with 47% reporting being both victims and perpetrators of violence (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023).

Some young people are disproportionately affected by youth violence. Boys account for 83% of young people cautioned or convicted for violent offences, 91% of all hospital admissions for knife assaults and 87% of victims of homicide aged 16–24 (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Boys from Black backgrounds are overrepresented at all levels of the justice system, despite White young people having the most interaction with the police and justice system – with 73% of young people arrested in 2022/23 being White (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Black young people are also, on average, more likely to report being vulnerable as both victims (21%) and perpetrators (22%) compared to White young people (16% and 14%, respectively) (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023). Violence also tends to be concentrated in the most deprived areas and in large cities, including London, the West Midlands and West Yorkshire (although, when looking at the rate of violence per head, children in other areas such as Nottinghamshire, West Yorkshire and North Wales are also at greater risk). Children living in the most deprived police force areas (10% highest rates of absolute poverty) are 2.5 times more likely to be exposed to violent crime than those in the bottom 10% (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Violence is not just about boys, though, as it has a serious impact on women and girls as well. A major report from the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) states that violence against women and girls has reached 'epidemic levels' in terms of its scale, complexity and impact on victims (NPCC, 2024). The NPCC reports a 435% increase in child sexual abuse and exploitation, with more than half of these cases being committed by children (NPCC, 2024).

Violence against young people is recognised as a public health issue by various organisations, including the World Health Organization, which highlights the importance of addressing both risk and protective factors (Gardner et al., 2023). The causes and drivers of youth violence are complex, but there are several risk factors that can increase the chances of a young person becoming involved in violence (see Figure 1). These risk factors operate at the individual, family and community levels, with wider social and economic injustices relating to poverty and racism being important drivers (White et al., 2021). Family factors are important where exposure to conflict and violence at home increases the risk of young people becoming involved in crime within their communities (Local Government Association, 2018).

Figure 1: General framework for reducing a child's chances of getting involved in violence (White et al., 2021)



Parenting interventions are considered a promising evidence-based strategy for reducing the risk of violence involving young people. Parents/carers play a crucial role in their children's wellbeing, with parental mental health significantly influencing family dynamics, relationships and parenting practices. Parenting programmes seek to help parents/carers and their children to develop positive behaviours and relationships. They help parents/carers to develop a caring and responsive relationship with their child; develop awareness of their child's behaviours; respond in a positive, consistent, non-violent way; and support the child in developing social and emotional skills. These approaches to parenting can help young people to manage their emotions and support positive behaviour, which are linked to reduced involvement in youth violence. This is not to say that parents/carers and parenting are the causes of youth violence, but consistent parenting and positive family relationships can be an important protective factor, particularly for families living in areas of high crime. Other protective factors, such as positive friendships, participation in sports and hobbies and supportive social relationships, can also mitigate these risks; parents/carers can have a positive influence over all of these factors (Early Intervention Foundation, 2015).

Although there is good evidence to show that parenting programmes can boost parents'/carers' wellbeing and self-esteem and improve parent/carer-child relationships (ultimately benefiting child wellbeing), the available evidence is hampered by a lack of robust evaluations of whether these

programmes can reduce the likelihood of young people engaging in antisocial behaviours, offending and other risk-taking activities (White et al., 2021). There is also likely to be a range of implementation challenges and barriers to encouraging parents/carers to take part in parenting programmes due to perceived stigma about being a 'bad parent'. Parents/carers can find such programmes challenging or are not motivated to attend the full sessions. Fear of group settings, a dislike of being told how to parent and distrust in services can all be barriers to participation. Programmes that are not culturally appropriate may also be a barrier for Black, Asian and minoritised groups (White et al., 2021). However, current research with these families is particularly scant.

The Youth Endowment Fund is interested in conducting an impact evaluation to explore the potential of the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities parenting programme developed by the Race Equality Foundation (REF) to reduce youth offending and violence. Prior to an impact evaluation, the Youth Endowment Fund has commissioned this feasibility study to explore the optimal design and approach for any future evaluation. We will first outline the intervention.

Intervention

The intervention of focus in this study is the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme. This is a programme specifically designed to address issues of youth violence and is based on a universal programme called Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC). We will therefore first describe the universal SFSC programme, followed by a description of the development of the SFSC:Safer Lives programme (see Table 1 for a comparison of both programmes).

Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities parenting programme

SFSC is a well-established parenting programme in the UK developed by the REF, a leading third-sector organisation on race equity in the public sector led by and for Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic people. SFSC is a manualised and group-based programme focusing on supporting healthy, violence-free lifestyles and on recognising the importance of promoting ethnic and cultural roots and building community links as part of strengthening families. The REF has over 20 years' experience with the SFSC programme; and are commissioned to directly deliver programmes and train and support staff within services and community organisations to deliver the programmes directly.

The SFSC parenting programme is inclusive; it has been designed to be culturally relevant to meet the needs of a range of families with children aged up to 18 years. The programme has been delivered through health and social care agencies and community organisations and to a range of parents/carers who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream family support and parenting interventions, particularly those from Black, Asian and minoritised communities; young parents/carers; fathers; and those with learning disabilities or with experience of drugs, alcohol or violence. Inclusivity is at the programme's core; this is reflected in the parents/carers receiving the programme, the practitioners who deliver it (some who have previously attended the programme), the range of languages it is delivered in and the materials that are used (including parent manuals in 20 different community languages and formats including simplified language and pictures and large print). The programme is also relevant to a range of family set-ups, with a parent/carer or any other carer being able to engage in the programme (including grandparents, foster-carers, step-parents/carers).

The programme is delivered by two trained facilitators, with core groups of 10–12 parents/carers attending weekly three-hour sessions run over a 13-week period (usually in term time). In some population groups and settings where access is very targeted to a specific cohort, a group size of six to eight is also more likely and is acceptable. Parents can join a group up to session four, after which the group closes to any new parents and the core group is established.

The curriculum covers parental strategies to enhance relationships, manage behaviours, understand development stages and meet a child's needs through childhood and adolescence, as well as to support participants to understand and access support in their community. This takes place within a framework that helps parents/carers to understand their own ethnic, cultural, and family contexts; the roles these play; and the impact of family and community violence on outcomes for children and young people. The sessions are highly interactive, participatory and reflective, and parents/carers are expected to engage in a range of activities such as role-play and group discussions. During the programme, parents/carers are also encouraged to try out different approaches and strategies in their homes and to come to sessions to discuss and reflect. Parents/carers are each provided with a parent manual as part of their involvement in the programme, which they keep as a reference point during and after the programme. Parents/carers receive a participation certificate if they attend four to eight of the 13 sessions but are encouraged to attend nine or more of the 13 sessions, as they are then likely to receive a more 'effective dose' (as suggested by NICE clinical guideline CG158). Parents/carers who attend nine or more sessions receive a completion certificate.

Facilitator expertise and training

Each programme is delivered by two trained practitioners who have a background in youth/social care, family support, counselling or community development. Facilitators should have experience of delivering group work with individuals from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, an empathetic approach and an understanding of sustained behaviour change through group interventions. There is a strong peer and co-production element within the programme itself, where programmes can also be co-facilitated by peers who have lived experience and have previously attended the programme. All facilitators are trained by the REF through a five-day training programme delivered by experienced trainers. The facilitator training is highly interactive and participatory, modelling the approaches used in the SFSC programme. Facilitators are introduced to the overall objectives of the programme and are guided through each session. Facilitators who are successful in completing the course will then go on to deliver at least two programmes, with the sessions being observed by a quality assurance officer, before they are able to independently deliver the programme themselves. There is also a two-day refresher course for trained facilitators who have not delivered the programme for a while.

There are a range of additional ongoing professional development opportunities for trained facilitators to enhance their delivery skills in specific areas, including delivering to parents/carers with learning difficulties, delivering to parents/carers of under-fives or 10–16 year olds and managing specific challenges in group work. There are also several supplements to the core SFSC delivery designed to reach certain groups or address specific outcomes – for instance, reducing parental conflict, tackling extremism and the radicalisation of young people and working in areas affected by gangs, guns and knife crime.

The SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme

REF developed the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme, which is designed to address issues of youth violence. It is based on SFSC but has a specific supplement to the core SFSC programme that is focused on addressing youth violence. The supplement was developed using the REF's existing expertise in violence prevention work; other supplements relating to gangs, guns and knife crime; and stakeholder consultations. The supplement provides a greater emphasis on relationship-enhancing strategies, conveying how a strong parent/carer-child relationship can act as a protective factor to mitigate some of the risks children and young people living in at-risk areas may face, with specific and relevant examples. Notable amendments to its content include a focus on the drivers of youth violence at individual, family and societal levels; on child development, the teenage brain and risk-taking behaviours etc.; and on the influence of technology and social media on young people. Facilitators delivering the SFSC:Safer Lives programmes in this feasibility study were expected to be already trained in SFSC and to attend the additional one-day training on this supplement. See Table 1 for a comparison of the SFSC and SFSC:Safer Lives programmes.

Table 1: Comparison of the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities and SFSC:Safer Lives

	Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC)	SFSC:Safer Lives
Target cohort	Largely a universal programme and open to all parents. Inclusive and delivered in a range of languages to reach families who might need and benefit from it the most.	A more targeted programme specifically for families where there are significant concerns and involvement in youth violence.
Number of sessions	Thirteen weekly sessions (term time), each lasting three hours.	The same as SFSC.
Group size	Usually around 10-12 parents/carers consistently attending a programme.	Smaller groups, likely due to the highly targeted approach to a specific cohort. Groups are likely to have eight to 10 parents/carers consistently attending a programme (but this can be around six as well).
Content	Curriculum covers parental strategies to enhance relationships, manage behaviours, understand development stages and meet a child's needs through childhood and adolescence, as well as to support participants to understand and access support in their communities. Focus is on supporting parents/carers to understand their own ethnic, cultural, and family contexts; the role these play; and the impact of family and community violence on outcomes for young people.	The same as SFSC but with an additional supplement that is embedded in the programme with notable amendments in its content, including a focus on drivers of youth violence at individual, family and societal levels; on child development, the teenage brain and risk-taking behaviours etc.; and on the influence of technology and social media on young people.
Facilitators	The programme is run by two trained facilitators, usually from a range of professional services with experience of group work with individuals from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. It can also be co-facilitated by peers who have lived experience and who have attended the programme.	The same as SFSC but with a focus on facilitators working in criminal justice services and community settings concerned with community safety, school exclusions and youth services.

Training requirements	All facilitators must have attended a five-day training programme delivered by the REF and have had at least two programmes with sessions observed by a REF quality assurance officer. There is a two-day refresher course for trained facilitators who have not delivered the programme for a while.	Facilitators must be SFSC-trained already and have completed an additional one-day of advanced training on the youth violence supplement.
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Current evidence base and rationale for a feasibility study

Several uncontrolled studies have evaluated the SFSC programme and demonstrated encouraging positive outcomes for both children and parents/carers, including raised self-esteem, confidence in parenting, and improved family relationships and young people's behaviour (Karlsen, 2013; Kelly, 2017; Wilding, 2009, 2007). A national randomised controlled trial (RCT) led by a University College London (UCL) team, the TOGETHER study, has been underway since 2019 to explore the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the SFSC parenting programme on a number of health outcomes, including parent/carer-child wellbeing, parenting practices, family relationships, self-efficacy, quality of life and community engagement (Lodder et al., 2021). The TOGETHER study focuses on families with children aged three to 18 years across seven urban areas in England with ethnically and socially diverse populations; outcomes are focused on the parent/carer. The study has engaged with an ethnically and socially diverse sample of 674 parents/carers, with follow-up self-report data collected up to six months post-intervention. An embedded process evaluation will assess the fidelity and acceptability of the intervention. The study is due to be completed in September 2024; the main trial analysis is now complete and the write-up is in progress.

The TOGETHER study has demonstrated that it is feasible to run a trial of the SFSC programme and reach a large ethnically and socially diverse group of parents/carers and families. The extensive track record of SFSC delivery with an existing successfully run trial indicates that there is a good grounding to use robust methods to adapt, deliver and evaluate the SFSC programme to a different population group, with youth offending and violence as outcomes of interest. Initial TOGETHER analysis indicates that the SFSC programme is effective at six-months follow-up on the primary outcome and several of the secondary outcomes. This provides encouraging evidence regarding the likely effect of the SFSC:Safer Lives programme on other outcomes, including offending and violence. Any future evaluations examining outcomes such as youth violence would substantiate and strengthen the evidence base further.

However, there are some substantial differences between the TOGETHER study and any future impact evaluations relating to the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme and youth violence outcomes (see Table 2 for a comparison of the TOGETHER study and this feasibility study). First, although the TOGETHER study has sought to recruit parents/carers from ethnically and socially diverse areas, the SFSC programmes under evaluation are universal, with recruitment across a range of services and with no specific focus on youth justice. Therefore, recruitment for and the acceptability of a trial through youth justice services may differ. The TOGETHER study has also only sought to recruit parents/carers and collect parent-reported outcomes, whereas the Youth Endowment Fund has a keen interest in considering child-reported outcomes. It is also likely that the outcome measures themselves will be different for an impact evaluation focused on youth violence than for the TOGETHER study, which has had a public health focus

on mental wellbeing. It will be important to fully consider and explore the acceptability of measures before conducting an impact trial relating to youth violence. The TOGETHER study also includes families with a child aged three to 18 years, and the mean age of children of parents/carers recruited was around eight years old. This is substantially younger than the children would be in any future impact evaluation around youth violence. Therefore, a feasibility study is a useful phase in which to draw on learning from the TOGETHER study and to consider the design, methods and approach of another evaluation focused on youth violence.

Table 2: Comparison of the TOGETHER study and this study

	TOGETHER RCT study	SFSC:Safer Lives feasibility study
Dates	2019–2024	2023–2024
Intervention	Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC)	SFSC:Safer Lives
Design	Randomised controlled trial (RCT) with process and economic evaluations.	Feasibility study to potentially inform a future evaluation study (including an RCT).
Population	Parents with children aged three to 18 years across seven urban areas in England with ethnically and socially diverse populations. Universal access across a range of services including community organisations.	Parents with children aged 11–18 years in contact with a specific youth offending team (YOT). Referrals strictly through YOTs.
Geographic reach	National	London – Lambeth, Southwark and Hackney only
Primary outcome of interest	Parent mental wellbeing at three- and six-months post-intervention (self-report only).	Youth violence (consider use of self-report and secondary data sources).
Funders	National Institute for Health and Care Research Public Health Programme	Youth Endowment Fund

Research questions

This feasibility study has sought to address the main research question: what is the optimal design (including methodology and measures) for a future impact evaluation focused on youth violence reduction?

To answer this question, our research objectives are to:

1. Engage with key stakeholders to identify key population groups, contexts and aspects of SFSC for adapting and refining.
2. Develop and test recruitment and retention processes to target those key population groups and contexts of interest.
3. Work closely with the REF as a delivery partner to set up and iterate two SFSC:Safer Lives programmes for two different groups and contexts.
4. Test the feasibility of measuring behavioural and offending behaviour via self-report and official records.
5. Examine the overall reach, uptake, retention and acceptability of SFSC:Safer Lives programmes and measures.
6. Produce a refined logic model that outlines the context, mechanism and outcomes relating to youth violence as well as processes for scaling the programme.
7. Propose the optimal design, methodology and measures for a future impact evaluation.

Ethical review

The UCL Research Ethics Committee reviewed and provided approval to conduct this study (Project ID: 26185/001). This included a thorough review by an independent committee of the study's ethical implications, ensuring compliance with all guidelines. Participants were approached transparently, with comprehensive information provided in consent forms and participant information sheets. The process prioritised informed consent, safeguarding participants' autonomy and upholding ethical standards throughout the study. Stakeholders, including young people and parents/carers, were involved in developing the study as it progressed.

Data protection

This study was fully compliant with the GDPR and Data Protection Act (2018), followed data protection principles and ensured that personal data was only collected, stored and used with the participants' consent and that we only collected the data necessary for the project's aims. All data collected was fully anonymised prior to data analysis and subsequent reporting. Full details were provided to participants and contained in information sheets and consent forms. Hard copies of the data have been stored in secure facilities at UCL and will be stored for two years. The controller for this project is UCL.

Project team and stakeholders

The project team included the academic research team as evaluators and the REF as a delivery partner. The evaluation team included:

- Co-lead: Dr Anita Mehay (City St George's, University of London)
- Co-lead: Professor Richard Watt (UCL)
- Co-Investigator: Dr Tim Weaver (Middlesex University)
- Research Assistant: Beverley Thompson (UCL)
- Research Assistant: Aile Trumm (Middlesex University)

Dr Annemarie Lodder, Zainab Hussain and Professor Yvonne Kelly provided support in the early stages of the study.

The REF developed and delivered the intervention, and the team included:

- Lead: Leandra Box (deputy CEO and director of programmes)
- Lead facilitator: Chantel Antoine (parent program officer)
- Lead trainer and supervisor: Bernadette Rhoden (senior parent programme and training officer)

Other key stakeholders included three YOTs: Lambeth, Southwark and Hackney.

This project was wholly funded by the Youth Endowment Fund, and no other funding was received. No declaration of interests was required. This report has been led and written by the evaluation team, with input and a review of later versions by the team at the REF.

Methods

This was a mixed-methods feasibility study that used a rapid-cycle testing approach to deliver the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme. Through rapid-cycle testing, the REF sought to stagger the delivery of two SFSC:Safer Lives programmes, holding regular meetings with the evaluation team to discuss progress and any adaptations as they occurred in real time. The full methods used are described in this section.

Co-design and stakeholder engagement

The study adopted a co-design approach with stakeholder engagement to develop the methods and processes and review the logic model. This involved collaborative working between the evaluation team, the REF, the Youth Endowment Fund and other key stakeholders. The evaluation team first engaged with eight stakeholders, including staff from YOTs, third-sector organisations, and parents/carers. We convened a stakeholder group at the start of the study to refine our initial logic model and discuss processes for recruiting and collecting data from parents/carers and young people. We also met with a group of six young people engaged with a local youth organisation to discuss the study and its processes. The evaluation team and the REF also met several times with the Youth Endowment Fund to refine all the plans and processes.

This engagement led to some notable priorities being established and changes made to initial plans during the early co-design and engagement phase. These will be referred to throughout this methods section. As part of the initial commission, the Youth Endowment Fund also specified the following priorities:

- Prioritisation of outcome data collection with young people, rather than with parents/carers, to generate insights into engaging with young people as participants.
- Adoption of a targeted approach to focus on young people with proven and current involvement in offending and violence, rather than those at risk.
- Identification of youth violence as a short-term outcome of the SFSC:Safer Lives programme (which should be reflected in the logic model).
- Selection of self-reported outcome measures from the Youth Endowment Fund's list of six approved youth violence measures.

Participant selection

Recruiting YOTs

We identified Lambeth, Southwark and Hackney as three areas with high levels of deprivation and crime and with YOTs that showed willingness to join the study. The REF had some pre-existing links after delivering SFSC in these areas but had few formal links with youth justice agencies. This partnership with Lambeth, Southwark and Hackney YOTs, therefore, involved new relationships that were formed during the initial co-design phase and through engagement with stakeholders. The Lambeth and Southwark YOTs were keen to work together across their geographical boundaries and support the delivery of one SFSC:Safer Lives programme together (rather than two programmes) due to the short time frame involved and concerns relating to their capacity to support delivery. Both YOTs also recognised that parents/carers often worked and lived across both areas (e.g. they might live in Lambeth but their children attended school in Southwark), and the YOTs were keen to broaden their reach, offer support across the areas and develop more cross-boundary working. Hackney YOT delivered one programme. All the YOTs largely delivered services directly to the children and young people on their caseload with some support offered to the children's parents/carers, with Lambeth and Southwark running various programmes and holding restorative meetings between parents/carers and their children. Two YOTs had a 'parent lead' in post; the other had a dedicated worker with the responsibility of providing support to parents and young people in the YOT.

Participant eligibility and sample size

SFSC usually engages with parents/carers who have children of any age up to 18 years. For this study, our target sample for the SFSC:Safer Lives programmes was young people aged 11-18 years old who were involved in each YOT, with a view to recruiting their parents to the parenting programme. This age category of the young people was set by the Youth Endowment Fund, as its remit lies within this age category. The study also focused on the 'index' young person involved in the referring YOT, as the primary outcome of interest relates to reducing youth violence for that young person (rather than for any other child the parent/carer might hold responsibility for, where youth violence issues are not known).

Our eligibility criteria included:

- Inclusion: the index young person in each YOT aged 11-18 years; parent/carer willingness to attend a parenting programme; and parent/carer willingness to provide consent for data collection concerning their child(ren).
- Exclusion: young people under 11 years or over the age of 18; parents/carers unable or unwilling to provide consent; parents/carers unwilling to consent for the research team to contact their child (11-18); and parents/carers already participating in another research study.

The SFSC:Safer Lives programme is inclusive by design, and our eligibility criteria for this study reflect this. We did not exclude based on language or literacy (unless cognitive difficulties would impede the provision of informed consent). The research team and SFSC:Safer Lives delivery team provided translation support or advocates where required, and the materials have already been translated into 20 community languages.

SFSC community-based, open access programmes usually start with between eight and 15 parents/carers, with a core established group of 10-12 parents/carers in each group by session four. The REF would usually reach out to double the number of parents/carers expected in a core group (i.e. to between 20 and 24 parents/carers). Core group sizes can, however, vary depending on the population group, the awareness and presence of SFSC, any REF links to referrers in each area and whether access is targeted to a very specific cohort. In these cases, core groups can be as small as six parents/carers in a programme, delivery of which is still feasible.

The REF recognised that a smaller core group size of eight to 10 might be more realistic target for SFSC:Safer Lives programmes in this study, considering that the programme required new ways of working with YOTs and involved engagement with a new population group, necessitating a very targeted approach to a specific cohort. The REF worked with YOTs to work towards this sample size (requiring an initial referral of 16-20 parents/carers per SFSC:Safer Lives programme and 32-40 across both programmes), with an internal goal set at achieving eight parents/carers being recruited and becoming part of the core group.

Co-developing recruitment strategy

The REF co-developed a strategy with each YOT based on the REF's previous experience of recruiting and of translating referrals into recruits. The REF held initial meetings with each YOT to discuss the study and get buy-in at all levels of the team (including from senior management and those working on the ground). Senior management was highly keen about and supportive of the study, and it was reassuring that the YOTs had the required pool of parents/carers to refer to the REF. Early meetings with the YOTs also saw discussions focused on the REF gaining an understanding of the parent and young people cohorts in each YOT, any guidance and learning from the YOTs about engagement and recruitment and any specific details to inform SFSC:Safer Lives delivery (e.g. particular days, times and venues). YOT workers who were directly engaged with the young people and their parents/carers were important to these discussions and provided valuable insights. They also gave reassurance that there was a large enough pool of parents/carers to recruit from and that the YOT had good relationships with parents/carers and young people. The recruitment strategy was agreed as follows:

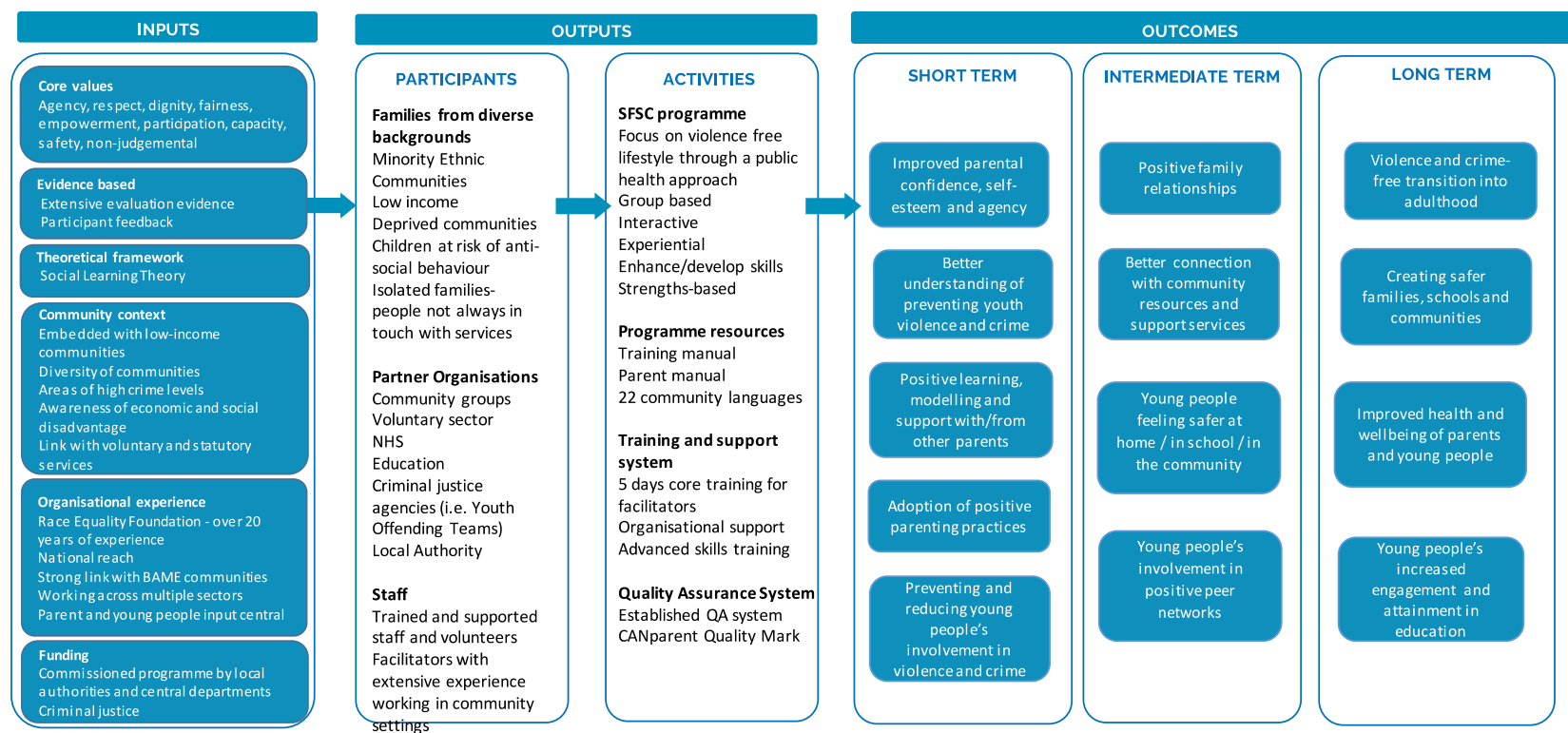
- The YOT worker considers their own caseload and identifies potential parents/carers and young people eligible for the study.
- The YOT worker contacts eligible parents/carers to provide an initial overview of the SFSC:Safer Lives programme and to gain verbal consent to pass on contact details to the programme facilitator.
- Those who do not agree to have their details passed on, and the parent/carer is thanked for their time.
- For those parents/carers who have agreed, the YOT worker provides the parents'/carers' details to the REF facilitator.
- The REF facilitator contacts the parent/carer and provides more details about the programme and the study (including the expectation that their child would be approached to complete an interview).
- Any parent/carer who does not agree or is not contactable does not progress with the study.
- Parents/carers who express an interest are provided with a participant information sheet and consent form to complete. Parents/carers also provide contact details for the index child involved with the YOT.
- The REF facilitator provides information about the intervention (e.g. date, time and location). The REF facilitator continues to contact parents/carers in advance of the programme to support and encourage attendance.
- The REF facilitator works with the researcher to pass on the details of the young person and to contact them as soon as the parent/carer attends at least one session.
- The researcher explains the study to the young people and provides a participant information sheet. Interested young people are asked to complete a consent form.
- The researcher arranges an in-person meeting to conduct the structured interview.
- The young people are provided with a £15 voucher for each structured interview completed and are thanked for their time.

Logic model development

The REF has an existing logic model of the SFSC parenting programme for its core delivery to parents/carers from ethnically and socially diverse backgrounds; this was developed as part of the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)–funded TOGETHER study. The logic model was reviewed by the evaluation team with the REF during the set-up phase of this study and then again with the Youth Endowment Fund and stakeholders to explore what revisions were needed to help reduce youth offending and violence (see Figure 2). All stakeholders agreed that SFSC:Safer Lives was likely to have an impact on youth violence in the long term (with other notable long-term impacts on supporting safer communities and schools, improved family wellbeing and increased educational engagement and attainment). The Youth Endowment Fund was keen to see the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme achieve a short-term (as well as a longer-term) impact on youth violence. This was extensively discussed between the REF, evaluation team, YOTs and other stakeholders (including the Youth Endowment Fund), with the common consensus that SFSC:Safer Lives is a complex intervention and its impact on youth violence is likely to be a longer-term outcome. However, there was some agreement that the effect on offending and violence could occur in the short and intermediate term, including a reduction in some offending and violence behaviours (e.g. lowered frequency, reductions in verbal aggression, better management of emotions and impulsivity). Other important short and intermediate outcomes (to name

a few) were improved parental self-esteem, confidence and agency; increased knowledge and awareness of the drivers of youth violence; improved relationships; and more positive engagement by the young people with their peers and at school. For this feasibility study, we were keen to explore the potential effectiveness of SFSC:Safer Lives on short and intermediate outcomes relating to both parents/carers and children and to explore any theorised links to long-term outcomes. After delivery, we went on to further review the logic model to review outcomes and adapt the logic model to reflect any new outcomes and pathways to change.

Figure 2: SFSC:Safer Lives Logic model



Data collection

This was a mixed-methods feasibility study, and an overview of all methods can be found in Table 3. We used a mixed-methods approach, largely drawing on qualitative data from parents/carers, facilitators and stakeholders. Qualitative designs are commonly used in feasibility studies, where the focus is less on the statistical effectiveness of interventions and more on drawing out experiences and insights to inform the intervention and future studies. Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and observations are useful methods for gathering these insights. We also draw on quantitative process data to provide additional insights around our research aim and questions relating to reach, acceptability, engagement etc. The following methods, approaches and measures were used.

Parents/carers: the Youth Endowment Fund was keen that any future impact evaluation is likely to include self-report outcome data from both parents/carers and children. We prioritised exploring the feasibility of outcome data collection with the young people since previous research with SFSC has largely focused on outcomes relating to parents/carers, where we have significant insights already. Therefore, we did not collect any self-report outcome data from parents/carers (although the REF did continue to collect its own pre-/post-test questionnaire data as standard practice for its delivery); the evaluation team conducted two in-person focus groups with parents/carers at the end of the final SFSC:Safer Lives session. All 12 participants were invited to the session, and three participants attended the Lambeth and Southwark focus group and four participants attended the Hackney focus group. There were two additional participants who gave consent to attend in Lambeth and Southwark but who had to leave before the discussion started. One of the participants was unreachable. Another parent/carer was keen to give views separately, so a one-to-one interview was arranged on Zoom. The views of this participant were entirely congruent with the views expressed in the focus groups, so for the sake of clarity and consistency, the data is presented together. All the focus groups were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. The parents/carers who took part in the focus groups were provided with a £15 voucher.

Young people of consenting parents/carers: the young people were asked to complete a one-to-one, in-person structured interview questionnaire with a researcher at the start and the end of the parenting programme. This was originally planned to be collected online/remotely, but during our initial engagement phase, the young people stated they would prefer a one-to-one, tailored and personalised approach. The young people also stated that researchers should be flexible about conducting these interviews in the spaces young people chose rather than defaulting to 'professional' spaces, including YOT offices. The facilitators and stakeholders also stated that it would be best to contact the young people once their parents/carers had started to attend the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme. This was due to concerns about the effect on the young people recruited of their parents/carers choosing not to continue with the programme before the first session or dropping out early on, which might have been disappointing for the young people. Our focus was on testing these recruitment and data collection processes and the acceptability of the measures, rather than to analyse the outcome data itself.

The questionnaire included a series of demographic questions (e.g. age, ethnicity) and two self-report measures relating to offending and violence: the International Self-Report Delinquency (ISRD-3) measure (Enzmann et al., 2018) and the Self-Report Early Delinquency (SRED) instrument (Charles and Egan, 2005). These two measures of youth violence were selected from the Youth Endowment Fund's approved list of measures for all funded studies. Our early engagement with young people to develop and test the interview schedule revealed the low acceptability of the youth violence questionnaires. The young people did not like the direct questions and queried how honestly they might answer them with a researcher. The questionnaires also lacked some applicability to a UK context and to the lives of and language used by young people. The evaluation team noted this feedback, but no changes were made, as there was a lack of appropriate alternative options within the Youth Endowment Fund's approved list of measures. All the young people were provided with a £15 voucher as thanks for completing each questionnaire.

Facilitators: a researcher conducted online semi-structured interviews with all three facilitators delivering each of the two programmes, which were conducted after the completion of each SFSC:Safer Lives programme. All the interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

Process data and reflections: As part of the rapid-cycle testing process, the evaluation team and the REF met regularly during the study (including during delivery) to discuss progress and any adaptations and changes made to any part of the study. The evaluation team also initially worked with the REF to review its current monitoring process and thereby ensure we could gather the relevant data. We obtained the data collected by the REF relating to attendance and retention in the parenting programme and quality assurance observations of four sessions. The research team also planned to conduct session observations, but this was reviewed and dropped, as the sessions were already being observed multiple times by the REF for quality assurance purposes, and the facilitators felt that the parents/carers might feel overly observed and that this might potentially disrupt the sessions. The researchers also kept notes relating to the frequency and nature of contact with the young people relating to data collection.

Table 3: Methods overview

Research methods	Data collection methods	Participants/data sources	Data analysis method	Research questions addressed	Implementation/logic model relevance
Qualitative	Focus group	Parents/carers	Thematic analysis	Objectives 1, 2 and 4	All – particularly activities, mechanism and outcomes
Quantitative	Structured interview	Young people	Descriptive	Objectives 1 and 3	Outcomes
Qualitative	Semi-structured interview	Facilitators of the two parenting programmes	Thematic analysis	Objectives 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5	All – particularly inputs, outputs and implementation
Quantitative	Process data, observations and reflections	Provided by the REF and researchers	Descriptive	Objectives 1, 2, 3 and 4	Inputs and outputs
Qualitative	Workshop meetings	Stakeholders, including staff within YOTs, young people and parents/carers	Content analysis	Objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6	All – particularly inputs, outputs and outcomes.

Analysis

Our overall approach to analysis was to triangulate multiple sources of data through a framework analysis approach around our research questions and logic model. We explored points of consensus and discrepancies across the data sources and discussed these in the final stakeholder workshops and within the wider project team. Triangulation was initially informed by qualitative analysis, as our main methodology, with other forms of data triangulated and integrated.

We conducted a qualitative analysis using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021, 2019; Byrne, 2022). This involved, first, professionally transcribing all focus group and interview recordings. A researcher then worked to gain in-depth familiarity with the transcripts, followed by coding and indexing. During this process, sets of categories were developed to reflect the themes of the data. The themes were then discussed within the evaluation team (a pragmatic version of double coding) and grouped around our logic model framework. Interview transcripts were also revisited, and the codes were double-checked with the interview data. We then analysed the notes from stakeholder meetings and observations and triangulated insights into the themes, where appropriate, or created new themes if they emerged. We also undertook a descriptive analysis of process data relating to our logic model and framework (particularly relating to reach, uptake and retention). Where appropriate, direct quotes from the data were employed to illustrate a theme and to support the development of a cohesive narrative that answers the research

questions. However, we use quotes sparingly since we have a small sample and so are at high risk of identifying participants (including parents/carers and staff).

Timeline

The feasibility study ran from August 2023 to June 2024 (10 months) and consisted of three phases, as shown in Table 4:

- Phase 1 – Set-up and refinement: initial set-up and engagement phase, which included obtaining ethical approval, identifying key areas and YOTs and running a participatory workshop with key stakeholders to establish recruitment and delivery plans and refine the parenting programme (including the logic model).
- Phase 2 – Rapid-cycle delivery: included recruiting parents/carers to two SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programmes and recruitment of young people with initial data collection. The evaluation team and the REF met regularly (on average, once a month) to discuss delivery and any further adaptations made to SFSC:Safer Lives.
- Phase 3 – Final data collection, analysis and synthesis: this final phase sought to further examine the acceptability of the programmes and triangulate and synthesise findings relating to the overall aims of the research. This included running focus groups with parents/carers on each of the parenting programmes, final data collection with young people, interviews with facilitators and a final participatory workshop with stakeholders. This phase also included drawing on process data and researcher and facilitator reflection forms.

Table 4: Study timeline

Date	Activity
Phase 1: Set-up and refinement	
August–October 2023	Ethical approval processes
August–October 2023	Identification and recruitment of YOTs
September 2023	Initial stakeholder workshop
November 2023	Refinement of the logic model and parenting programme
Phase 2: Rapid-cycle delivery of two parenting programmes	
October–November 2023	Recruitment of parents/carers and young people
December 2023–January 2024	Baseline structured interviews with young people
January 2023– April 2024	Delivery of Lambeth and Southwark parenting programme
December 2023–March 2024	Delivery of Hackney parenting programme
February–March 2024	Observation of sessions (by the REF)
Phase 3: Final data collection, analysis and reflections	
March/April 2024	Final structured interviews with young people
March/April 2024	Focus groups with parents/carers in each parenting programme
March/April 2024	Semi-structured interviews with facilitators
May 2024	Final stakeholder workshop
May/June 2024	Final data analysis and synthesis

Findings

Participants

We recruited 12 parents/carers in total, all of whom attended one of the two SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programmes (six parents/carers from Lambeth and Southwark and six parents/carers from Hackney; see Table 5). A total of 12 young people who were the index child of these parents/carers (who are also involved with the YOT) consented and were involved in the study (six in Hackney and six in Lambeth and Southwark; see Table 6). The majority of the young people (13 of the 14) were male, with one young woman. The average age was just under 16 years (ranging from 13 to 18 years old). Most young people were of Black African Caribbean ethnicity ($n = 6$), followed by Black African ($n = 4$), White and Black Caribbean mixed ethnicity ($n = 1$) and White 'other' ($n = 1$).

Engaging stakeholders and delivering two programmes (research questions 1 and 3)

The early stages of the feasibility study saw useful engagement with a range of stakeholders (including the young people themselves), which led to some important collaborations and decisions about the programme delivery and research processes. Some changes were made to the research processes in response to this engagement. The study subsequently reached the target population group of parents/carers and young people where youth offending and violence was a significant concern. Three YOTs were recruited from areas of deprivation and crime and were keen to support the study and delivery of the parenting programme. Two SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programmes were also successfully delivered as intended.

Initial expectations were to have eight to 10 parents/carers in each programme, with a minimum of six parents/carers in each being acceptable. The SFSC:Safer Lives groups were within the lower range, with six parents/carers in each. There were some challenges around recruiting parents/carers, which are explained in more detail in the following section. One programme (Lambeth and Southwark) had to start slightly later than planned; this was due to slower number of referrals than desired. Here, three parents/carers had been recruited, which the REF deemed was not enough to start the group (usually, at least four parents/carers are expected). There had been other reasons for a delayed start, including the Christmas period presenting challenges with engaging parents/carers and young people and key staff within the YOTs going on leave.

Each programme was delivered and observed by REF staff, who were reported to have a high level of fidelity. During observations of the two SFSC:Safer Lives sessions, differences were noted in the suitability of the venues and resources for group work. One programme was held in a community venue, in a good-sized room for the number of parents/carers. The audiovisual resources were all in working order. This made the running of the sessions more conducive to group work. The other community venue was noted to still be appropriate but was much larger and lacked a private, closed feel to support group bonding and trust. Crèche facilities were provided for both groups and were important to allowing parents/carers with young children the time and space to engage in the sessions.

Four facilitators received additional training to deliver the programmes; the training was described as well-structured but also very demanding in terms of time and effort. For example, a facilitator stated: *'I felt the training was very rushed because we had so much to cover and we also had homework to do as well. It was exhausting, and they were long days.'* (Facilitator 3). However, in this context, the structured nature of the programme materials was appreciated; the facilitator went on to state: *'Oh, yes, constantly [the manual was followed]. All the time. That was our bible, really. That was what we delivered.'* (Facilitator 3). The accessibility of support during and after training was emphasised positively. Facilitators valued the ability to reach out for help and approved of the discussion-based learning approach. This was particularly useful for those who preferred interactive learning methods. In addition, the ongoing support provided by the REF was viewed positively, and another facilitator stated: *'You know, you can contact [name redacted] and say, "Help me go over this" or like Race Equality do offer people, like "I don't know how to convey this particular thing", and then you can go over it again with them, and they do facilitate that, which is nice.'* (Facilitator 2).

Supervision also involved managing differences in professional backgrounds and working styles among colleagues. These differences sometimes led to initial conflicts and misunderstandings, requiring adjustment and adaptation over time and suggested improvements to the supervision format; for example: *'I think the two facilitators need to have individual supervision... and not together because if there's something that you want to raise, you can't.'* (Facilitator 1). Participants emphasised the importance of having one-to-one supervision to address personal issues effectively. Facilitators felt that the emotional impact of the work, particularly in dealing with any potential safeguarding incidents, highlighted the critical need for effective supervision and emotional support.

Recruitment, retention and uptake and acceptability (research questions 2 and 5)

We aimed to recruit between eight and 10 parents/carers to each parenting programme, and the REF, with the YOTs, sought to reach out to double the number of parents/carers (i.e. between 32 and 40 parents/carers in total) to achieve this. The YOTs collectively referred 30 parents/carers to the study, which was at the lower end of what was anticipated. The referrals included children from various ethnic groups, including 22 Black Caribbean, five other minority group, two Asian and one White. Of the 30 referrals, 23 parents/carers went on to show interest in the study, and 12 went on consent to and attend one of the first four sessions of the programme. This included six parents/carers from Lambeth and Southwark and six parents/carers from Hackney. This reflects a referral to recruitment rate of 40%, which is also lower than expected by the REF, who suggested a 50% uptake as standard. However, a 40% uptake is also not unusual for some SFSC groups like SFSC:Safer Lives, whose referral sources are limited to services rather than more universally targeted recruitment (e.g. through schools and community groups). Overall, referrals were at the lower end of what might be desired, and there was a slightly lower recruitment rate as well, which explains the smaller groups.

Table 5: Overall parent/carer recruitment and retention

Research site	Family referrals	Parents/carers consented	Parents/carers going on to participate in one of the first four sessions	Average number of sessions attended out of 13
Lambeth and Southwark	14	11	6	9 sessions (62%)
Hackney	16	12	6	6 sessions (46%)

The YOTs were initially confident that they had a large pool of parents/carers to refer to the programmes. However, there was, ultimately, an insufficient number of referrals generated to achieve larger groups of closer to eight to 10 parents/carers in each SFSC:Safer Lives group (for which around 32–40 referrals would be required across the two groups). The REF also reported that it faced challenges converting referrals to

recruitment, since some referrals had incomplete contact details, other referrals were out of date (e.g. parents/carers were not in contact with the YOT anymore) and, on some occasions, parents/carers reported not having had a YOT worker contact them about the study initially. This further added to the challenges of translating referrals into recruitment from an already small pool of parents/carers.

Facilitators reflected that referrals were more likely to turn into interest and recruitment if the parent/carer had an initial good relationship with the YOT and, in particular, with the referrer. This meant there was a good level of trust between the parent/carer and the YOT, and they were more likely to engage in the support on offer. However, not all parents/carers were open to support through the YOT, and some held a high level of mistrust. Nonetheless, there was still a good recruitment rate of 40%, with parents/carers responding well to the initial REF facilitator. The facilitator reflected that they hold a unique role, having completed the parenting programme themselves and gone on to train as a parent practitioner with additional therapeutic training. The facilitator is also part of the community and resides in one of the target areas; this, they stated, allowed for a meaningful connection with and for them to gain the trust of parents/carers in these programmes. The facilitator also spent a significant amount of time and effort contacting parents/carers, building trust and outlining the support available through the SFSC:Safer Lives programme. In some instances, the facilitator would speak to parents/carers for up to 45 mins to develop an understanding of the issues the parent/carer was facing, to better understand and build trust and to explain the SFSC:Safer Lives programme in ways that would suit the parent/carer and possibly meet their needs. However, despite the qualities and skills of the facilitator, it is likely that there needs to be around three times (rather than just double) the number of referrals to achieve a larger SFSC:Safer Lives group size of closer to eight to 10 parents/carers.

Referral to the parenting programmes solely came from YOTs, and the project team was reliant on good cooperation and buy-in from these services. Like many public sector services, YOTs are working with very high levels of caseloads, with limited capacity within the workforce. YOT workers often reported full caseloads, and the research was seen as an additional task and was not a priority. In addition, remote working sometimes hampered efforts to connect with staff within YOTs to discuss potential referrals and ongoing recruitment and retention in the programmes. Stakeholder workshops with YOTs suggested that they do generally have a high number of families to make programme delivery feasible, but closer working relationships are required to draw on these numbers in future studies.

Facilitators also reflected that highly targeted groups at families involved in YOTs meant that there was a high concentration of parents/carers with lots of complex needs. Facilitator session notes outlined the challenges facing the parents/carers; these included young people going missing, some young people being subject to high levels of violence (sometimes in/near the home) and some parents/carers themselves being the target of violence from their child. Facilitators reflected, in their session notes, on the challenge of ensuring parents/carers all felt heard and supported, on being tasked with holding parents/carers during these crises points and on managing the parents' uncertainty over their situations. Observations of sessions noted that there was a risk that the immediate and acute issues facing parents/carers presented challenges to facilitators' progression through the programme curriculum as designed and intended.

The high level of needs also meant that attendance was variable; such sporadic attendance impacted how quickly the groups were able to form a bond. Of the 12 parents/carers who started the programmes,

process data from the REF showed the average number of sessions attended was 7.5 out of 13 sessions (54%). Seven of the 12 parents/carers showed high levels of engagement, attending eight or more sessions (see Table 5). As usual for REF programme delivery, facilitators took a highly supportive and facilitative approach to encourage high levels of attendance and provided one-to-one support to make up for a missed session. Parents/carers also received a participation certificate if they attended four to eight of the 13 sessions and a completion certificate if they attended nine or more of the 13 sessions. However, if a significant and successive number of sessions were missed, the parents/carers were encouraged to join at the start of another group. Within this study, attendance in each session varied, from just two parents/carers in a session to up to five in other sessions. In some cases, non-attendance in sessions was not known/reported; this was largely due to parents/carers not being readily contactable. But the main reasons for non-attendance, when a reason was given, was a conflict in schedule or demands at home. Facilitators reported in their ongoing reflections that the end-of-programme incentives, such as certificates and celebrations, helped encourage parents/carers to attend all sessions and be recognised for their achievements. However, for many of the parents/carers, reasons for non-attendance at sessions tended to be reflective of the challenges they were facing in their lives with their children and the demands of shift work/multiple roles. Despite this, some parents/carers demonstrated extraordinary attempts to attend many of the sessions; for instance, one parent attended after their night shifts, and others attended during times of crisis with their children.

Some facilitators reflected that it was not usual for them to work with smaller groups with a very high concentration of needs. They noted that they would not have been able to manage larger groups with this level of need but that groups may have been more effective if they had contained a greater number of parents/carers with a mix of varying levels of needs relating to youth violence. With sufficient numbers for the group to bond, build trust and form dynamics earlier, parents/carers can benefit from a range of experiences. This allows the programme to work with parents/carers dealing with youth offending and violence while also working with parents/carers where there are significant issues and risks relating to youth violence. Parents/carers also noted wanting to see this approach adopted to widen support and take a preventative approach.

The YOTs and the REF also suggested that widening support to other referral sources could help reach young people and families at high risk of youth violence who are not quite at the threshold for YOTs involvement or may have been missed by YOTs, for instance, young people who have been excluded from school. This was also highly appealing to parents/carers, who also stated that they wished for the introduction of such programmes earlier, ideally during secondary school, to address issues before they escalated; for instance: *'at that crucial point, if we had something like this, maybe that would help...instead of waiting until the child gets into the system'*. (Participant 5). Parents/carers reflected on 'prevention being better than cure' and the importance of the earlier introduction of the parenting programme, starting from schools and first arrests.

Measuring behavioural and offending behaviours in young people (research question 4)

This feasibility study also sought to recruit and collect self-reported outcome data from the young people aged 11-18 years who were involved in each YOT. Our recruitment strategy was to first get consent from

the parents/carers of these children and then to obtain consent from the children and conduct a structured outcome interview as a baseline and then again after the programme delivery.

Twelve parents/carers who consented to taking part in the study and attending the SFSC:Safer Lives programme; all 12 of their index children who were involved with the YOT consented to take part in the study as well (six in Hackney and six in Lambeth and Southwark). Of the 12 young people, 11 completed the baseline questionnaire and eight completed the follow-up questionnaire (see Table 6).

Table 6: Total number of young people: recruitment and retention

Research site	Number of young people	Consenting young people	Young people baseline questionnaire completion	Young people final questionnaire completion
Lambeth and Southwark	6	6	5	3
Hackney	6	6	6	5

There were some challenges in initially making contact and collecting baseline self-report data from the young people. Part of the challenge was the very short time window in which to contact the young people and ask them to complete the questionnaire (in particular, there was a very short lead-in time before starting the programmes, and the study end point was soon after delivery finished). Some parents/carers were recruited just days before a programme was due to start or during the first few sessions. This left very little time to engage with the young people before or during the first few sessions. This was particularly compounded by the initial delivery being planned in the run up to Christmas, when many families were busy.

Furthermore, some of the young people did not have a mobile telephone since the police had confiscated it. Other young people were hard to contact despite numerous attempts and messages. The researchers reported that a highly personalised approach and drawing on the young person's network of support was useful, but they required time to understand who were in these networks. For instance, for some young people, their parent/carer was a good contact for the initial engagement, whereas for others, the parental relationship was strained, and it was not appropriate to call on them to contact the young people. In many cases, social workers and youth workers were important contacts who could reach the young people. Researchers also had to be highly flexible and willing to act quickly when a young person did engage, meeting them in whichever time and place they chose, even if that meant arranging transport for them. It was also important to consider safe locations for the young people, as a number of them were anxious about postcodes they felt unsafe in due to gang issues. The researchers reflected that the young people seemed to respond well to structured interviews taking place outside formal settings such as YOT offices and were more comfortable meeting in coffee shops or McDonalds. Researchers who were based close to areas and teams was also a strength as meant they could respond and meet young people with greater flexibility. Vouchers were also an incentive for many of the young people, who appreciated the

token of thanks; however, the researchers reflected that some of the young people aged 16–18 years were less incentivised by the voucher than the young people aged under 16 years.

In terms of the completion of the actual questionnaire items, the young people completed most of the items in the baseline questionnaires, with just 4% of items not being completed as intended. Two of the young people had particularly high levels of missing data (which mainly included items relating to the quality of relationships with their parents/carers, with some relating to offending behaviours). A few items were not completed, with the young people stating they were not applicable (e.g. items about doing homework, as some of the young people were not currently attending school). At the follow-up, the item completion rate was improved, with just 1% of items not being completed as intended. This would suggest that the questionnaire items were acceptable, but researchers, facilitators and parents/carers noted that they were too long, and it was not clear whether the responses provided by the young people were honest depictions of their lives. For example, at the follow-up interview, there was an increased item selection of 'no' for some items, which led to fewer follow-up items. This may reflect the young people's lives or may indicate that the young people became more aware at the follow-up interview of how to progress through the interview more quickly.

During initial engagement work, the young people had reported that the self-report outcome measures relating to offending and violence were not acceptable. Many felt the measures lacked relevance to their lives. Others did not like being asked direct questions about offending behaviours through short, closed questions. Stakeholders reported concerns that the questionnaires could be quite stigmatising and did not fully consider the positive aspects and changes made to the young people's lives by the parenting programme. The paperwork (such as consent forms, information sheets and research questionnaires) was also criticised by parents/carers for being too lengthy and complex. Parents/carers were sceptical about the effectiveness of questionnaires at capturing accurate data and suggested that the research approach needed to be more tailored and considerate of individual circumstances. For instance, one participant stated: *'You're not going to get the correct research because they're not ticking honestly.'* (Participant 1). While the parents/carers were generally supportive of the research, they found it challenging to get their children to participate due to the length of the questionnaire. Parents/carers were keen to see reductions in paperwork and, possibly, the introduction of digital formats for questionnaires, with some additional support and tailoring to make it easier for children to participate. The project team initially considered digital formats, but our early engagement work with the young people found that they preferred face-to-face contact; therefore, this would need some further consideration and testing with young people.

We also scoped and explored the potential of drawing on routine offending data on youth violence through desk research and discussions with stakeholders. There was a lack of clear guidance about how researchers can request and access routine data from Police National Crime records. The YOTs involved in the feasibility study demonstrated a willingness to share data and information where permissions and approvals were in place, but it was not clear how this could be established. Desk research identified the Ministry of Justice's [Justice Data Lab](#), which offers organisations working with offenders access to central reoffending data. The Lab provides this information to help organisations to assess the impact of their work on reducing reoffending. Services can submit details relating to participants taking part in an intervention, and the Justice Data Lab will provide an analysis that assesses the impact of that

programme against various reoffending measures (including the one-year proven reoffending rate and the frequency of reoffending over the one year) and against a matched control group. This analytical service may provide a robust way to establish the effectiveness of the parenting programme as related to reoffending, but it requires some further exploration, particularly relating to the minimum data requirements and acceptability from young people and their parents/carers. Furthermore, the outcome relates to reoffending, which may not include violence, and it will not capture any violence or offending that was not recorded or did not lead to a conviction.

Logic model development (research question 6)

We explored indicative insights to gain an understanding of how SFSC:Safer Lives might work to improve a number of outcomes in our initial logic model, including those relating to youth violence. We present findings from interviews with parents/carers and facilitators. This is based on a small sample, and so caution is required when considering these findings. We do not suggest that these prove that SFSC:Safer Lives is effective, rather that they provide an indication of likely pathways of effect.

Short-term outcomes for parents/carers: indications of improved support and confidence, increased knowledge and shifting parenting practices

There was good consensus between parents/carers and facilitators that the programme may offer some immediate effects for parents/carers, including increasing knowledge about their children's lives, feeling supported and gaining confidence in their parenting practices.

Parents/carers highlighted the increased knowledge they gained into the various factors that influence children's behaviour beyond the home environment, including crime, medical reasons and socio-economic issues. This broader perspective allowed parents/carers to focus on their roles within the home while understanding external influences. Facilitators reported that the programme helped parents/carers to empathise with their children's perspectives, particularly in the context of modern challenges such as social media and technology. The programme particularly encouraged deep reflection on the cultural and generational differences between parents/carers and their children, allowing parents/carers to recognise the unique challenges their children now faced. Participants noted that it helped them understand their children's behaviour better and adapt their parenting strategies to fit the cultural and environmental contexts their children live in. Participants also highlighted how the programme helped them develop a better understanding of preventing youth violence and crime by recognising the broader societal influences on their children's behaviour and providing them with the tools to manage these challenges effectively.

Parents/carers also liked the practice elements of the programme, through which they developed strategies to improve their own parenting practices and build more positive relationships with their children. Participants also reported the value of the strategies for managing parental stress and understanding their children's behaviour better, reducing worry and stress. This comprehensive support system provided by the programme was reported to help parents/carers navigate the various services

involved with their children, providing a balanced approach to family support. Participants reported a boost in their confidence through the application of new skills, with some parents/carers reporting improvements in their relationships.

Participants also highlighted the importance of mutual support gained from being within the group, emphasising how parents/carers connected and supported each other through shared experiences. Facilitators echoed this, noting the positive outcome of group cohesion that extended beyond the formal sessions, fostering ongoing relationships and support networks. The programme offered emotional and psychological support to parents/carers. Some described this as akin to a 'lifeline'. Some appreciated the sessions because they were '*... like a counselling session, where you can express your thoughts and your feelings*'.

Intermediate outcomes for parent/carer and children: indications of improving parent/carer–child relationships, feeling safer, spending more time in the home and having increased connectedness to community support and services

Participants reported some early signs of intermediate outcomes from the programme, where there was good consensus between parents/carers and facilitators of effects with improved parent/carer–child relationships, young people spending more time at home and parents/carers feeling a greater connectedness to support in their communities. Enhanced communication between parents/carers and children emerged as a critical outcome of the programme. Participants consistently reported significant improvements in their relationships with their children and described moving from interactions characterised by conflict and aggression to more respectful and open dialogue. This transformation was reported to be facilitated by learning about the building blocks for good parent/carer–child relationships, approaching conflict situations and managing personal anger through the programme. The programme was reported to support better communication through the teaching of communication techniques between parents/carers and their children. Participants noted that learning about calm and effective communication strategies appeared to make a substantial difference. Parents/carers described being able to de-escalate situations of potential conflict, leading to more honest interactions with the young people and positive changes in their behaviour, for example, the young people started initiating discussions about personal issues and showed a reduced tendency to be out late. The benefits felt by the programme participants appeared to be strongly linked to the facilitators' ability to listen to participants' issues and respond swiftly with appropriate support and resources. This approach not only addressed immediate needs but also connected participants with additional services, enhancing their overall experience and satisfaction with the programme and giving them resources that could be accessed for support in the longer term. Participants consistently highlighted how the facilitators listened attentively to their concerns and responded promptly with practical solutions and resources. This responsiveness was reported to be a critical aspect of the support the participants received.

Theorised reductions in youth offending and violence

Parenting programmes seek to help parents/carers and their children to develop positive behaviours and relationships, and there are some indications that SFSC:Safer Lives had something of this effect on the participants in this study. SFSC:Safer Lives can help a parent/carer to develop a caring and responsive

relationship with their child; to develop awareness of their child's behaviours and respond in a positive, consistent and non-violent way; and to support their child to develop social and emotional skills. These approaches to parenting could help children to manage their emotions and support positive behaviour, both of which are linked to decreased involvement in youth violence.

The findings presented above collectively highlight how the parenting programme was seen by participants to have had a positive (sometimes profound) impact, providing a mechanism for altering children's behaviour and relationships for the better. The programme's influence extended to noticeable reductions in problematic behaviours, better and more open communication with parents/carers and children being more inclined to stay at home; as a direct consequence, there was a perception of reduced involvement in illegal activities.

Parents/carers and facilitators reported that the parenting programme could reduce levels of youth offending and violence in the ways outlined in the logic model in the short, intermediate and longer term. However, it is not clear whether *significant* shifts in youth violence are realistic in the short term and whether SFSC:Safer Lives is likely to see sustained and significant reductions over the longer term (i.e. six months after the intervention). Notably, one of the facilitators provided an example where a parent in the group came to a session highly distressed, as a close relative of theirs was a victim of a serious crime. The parent noted that they were able to adopt some strategies with their child that allowed them to discuss the incident and how they could support their child to manage their emotions. The parent was also well supported by other parents/carers in the group as well as by the facilitator. The parent went on to reflect that they were able to encourage their child to avoid any retaliation or enactment of violence, which might have not been the case without the intervention. This is an anecdotal but valuable example of the potential short-term effect of the programmes on reducing youth violence. However, the more sustained and larger gains are likely to occur with sustained improvements in parent/carer-child relationships and by connecting parents/carers to others and to the community over time. There are indications of a sustained change, as parents/carers reflected in their groups that they wished to keep in contact and to continue to meet with their supportive groups after the SFSC:Safer Lives group had finished. Some also asked to join other parent/carer groups run by the facilitator or by the REF, which is a stark change to the parents'/carers' earlier reluctance and mistrust of joining groups or receiving support from services. It is likely that this deepened connection to their children and their communities will, over time, lead to more positive relationships with their children, the young people spending more time in the home and strengthened parental and community support and guidance around the young person. Therefore, it is more realistic and reflective of a sustained and meaningful change to consider the programme's effect on youth violence as a longer-term outcome.

There were fewer insights emerging from the findings relating to more positive peer relationships and engagement in schools (as outlined in the logic model). The current evidence would suggest that the parenting programme could lead to the anticipated long-term impact of more positive transitions to adulthood; safer families, schools and communities; improved health and wellbeing; and the increased engagement and attainment in education. It is unlikely that the programme will see this impact immediately after parents/carers complete the programme, which may limit the utility and purpose of any self-report methods with young people that is not a longer-term follow-up. However, this long-term impact may be better established through the use of routine data. As a feasibility study, there are limits

to what conclusive and generalisable findings we can draw out, so we advise caution when considering these insights.

We held a final meeting where we invited stakeholders from both YOTs involved in the study and the REF as delivery partners. A total of five stakeholders were able to attend, and we discussed the emerging findings and reviewed elements of the logic model. The findings provide support for key elements of the logic model, suggesting that the parenting programme reached the target parents/carers and young people and key mechanisms and outcomes were activated, suggesting a potential pathway to making an impact on youth offending and violence. The stakeholders were supportive of the insights and the current logic model. There were considerable discussions relating to other aspects of recruiting parents/carers and young people, managing SFSC:Safer Lives programmes with parents/carers with complex needs and considering how to tailor content and materials to support neurodiverse needs both in engaging young people and for parents/carers during the programme. No changes or revisions were made to the initial logic model.

Conclusion

Evaluator judgement of intervention feasibility

The evaluation team conclude that the SFSC:Safer Lives intervention is feasible for this population group and context, as demonstrated by the ability to deliver the intended two parenting programmes across three geographical areas (Lambeth, Southwark and Hackney) to groups of parents/carers and their children who are involved in offending and youth violence. Our findings also indicate that uptake of the intervention was around 40%, which was slightly lower than expected but still within range, and once the parents/carers were engaged in the SFSC:Safer Lives programme, the intervention was highly accepted and valued. Insights from parents/carers and facilitators delivering the programme provided initial indications that the mechanisms and outcomes anticipated in the logic model were activated, suggesting the programme could have the desired impact. This is worth exploring in further evaluation studies.

However, there were some concerns that warrant exploration and which relate to the feasibility of recruiting the required number of parents/carers and young people to be able to scale-up the SFSC:Safer Lives programme in a larger evaluation, as this proved challenging in this study. There was a lower number of referrals to the programmes than was required to reach group sizes of closer to eight to 10 parents/carers, and it is likely that more time, resources and support is needed for the REF and YOTs to work together to identify and invite eligible parents/carers to future research and programmes. Although there were challenges, it is also likely that, with more time and experience, the YOTs may build their capabilities to support recruitment. The final stakeholder event showed positive commitment and ideas to strengthen this partnership going forward, with ideas for researchers and facilitators to be more embedded within YOTs and greater awareness being spread within YOTs about the SFSC:Safer Lives programme (potentially through taster sessions for staff so they can better understand the programme and refer parents/carers).

There are also indications that solely running intervention groups with parents/carers with very high needs relating to their children's involvement in offending and violence is more challenging for facilitators and

that it may reduce the effectiveness of the intervention, as facilitators may not fulfil all the components of the intervention due to having to manage the multiple crisis situations the parents/carers are facing. We recommend considering widening the threshold to recruit parents/carers and young people who are at high risk of youth offending and crime but may not be involved with YOTs (yet still have significant risk factors). We also recommend a focus on implementation factors in future studies, including reviewing the training and supervision needs of services and facilitators involved in programme delivery, drawing on locally based facilitators where possible; establishing clear processes and ways of working between the REF and YOTs to support referrals; and considering the appropriateness of venues for group-based interventions.

Interpretation

Youth offending and violence is a significant concern in the UK, with significant public health implications that impact families and the wider society. Although there are a range of interventions directly addressing criminality, such as knife amnesties and efforts to tackle gang involvement, there is also the opportunity to consider public health-focused interventions such as parenting programmes. The potential is vast, since efforts to reduce youth offending and violence need to both address the risk factors and promote protective factors, including strengthening family relationships, supporting positive peer and community relationships and keeping young people engaged in meaningful and purposeful activities. The REF has established the SFSC parenting programme, which is widely delivered as a universal programme in health, care and community sectors; adapted to address youth violence; and delivered as the SFSC:Safer Lives programme. As a feasibility study with a relatively small sample size, there are limits to what conclusive and generalisable findings we can draw, so we advise caution when considering our insights. The findings indicate that the SFSC:Safer Lives intervention is likely to be feasible when applied to a youth violence context with the delivery of two programmes in three different YOTs in areas with high levels of youth offending and violence. Parents/carers and facilitators reported high levels of acceptability of the intervention, and adaptations made to the programme allowed a specific focus on the issues of youth offending and violence while retaining the core elements that have made SFSC successful. These were captured in an initial logic model, and findings suggest that key elements were activated, including parents/carers feeling supported, gaining confidence in their roles and making changes to their parenting practices. There were indications that, during and soon after the programme, parents/carers were already reporting positive changes in their relationships with their children, that their children were spending more time in their homes and that parents/carers were more connected to the support and services around them. There is a potential that other outcomes were also occurring, including changes in young people's peer relationships and experiences in schools, but this was not fully explored or did not come through in the findings of this study. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that there could be longer-term impacts of the SFSC:Safer Lives programme in terms of reducing youth offending and violence. There are some remaining uncertainties relating to the successful implementation of the programme, how best to recruit and retain parents/carers and young people and how to widen the threshold to reach more parents/carers and families with significant risks and needs. Further exploration is also required to consider alternative research processes, including changes related to how to engage young people and the nature and content of structured outcome interview questionnaires, as these were not acceptable to the young people and other stakeholders in this study. We did not trial specific processes to utilise

routinely collected data (e.g. from the Police National Computer or Justice Data Lab), and there may be some potential to draw on this option in future research.

Proposed design of a future impact evaluation

Proposed research questions or study objectives

The findings from this feasibility study provide useful insights to inform the subsequent development of research questions and objectives for any proposed future impact evaluation study of the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme. In addition, several members of this evaluation team have also been involved in completing the TOGETHER trial, which has assessed the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the universal SFSC parenting programme in a diverse sample of families across England (Lodder et al., 2021). The outcome analysis of the TOGETHER trial data has not yet been completed or reported to the NIHR (the funding organisation for the study), and therefore cannot be shared externally. However, the team wishes to reflect on the initial preliminary findings from the TOGETHER trial in this report, as some of the issues are directly relevant.

This initial feasibility study has highlighted the challenges and difficulties in recruiting and retaining young people in contact with YOTs and their parents/carers into a study evaluating the impact of the SFSC:Safer Lives programme. Future research needs to further explore some fundamental issues in relation to the identification, recruitment and retention of young people in contact with YOTs. In addition, the outcome measures of youth offending and violence, such as ISRD-3 (Enzmann et al., 2018) and SRED instrument (Charles and Egan, 2005) that we used with the young people proved to be inappropriate and not acceptable to this group. The baseline and post-intervention questionnaires were considered by both the young people and their parents/carers to be too long, overly complex and not directly relevant to the contexts and experiences of the participants. Future research needs to assess the acceptability and appropriateness of other outcome measures for use with young people in contact with YOTs, and we recommend that the Youth Endowment Fund also review its approved list of measures (see later section).

Based upon the above considerations, the following research questions are proposed for future evaluation studies:

Further exploratory questions:

- What approaches (beyond YOTs) can be used to identify young people and their parents/carers who would most benefit from the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme, which aims to reduce offending and violence?
- What approaches and strategies can be used to recruit and retain young people and their parents/carers who come from socially and ethnically diverse communities and who are at particular risk of engaging in youth offending and violence to SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programmes?
- What existing validated outcome measures used to evaluate the SFSC:Safer Lives programme are most appropriate and acceptable to young people who are at particular risk of engaging in youth offending and violence and to their parents/carers?

- How acceptable would individual and cluster randomisation be to parents/carers and other stakeholders in a future impact evaluation study?

Efficacy question:

- Is the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme effective and cost-effective at reducing offending and violence in young people?
- Which parents/carers and young people might benefit most from the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme and under what context? (What works, for whom and under what context?)

Proposed design

In our view, to answer the above questions requires a further consultation phase with the Youth Endowment Fund and stakeholders, followed by an RCT with an internal pilot and specific progression criteria on key issues.

Further consultation

We suggest a phase of further consultation with the Youth Endowment Fund and other key stakeholders (including YOTs) is needed to clarify and confirm the key details that will be crucial to informing the design and conduct of a future trial. These points for clarification and consultation include:

- Mapping the youth justice landscape to gather a fuller understanding of YOTs and other justice agencies and community organisations that might support discussions around widening the threshold for recruitment whilst maintaining a clear focus on youth justice outcomes.
- Considering the optimal group size for SFSC:Safer Lives programmes delivered to address youth violence outcomes. Such consideration should focus on the most effective and manageable group size for facilitators, considering not only the complexity of needs but also the composition of the group based on varying levels of need (e.g. the ratio of high-need parents/carers from YOTs and those referred by other agencies). This should be led by the REF but in consultation with the Youth Endowment Fund and other stakeholders.
- Developing a consensus as to where there might be collective opportunities to support and build research capacity and capabilities across YOTs and other justice agencies.
- Selecting an appropriate and acceptable primary outcome measure, which may go beyond the list of approved measures from the Youth Endowment Fund.
- Considering the realistic timescales required to develop good working partnerships with YOTs and to provide sufficient lead-in time to recruit parents/carers and then young people to the study before the start of the intervention to gather a true baseline. This should consider appropriate safeguarding and the management of the expectations of those young people who are taking part in a study but whose parents/carers do not complete the programme.
- Drawing on the expertise and experience of Youth Endowment Fund projects to collectively understand the potential for utilising routine data. We scoped and explored the potential of drawing on routine offending data, although this proved challenging. There was a lack of clear guidance about how researchers can request and access routine data from Police National Crime records or directly from YOTs. The Ministry of Justice's [Justice Data Lab](#) offers organisations working

with offenders access to central reoffending data. This requires some further exploration, particularly relating to the minimum data requirements and acceptability from young people and their parents/carers. Furthermore, the outcome relates to reoffending, which may not include violence, and will not capture violence and offending that is not recorded or did not lead to a conviction. The Youth Endowment Fund may hold valuable expertise here or may leverage some influence with agencies who hold this data.

- Examining the feasibility and acceptability of randomisation, particularly in a control group condition. In this study, it was not within our parameters to assess the views of participants (neither those of the young people nor of their parents/carers) or of other stakeholders (SFSC:Safer Lives delivery staff and YOT workers) on the randomisation of participants in a future evaluation study. In the early stages of the TOGETHER trial, there was a degree of uncertainty and even concern about the perceived acceptability of the cluster randomisation process that was planned. However, these concerns were largely unfounded, as after giving a clear explanation and justification of the steps involved, there was almost universal acceptance of the randomisation process among all of the stakeholders. The situation has, however, potentially changed in this regard, as the TOGETHER trial findings (once fully reported) will show a significant positive effect of the SFSC:Safer Lives programme, and this then raises potential ethical questions about randomising participants who might be in a crisis situation to a control group. We also provide a very tentative sample size in the final section of this report, and it will be important to consider the feasibility of achieving this sample size within current levels of referrals if recruitment continues to be very targeted only through YOTs. The target number of referrals in this feasibility study would need to be doubled (at least) to account for both a control and treatment group of parents/carers, which is likely to be challenging.

Randomised controlled trial with internal pilot

We recommend a future evaluation study of the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme as a cluster RCT with an internal pilot. This was the design of the TOGETHER trial, which has provided a robust and rigorous methodology to assess the appropriateness and acceptability of the evaluation plans and, ultimately, the evaluation of the universal SFSC parenting programme against health-related outcomes (Lodder et al., 2021). The six-month internal pilot provided very valuable insights into the feasibility of the trial protocol, and the set progression criteria were met to enable the full trial to proceed. We therefore recommend that if a future trial is undertaken, then a well-designed internal pilot is conducted with a range of 'stop/go' progression criteria addressing the points raised above. Of particular importance is the need to establish community engagement/public involvement processes to discuss the study plans with relevant people who have lived experience and insights. This proved vitally important in the TOGETHER trial. An additional trial relating to youth violence outcomes would add further robust evidence on the efficacy of the SFSC:Safer Lives programme, with particular strengths in gathering child outcomes directly and engaging with youth justice services.

One important trial design issue to consider is what is the most appropriate unit of randomisation to use in a future evaluation study. In the TOGETHER trial, we successfully used a group cluster design, but in view of the more focused approach of a future Youth Endowment Fund-funded study and the lower number

of potential eligible participants, local authority areas could potentially be the unit of randomisation, although this would affect the sample size calculation.

Proposed participants

This feasibility study has raised some important points to consider when deciding on the proposed participants in a future evaluation study. Interview data from parents/carers and staff and discussions with other stakeholders highlighted a concern that if the parenting programme was targeted only at families where a young person was already in contact with YOT, then this could be seen as 'too late', and circumstances and events had moved too far forwards for the programme to have a major impact. Widening the eligibility criteria to young people and families deemed 'at risk' of future offending, antisocial behaviour and violence was considered a better option so that the SFSC:Safer Lives parenting programme could be framed as an early intervention programme designed to support families at risk of future problems. A detailed discussion (as suggested in further consultation) is needed on the range of appropriate risk markers that could be used, but these could include the following:

- Young people experiencing major problems at schools, including exclusion
- Young people with siblings or peers in contact with the YOT
- Young people referred by social workers, schools or other community groups, where concerns have been raised about the future risks for that young person.

Based upon the above rationale, we propose the following criteria for participants:

Proposed inclusion criteria:

- Young people aged 11-18 years in contact with a YOT or deemed at risk of offending and violence (with clear criteria developed about the risk factors)
- Willingness of the parent/carer of the young person to attend a parenting programme
- Willingness of the parent/carer of the young person to provide consent for data collection with the young person.

Proposed exclusion criteria:

- Young people aged under 11 years or over the age of 18
- Young people aged 11-18 who are not involved with a YOT or other criminal justice agency and not at risk of offending behaviours
- Parents/carers unable or unwilling to provide consent
- Parents/carers unwilling to consent for the research team to contact the young person (11-18 years)
- Parents/carers already participating in another related research study
- Parents/carers taking part in another parenting intervention.

Proposed outcomes and outcome measures

Primary outcome

This feasibility study highlights the significant concerns from young people, parents/carers and other stakeholders of the current self-report measures used to capture youth offending and violence. There are major concerns that these measures did not capture the lives and potential change in outcomes and were viewed as overly direct, negative and potentially stigmatising. There are alternative measures of offending and violence outside the six measures recommended by the Youth Endowment Fund, but there is a lack of consensus on a measure that is widely used, acceptable and robust at detecting change. We therefore suggest considering a primary outcome of conduct problems that captures behaviours relating to antisocial, aggressive and defiant behaviours. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a highly established and reliable measure of young people's socio-emotional health and wellbeing and assesses emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer relationships and prosocial behaviour (Goodman, 1997). The SDQ is also designed to capture change over time and has been used to evaluate the effectiveness of a range of interventions, including parenting programmes. The SDQ can be both parent/carer reported or directly completed by the children and young people. We would suggest a follow-up at various intervals post-intervention, including after the intervention and again at two months, four months and six months to allow for regular engagement with the young people and to avoid issues of attrition at the final follow-up time point. The self-report SDQ outcome measure would also complement the outcome relating to reoffending by using routine data that will capture change one-year post-intervention (as outlined earlier through the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab).

Secondary outcomes

Other important secondary self-reported outcomes include:

- Parents/carers: positive parenting practices; quality of parent/carer-child relationships; parental self-efficacy; and parental wellbeing
- Young people: quality of positive peer relationships; school exclusion; missed school days; involvement in education, employment or training; and community involvement

Sample size calculations

The evaluation team has consulted with a very experienced trial statistician and head of a clinical trials unit to discuss options for calculating a sample size for a future trial based on the quantitative information gathered in this study. We have been advised that, in the absence of a control group and the very limited number of pre-/post-intervention questionnaires in this study, it would be inappropriate to try to calculate a sample size on such limited quantitative data. Indeed, any such sample estimate would be open to such a high degree of uncertainty that the estimate would be of very limited value.

However, we offer some very tentative indications around sample size, which may offer some limited value for a future evaluation. Based on two meta-analyses of the effects of early family/parent training interventions, including parenting programmes (Piquero et al., 2016, 2009), we would anticipate an effect size of 0.3. A sample of 628 in total (314 per group), including 25% attrition, would provide 90% power to detect an effect of approximately 0.3 at a 5% significance level. This calculation assumes that the selected primary outcome would be continuous in nature, that a 0.3 effect size on this measure would be of clinical importance and that the design would be a two-arm individually randomised trial. The calculation used assumes the use of a two-sample t-test that assumes equal variance as a conservative estimate, and

the sample size may be reduced by taking account of the covariates in the model. However, the sample may need to be increased if, for example, clustering or the outcomes of alternative distributions need to be taken into account. We recommend a statistician be consulted on indicative sample size once further design aspects have been finalised.

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