HOUSE OF COMMONS

Science and Technology Committee

Oral evidence: Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health, HC 822

Wednesday 23 May 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Norman Lamb (Chair); Vicky Ford; Bill Grant; Darren Jones; Stephen Metcalfe; Carol Monaghan; Damien Moore; Neil O'Brien.

Questions 160 - 213

Witnesses

I: Martin Hewitt, Assistant Commissioner, Metropolitan Police Service; Dr Netta Weinstein, Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, Cardiff University; Beth Murray, Director of Communications and Engagement, Catch22; Dr Keir Irwin-Rogers, Lecturer in Criminology, The Open University; and Sheldon Thomas, Consultant on gang and youth violence, Gangsline.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Martin Hewitt, Dr Weinstein, Beth Murray, Dr Irwin-Rogers and Sheldon Thomas.

Q160 **Chair:** Welcome, all of you. Thank you very much indeed for coming along this afternoon. I am sorry that we had a late start after a vote interrupted our schedule. I am conscious that we have a big panel. We do not normally have five people, which presents the potential nightmare of our sitting here until midnight. Can you try to keep your answers succinct? Unless you feel you have something specific to add to what other panel members have said, don't feel you have to answer every question that we put to you. Could each of you briefly introduce yourselves and then we will get started with the questions?

Dr Irwin-Rogers: My name is Keir Irwin-Rogers. I am a lecturer in criminology and a supporting academic to the Youth Violence Commission.

Beth Murray: My name is Beth Murray. I am a director at the charity and social business Catch22. We work all over the UK with vulnerable children and adults on education, employability, youth justice and child sexual exploitation.

Martin Hewitt: I am Martin Hewitt, assistant commissioner at the Met police. My area of responsibility is territorial policing.

Sheldon Thomas: My name is Sheldon Thomas. I am a former gang member. I run Gangsline, a consultancy and training company; we train frontline staff and Government staff on understanding gang mentality. We also deliver gang prevention in primary and secondary PRUs and we engage with gang members throughout the UK.

Dr Weinstein: I am Dr Netta Weinstein. I am senior lecturer at the School of Psychology at Cardiff University. My research is centred on human motivation, behaviour and wellbeing.

Q161 **Chair:** Thank you all very much indeed. In this inquiry, we are looking at the link between social media and screen time, the physical and mental health consequences of that and what the evidence points towards. Today, we want to look particularly at the link between social media use and gang violence. Can we hold social media responsible in any way for gang violence?

We have noted the comments of Commissioner Cressida Dick about the link, but I am very interested to hear from all of you. If there is a link, what is it about social media that facilitates young people getting involved in violence? Martin, perhaps you would like to start, and then I welcome other comments.

Martin Hewitt: I do not think I would use the word "responsible," but there is no doubt in our minds that a relatively small element of social

media is a contributory factor to some of the gang-related violence we have seen in London. A small number of individuals use various social media channels, particularly films on YouTube and subsequently on other platforms. As to the way they are used, at one end it glamorises and normalises gang behaviour, violent behaviour and the behaviours and criminality that are associated with gangs. At the other end of the spectrum, in some cases the use of social media as some form of taunt or challenge has led directly to very serious criminality, up to and including murders.

The reason it has the impact it has is the same as the reason social media is really positive, in that it can reach very large numbers of people quickly in simple and accessible ways; it can be engaging in the way it presents itself. What previously would have been a conflict between one gang and another that would have found its way through word of mouth to various things that might happen locally can now very quickly become amplified and spread as it moves across the various platforms, because things jump from platform to platform.

I think the phrase that the commissioner used in her article was "revving up," which is probably a good phrase to describe it. It is amplifying the anger, the feeling that you have to respond, and we get the subsequent violent crime and behaviours that go with it. It is an amplification. There is a lot that is really positive, but for certain elements, some of the stuff going out is a very easy way to attack and get under the skin of a rival group, or raise their own status or reputation, and that inevitably has consequences.

Q162 **Chair:** I assume you monitor this closely. Are you witnessing a significant increase in activity online?

Martin Hewitt: I think there has been an increase. The question of whether you can monitor it closely across the piece is very challenging, because of the large volumes and the number of platforms. Since the end of 2015, we have run Operation Domain, which is concerned particularly with videos. We use a standard piece of software to scrape across the various platforms and pull out anything that we think is concerning. In that period of time, we have picked up 1,400 videos that we have gone on to deal with. Some of them were used in evidence in criminal trials and some were used for intelligence; and we have worked with the industry to have some of them removed.

Q163 **Chair:** Has there been an even spread of those 1,400 over the period, or do you see a rising curve?

Martin Hewitt: I think there has been a rise. It is more prevalent than it was. Like all things, the more media attention it gets, the more prevalent it becomes, and latterly there has been quite a lot of media attention, particularly on videos, on certain offences and on murders. The fact that now everybody over the age of 11 has a smartphone in their hand means that accessibility is ever increasing.

Q164 **Chair:** We will come on to look at what can be done about that, if others agree. Can we have succinct comments from others on the panel?

Dr Irwin-Rogers: I agree with Martin that there is a direct causal link between what we are seeing on social media and violence in real life. You asked about the causal mechanism. That is related to the perennial problem that underpins lots of violence across societies and throughout history, namely that, when an individual or a group disrespects or threatens another individual or group, it leads to violence. Social media does not fundamentally alter the nature of that; it just enhances the problem.

There is an issue with overly focusing on social media when it comes to violence. The Youth Violence Commission is looking at serious violence between young people. We feel that social media plays a role, but it can displace other questions that are far more important when it comes to understanding that violence.

Q165 **Chair:** We will come on to other issues later.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: Why do young people feel the need to disrespect and threaten each other to the extent they currently do, and why do relatively trivial examples of disrespect lead to young people reacting with serious violence? Why do they think that is the best course of action? Those are the really important questions. The Youth Violence Commission will be reporting over the summer, so I hope that our work will complement some of the work you are doing here. We had a session in this room three weeks ago on social media and youth violence, so I hope that that evidence can connect with what you are doing.

Beth Murray: I echo to an extent what Martin and Keir have said so far, but from our perspective youth violence is a public health crisis, not a social media crisis. Social media is very much a symptom, but rarely is it the direct cause of what we are talking about. Young people increasingly live their lives online. We are not talking about social media as something separate from people's lives; we are talking about people simply living their lives online. As has historically been the case, and will potentially continue to be the case, a small minority of young people are living extremely violent lives on our streets and that is playing out online.

While it is absolutely a catalyst, and we look at all the rationale behind it, a lot of the same rationale that sits behind child sexual exploitation sits behind child criminal exploitation in exactly the same way—the grooming of young people online and so on. We look at all of that, but we are talking about a small minority of young people and a small minority of videos and victims. We really want to focus on why violence is happening, and that is a public health issue.

Chair: That is very helpful.

Dr Weinstein: Maybe we can understand these relationships a little bit more by looking at the kind of research that has been done on media

violence more broadly. If somebody sees violent television or plays a violent game, how does it affect their own violent or aggressive behaviour? We are assuming basically that you see violence and then you want to engage in it in the real world. That is the big question. From an empirical standpoint, we do not have very strong evidence that, especially for more extreme violent behaviours, media violence plays a direct role. The research we have shows that it might be under 2% of variance, which means that media violence would have a very small direct effect on real-life aggressive behaviour.

Chair: That is very helpful.

Sheldon Thomas: I agree with everything everybody is saying, but I question the research because they live in a different world from us.

Q166 **Chair:** You mean people involved in gangs.

Sheldon Thomas: The young people involved in the gang lifestyle are in a different world from us. In their world, YouTube plays a massive part. People may think that the research shows differently, but I know for a fact that when you are talking about gang-related activity—tit for tat—that is definitely played out on YouTube. YouTube videos are not just used in that way. They are used, first, to recruit young people, secondly, to get girls, and, thirdly, to promote wealth. Drug gang members promote their wealth by showing off in their videos the diamonds, the stuff, the crystal, the drinks and the alcohol. Another thing they have been doing is promoting alcohol indirectly and subliminally by using YouTube videos.

Obviously, there has been an increase in tit-for-tat reprisals, but there are social dynamics in that increase. Because these guys crave attention, they will use social media to get it. When I say crave attention, we are talking about children who have not had their basic needs met. If you look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Bowlby and Bowen's attachment theory, they are quite clear that some of the young people involved in this lifestyle, and young people not involved in gangs, are growing up in houses where there are no relationships with parents—that is, no relationships with fathers.

Q167 **Chair:** We are doing another inquiry into adverse childhood experience. Are you finding a link? Have substantial numbers of people involved in gang violence themselves experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in childhood? Some of you seem to be nodding.

Sheldon Thomas: A high percentage of videos are used for the purpose of violence, but they are also used to recruit. Where the variance comes in is in what percentage is used for what and how. It also depends on who is watching the videos. Martin referred to the age group. I would say it is younger. We have mothers giving phones to eight and nine-year-olds. Once young people have phones, they have access to YouTube, and it is very difficult to monitor and control what they are listening to, especially if they come from a dysfunctional household. I am not

suggesting that all kids come from dysfunctional households. For me, there is a link between the videos that are being perpetuated and played out and the rise in violence, but there are social factors surrounding it.

Q168 **Chair:** What is the core age group we are talking about when we think of street violence—knife crime, gun crime and so on?

Sheldon Thomas: Many years ago, you could put an age group on it. Now I do not think you can. I mentioned to Martin outside that we have 11-year-olds in Chelmsford and 10-year-olds in Stratford selling drugs. I can talk about Croxteth and Norris Green; I can go on, right across the UK. It is very difficult, because, wherever money is to be made from drugs, there will have to be violence to protect it.

Q169 **Chair:** In all of this, there is a key link to the illegal drug trade.

Sheldon Thomas: Yes. Money-making through selling drugs is linked to violence and the carrying of weapons by younger age groups.

Beth Murray: I want to be careful when we use the word "gangs," because gangs relate to a specific subset of people. What we are talking about is youth violence, which is much wider. I think the Met's research shows that only about 5% of youth violence relates to specific gangs, so we are talking about young people who might be living violent lifestyles.

The point about trauma is absolutely well placed. We are talking about young people who may have lived very traumatic lives, but are certainly, when they look at their smartphones, seeing traumatic things. Whereas we have become very developed in how we think about victims of child sexual exploitation—we take into consideration what they might have seen and experienced and we treat them as victims—what we are doing is treating these young people as perpetrators first. We are not treating them as victims; we are criminalising them and often putting them into short-term sentences. At no point during that process are we considering the trauma they may have experienced or seen, certainly through social media.

Q170 **Stephen Metcalfe:** I want to go back to the point about gang members getting younger and younger. Are the people you are seeing—for example, the 11-year-olds in Chelmsford selling drugs—inevitably on that path and it is just that they are getting younger, or have they been recruited through social media? Presumably, if it is through exposure to social media, they are not recruited the first time they see it; there must be a build-up. Is there a way of monitoring what they are watching, or what is being seen—key words—using technology?

Sheldon Thomas: I was giving you the example of Chelmsford.

Q171 **Chair:** I should mention that my colleague who represents Chelmsford is here.

Vicky Ford: Let's talk about Basildon.

Chair: We normally hear how wonderful Essex is.

Sheldon Thomas: The reason I mentioned Chelmsford is that it does not fall into the category of highly impoverished area. The young people I engage with in Chelmsford are from middle-class houses. I agree with what Beth says; maybe using the word "gangs" is not a good idea, because we are talking about vulnerable children. The fact that they come from a middle-class background suggests that they may have better parentage, which is not true. We have found that the kids we are engaging with come from households where parents do not engage with them. These kids go on to their phones and look at YouTube. I know for a fact that quite a lot of young people in Chelmsford bought into the culture of gangs through YouTube videos. They did not have a direct link to the guys. They can send a message on YouTube and get a response almost immediately, so in their heads, it is, "I can't even get a response from my dad that quick. How come I can get a response from guys who don't know me?" Obviously, they do not know the reason; there is an alternative reason.

I tend to use Chelmsford as an example because, first, it is not a typical area. Secondly, I know that for them it was through the music. We went into a particular school in Chelmsford and the principal, or vice-principal, said to me that 70% of the white kids thought they were black because of the music they were listening to. That is what we have to look at, because what they think is black culture is not what they are listening to. The music influences the way some people think about themselves, and it changes them from who they really are into something they are not. We could tell from the language they were speaking, the way they came across and how they were handling themselves. I believe the teacher is correct. They thought they were black because of the music they were listening to.

Vicky Ford: I just want to point out that it is not every 11-year-old in my constituency. I have to pop out, but I am coming back.

Q172 **Chair:** A survey published by Childnet in 2017 showed that one in 10 UK youths had been targeted online by their peers with sexual threats, such as rape threats. Apart from knife crime violence, is social media contributing to sexual violence? Are there any views from any members of the panel? You are nodding, Beth Murray.

Beth Murray: For us, there is no doubt about that. I mentioned before that, when we look at online victims, we split them broadly into two: potential victims of child sexual exploitation and potential victims of child criminal exploitation. Keir and Catch22 published an exceptional report a couple of years ago on how young people are groomed into becoming victims of child criminal exploitation, often online. One of the focuses is how women in particular are used as weapons. Women are used either as treats or as a threat, for example, "If you don't do this, I'm going to come after your woman, your family member." From that perspective, we see sexual exploitation as a much wider part of criminal exploitation.

Martin Hewitt: I would agree with that. Where we are going with all of this is that there are problems and issues. Vulnerable young people are being exploited in one way or another, whether being dragged into violence or sexual offending. Social media provides a delivery mechanism. I think we are all saying that it is not the cause, but it is a delivery mechanism.

Q173 **Chair:** There are all sorts of social factors at play that are the root cause of both sexual violence and other street violence, but this is a mechanism that sometimes amplifies it and acts as a recruiting sergeant.

Martin Hewitt: It gives accessibility. One of the examples that I deal with in another world is sextortion, where organised criminals, through social media, get an individual, normally a male, into a position where they compromise themselves, and a blackmail demand flies straight in. They have exposed themselves to what they believe is a girl who is engaging with them, but who is sitting somewhere being employed to do it. Five young people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have committed suicide in the last 18 months because they did not think there was any way they could get themselves out of that situation. That crime would never have been possible without the ability to deliver it via social media access in a chatroom.

Beth Murray: You say these are societal issues, which is absolutely true, but there are human issues as well. The two most important emotions that sit behind a lot of things are shame and pride. This talks directly to both of those. We are talking about shame. For example, I might have been beaten up 10 or 15 years ago. My mates might have seen it, but that would be the end of it. Now it is put on Snapchat; that is grabbed and put on Instagram and broadcast everywhere. I not only have my friends telling me that I need to go out and do some retribution against whoever harmed me but I have internet strangers telling me that if I do not go out and exact some kind of revenge I am a weakling. Shame and the pressure that comes with it is a massive driver behind this, and pride sits alongside.

Q174 **Chair:** Both you and Keir stress social factors as the root cause, but it seems to me that, if this is acting as a massive way of amplifying both pride and shame, it is something we need to take seriously.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: Actually, it means that you have to take those social issues more seriously, because what is happening is that social media is giving us a lens or insight into social problems that have always been there, but they are becoming hugely amplified. I call them a catalyst and a trigger. We can no longer ignore some of the problems we were able to ignore, because social media are bringing them to our doorstep.

I agree with Sheldon that social media are being used to recruit people into drug networks and gangs. To some extent, that is true. To some extent, young people now have an insight into what is going on in those places that they didn't have before. Middle-class children in a small town

can now go on to YouTube and social media—Snapchat and Instagram—and see how much money is being made through illicit drug networks. That looks pretty attractive to a young person who is not doing too well in school and thinks they do not really have a future in employment. We know that the job market is not great for young people; it is insecure, and young people are worrying about work. When they go on social media and see they can make huge amounts of money very quickly, it is attractive. Drug markets need to be looked at very closely, but I will try not to go into that.

Chair: We might have a private conversation with you about that at some other time.

Q175 **Darren Jones:** We have been talking about platforms. We all know about Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, but I did not know, for example, that you can send messages to people on YouTube. Are there new types of platforms that may be in our common language that we need to be looking at as well, and what are they?

Sheldon Thomas: Always. You have Cloud and Tumblr.

Martin Hewitt: Periscope.

Sheldon Thomas: There are so many different ones that guys and girls go on to. We will always be playing catch-up because as adults we do not have the time to sit there and go through social stuff, but we need to gravitate to the social aspect. I know that today we are here to talk about social media and the role it plays. Part of the reason we are talking about it is that we have not dealt with the underlying issues in society. I commend what you are trying to do, but you will not make any changes unless you look at the underlying issues. Absent fathers are the elephant in the room no one seems to want to talk about; 22% of poor white families have no fathers, or do not have a relationship with fathers, and it is 61% in the black community. I can go on with the figures.

We have to start to address those societal issues and then look at mental health issues because of the skunk these guys are smoking. It is made with chemicals. It is not grown naturally as it is in Jamaica; it is made with chemicals, which raises the THC level. With the amount of skunk that 11, 12 and 13-year-olds are smoking on a daily basis, you have to look at mental health issues. In this country, our mental health system is in crisis and is not able to make diagnoses and look at thresholds. We have to address all of those things.

We can talk today about social media and the symptoms, but they will not address the underlying social factors—for example, social inequality. We have class problems. In Croxteth, the gangs are white, not black, yet when I spoke to them the first thing they mentioned was that they felt they were not part of this country; they felt discriminated against by middle-class whites. If that is coming out of white kids, obviously, for them, there is an attraction to gangs, where there is no discrimination.

Gang members are the best employers. They don't discriminate against race, age or gender. Anyone can work for a gang member. There is no contract involved and you get promoted quite easily, so the attraction to a person who feels discriminated against is hard to resist. We need to look at those things.

Q176 **Chair:** I reassure you that the whole purpose of this inquiry is to look at the evidence and reach conclusions from it, so it is really helpful to hear that.

Beth Murray: One of our youth violence units in Bristol did a survey of all the different platforms that young people are using to communicate with one another, and they found 142. I am happy to furnish you with that list. When we were kids, we sought out hidden places. You look for places where you are not being watched. That is what is happening.

Q177 **Chair:** Martin was saying earlier that monitoring it becomes incredibly difficult.

Beth Murray: YouTube is important, but it is a small element. Primarily, it is used as a push mechanism. It will be music videos; it will be getting people on to other platforms where private conversations can be had. If you are on Instagram and looking for people, you will find people with lockdown accounts and closed away identities. People are deliberately hiding their channels, because they only want to talk to the people they are talking to.

Q178 **Neil O'Brien:** Are social media companies doing enough to tackle the problem of people posting violent or gang-related material on their websites? Related to that, are social media companies doing enough to take down material quickly? Do you think there could be a role for much more strongly enforced age verification as part of the solution?

Dr Irwin-Rogers: One of the questions we were asked was whether drill music glamorised violence. There is very little doubt that it does glamorise violence, among other things, but the important question is to what extent social media platforms should be censoring and removing that content. I would be very careful when it comes to that, because we interfere with young people's freedom of expression at our peril. Whether or not we like it, and whether or not young people are talking about the violence they are involved in generically, their involvement in drug-dealing activities or their hatred for the police, it is not for me to interfere with how young people express themselves. Suppressing it will cause far more problems than it will solve. Even if you do not agree with it, it is better to listen to it and either accept what people are saying and make some changes, or disagree with it and challenge it.

Having said that, there is a threshold and there are limits. I would draw the limit where a young person is making a direct threat to another young person or group. That is not difficult. That is not drill music and violence; that is about people not making threats against the lives of others. Just as I would not threaten you in real life, over the phone, via a

text message or over Twitter, I should not be doing it via a music video. Simply because I have put a backing track on it does not make that threat any less real. We know that because the police have seen it. It has real-life consequences, so I treat it very seriously, but to go down the route of saying that drill music is glamorising violence and therefore we need to do something about it is really dangerous. Interference by social media companies there is problematic and would probably cause more problems than it solved.

Q179 **Neil O'Brien:** Can I push you on that for a moment? Then if the other panellists want to talk about drill music, that would be very welcome.

You would be relatively relaxed. You do not think that social media, or anybody else, should be censoring content where there is not a specific threat of violence to an individual, but perhaps a person might be boasting about acts of violence that they have generically carried out, or their prowess at violence. You would be relaxed about that content being left online.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: Not relaxed and not happy about it.

Q180 **Neil O'Brien:** Sorry. "Happy" is the wrong word. You think it should stay and it should not be censored.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: I think that, on balance, you will cause more problems if you start to try to draw grey lines around those issues than if you have very clear and specific policies on what is and is not allowed. The social media platforms can and should do more than they are doing, but they need very clear guidance and it needs to be backed up with resources for efficient and effective enforcement. That is not what is happening right now, and that is why the police see some of the problems they are seeing when they flag clear incidents of direct threats. YouTube and other social media companies are not responding fast enough, so I would support that.

Q181 **Neil O'Brien:** I read what you said about drill music in your submission. I would be interested in your views more generally on the point about take-down times and whether they are doing enough.

Beth Murray: Google asked Keir and me to go and see them the other week. We saw them. It is clear that they are taking these issues seriously, certainly on YouTube. Have you guys seen a drill music video?

Q182 **Chair:** No, other than very brief clips.

Beth Murray: I recommend you look at them; they are easily available. On the drill point, we do not believe that drill music videos create violence. Some are violent, but the majority are not. Social media companies have such a huge task ahead of them. To Keir's point, is it their responsibility? Yes, if it contravenes their guidance. Their guidance needs to be really clear. I use YouTube all the time. Do I know specifically what its code of conduct is? No. Does it have responsibility to make that really clear and accessible?

Google's answer, which is not a bad one—they are on a journey—is to ask organisations such as Catch22 to become part of a programme called trusted flaggers. We have 1,300 frontline workers—teachers, social workers, youth workers, gang violence workers and prison workers—who are working incredibly hard and do not have the time or resource to spend on doing the job of policing social media platforms.

Q183 **Neil O'Brien:** You would like them to spend more of their own resource.

Beth Murray: We are happy to do it, because our people probably understand what the gang landscape looks like in Merseyside a lot better than Google, but there needs to be resourcing. If you are going to outsource a moral responsibility, you need to be able to resource it.

Dr Weinstein: The research we have so far shows that young people are very good at circumventing those kinds of restrictions. Whenever you place restrictions on what they can do, including things like filtering, if they are really motivated, they tend to find a way around it. We will continue to struggle with that. It will cost increasing resources and ultimately will be ineffective.

At the same time, the point about unintended consequences is a really important one. If you are creating a restriction without knowing whether it will be effective, you might also be doing unintended harm at the same time. For example, if you are seen to undermine people's ability to express themselves, that is not going to yield the kind of behaviours you are looking for, such as, "Let's engage more positively with society."

It is very important to keep in mind that it all sounds like a great idea. Age verification sounds like a great solution, but youngsters are able to find a way around that, and maybe get information from their parents to get into the kind of social media sources they would not otherwise have access to. The kinds of people we are concerned about are those who are motivated to circumvent our restrictions, rather than the large minority we are not concerned about.

Martin Hewitt: I take a slightly different position. We absolutely have to work with the organisations, and we are working with them and they are working with us. I share Beth's description; they realise the challenge and they are trying to work on it. There is a big meeting with Google tomorrow to talk it through. We are going to be trialling some trusted flaggers from the police service to try to assist with that.

Where I would slightly disagree is that if someone is talking about something violent that they did, and there is some credibility to that, it should be removed. The problem is that you have to respect the freedoms of the individuals who are putting it there, but equally you have to realise that at the other end of the spectrum there are 11 and 12-year-olds watching it and they have a right to be protected as well. It is really difficult.

We have a role to play through trusted flaggers in translating, because something that appears innocuous may be a very direct threat between individuals or groups, but if you do not understand the language, the context and the names in an area it is really difficult. It is not about censorship or closing down. We have to be realistic about the impact that it has when it is there and the ability for it to spread, but drawing those lines is so difficult, isn't it? It is a journey we have been on in terms of radicalisation. What should not be there and what is acceptable? We have to work collectively to try to find where the line is.

Sheldon Thomas: I see it slightly differently from everybody else on the panel. As a black man, I have to ask the question: who does this affect the most? When hip-hop was doing gangsterism—it started with Schoolly D—I was in America at the time with Ice Cube. Gangsta rap had come out and the communities that it affected more were African American. If this music was affecting another community, would we be sitting here trying to decide what to do? Because it disproportionately affects the black community and poor whites, we are sitting here saying, "Should we or shouldn't we?"

I know the lyrics and I understand the language. Google may not understand it. Google called me in. I am not quite sure how that would work out and what they intend to do, but I am quite clear: I disagree with what Keir and Beth are saying because 90% of it is the promotion of violence. I am not quite sure why they see it differently from that. I have not heard one piece of positive drill music that has come out. Maybe Krept and Konan could be considered different, but most trap and drill music is done by gang members who are portraying themselves as rappers. Krept and Konan are rappers, not gang members, so there is a difference. You have to understand who is doing what.

If trap and drill music is being played, I can point out to you that most of the people doing it are gang members portraying themselves as rappers, whereas the percentage Keir and Beth may be talking about is very small. Trap and drill is about the promotion of gangsterism. I am not quite sure why anyone sees it differently. It is not like grime. You have different kinds of things going on in grime, positive and negative. In trap and drill there is nothing positive, apart maybe from Krept and Konan.

I will read this lyric to you right now and you can tell me what you think of it: "Still pulling up on a smoke. Skeng in my pocket, can't you see the bulge in my coat? Like Hollow Meets Blade, manaman got guns that'll sink down a boat. Send a young boy round with a skeng, they ain't leaving till they see smoke. My niggas the realest in town, you niggas are really some jokes." I am not quite sure Google understands that. I am not quite sure most workers understand the language of the streets, because street slang is what drill and trap music is about. When workers say they are not quite sure, it is because they do not understand street slang, and they do not understand who it affects more.

If you look at the murder rate between January and now, 90% have been black on black, so we cannot sit here and say it doesn't have an effect. It disproportionately affects a particular community. I agree with Martin that it is going to be difficult to take down videos, because YouTube is about subscribers, and these guys are getting bigger hits than Eminem and Jay-Z put together. Gangs from Brixton are getting more subscribers than popular artists in America, so it will be difficult to challenge it. How do you deal with that?

Dr Irwin-Rogers: I have to come back on that, Sheldon. I started by saying that I absolutely do think that drill glamorises violence. I am not arguing with you on that. That is definitely the case. What I am saying is that I do not think you can tackle that issue by censoring that content online. If you try to censor it and interfere with young people expressing themselves in that way, you will create a problem that is bigger than it is right now. You need to address the social reasons why young people are making that music in the first place. This is not just imagination; it is reflecting the lives they are living. I agree that is the case, but we need to stop young people being engaged in drug markets and making the sort of money that creates a culture and glamorises it.

Q184 **Stephen Metcalfe:** Martin, I think you said that we have been down this route with radicalisation. Are you saying that what we are facing at the moment has the same or similar consequences as radicalisation? We accepted that we lost some liberty in pursuit of trying to keep ourselves safe and tackling radicalisation. Do we need to lose further liberty in our attempt to tackle the violence that we are seeing at the moment?

Martin Hewitt: They are different things. The point I was trying to make is that what the internet and social media have given in a number of areas is a way for people to do criminal things differently. You can radicalise someone sitting in their bedroom; you do not have to get physically close to them. We have talked about sexual offending and the ability for offenders to contact or engage with potential victims. In this case, we have the ability for people who want to do things criminally, for all the ends we have talked about, to reach lots of people. I do not think those videos are just people expressing themselves. I know what Keir is saying, but I disagree. Those particular videos are not simply a way of expressing themselves. They are directed towards violence and they create violence, and we collectively have a responsibility to try to prevent that from happening.

Q185 **Stephen Metcalfe:** Absolutely. The nub of my point is that we gave up some liberty to tackle radicalisation. If we want to tackle youth violence and street violence, do we have to give up some further liberty and do more censorship, because this is obviously fuelling the problem?

Martin Hewitt: The key point, as Netta said, is that what we do has to be effective. There is no point doing things that look like you will achieve something, or quell something, if they do not have an effect. Liberty works in all directions. For me, an 11-year-old boy from Chelmsford has

had his liberty taken away as well. In the broadest sense, this is a safeguarding issue about doing everything we can—social media is but one aspect—to stop young people being drawn into leading violent lives with the consequences we are all aware of.

Q186 **Neil O'Brien:** This question is directed mainly at Martin and Sheldon. Perhaps I can get you to answer it almost in a yes or no way. At present, do you think that the large social media firms are doing enough to take down violent and gang-related material? Are they moving quickly to take things down?

Martin Hewitt: I do not think enough is being done now, but they are working with us to try to be better at it.

Sheldon Thomas: I agree. Not enough is being done, but I agree that they are trying to do something now.

Q187 **Chair:** Do they need to be committing a greater investment to it? Beth, you talked about contracting out, but it has to come with the resource to do the work. Do they need to be committing more resources?

Beth Murray: It comes down to whose responsibility we think this is. Social media companies need to be clear about what they will and will not permit on their sites. If there is content on it that is not permissible, it needs to come off. I think a lot about copyright and about how quickly videos that infringe copyright come down. Then I think about videos featuring violence that stay on for days and weeks. The artificial intelligence exists to be able to recognise patois, individuals and IP addresses that are uploading specific videos and are regularly infringing what is seen to be appropriate. I think there could be more.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: It is not just resource. They need to be smarter in how they are doing it as well. When they have taken down videos, they often just put up a generic sign: "This has violated our terms and conditions." Young people go crazy when that happens. I have seen some of the drill music videos that have been taken down. They go up under a different name, or on a different platform, so they come back in any case, but young people are incredulous when they do not understand why a particular video has violated a policy.

If YouTube and other social media platforms are going to start interfering with young people's use of content to express themselves, they have to be very clear about why they are censoring that material. Currently, they are not doing that. When we met Google, their response was, "Mm." The difficulty is that they think it will cost a lot in resources and hit their profits if they have to spend a lot of time telling people why they are taking down content, but that is not a good enough excuse. If they are providing a platform for young people to communicate in this way, they should provide the resource to make sure it is being used safely. My threshold is really high, but when it is crossed, I think they have an obligation to be very clear about why it has been crossed.

Dr Weinstein: To step back a little bit, I want to make two related points that I hope will help frame the conversation. The first is that we have been talking about music and content interchangeably. We might talk about verbal messages and music as different things. One of the things that concerns me about drill music is that we are talking about it in black and white terms: bad music and good music. In reality, it is a grey scale that goes from Elvis shaking his hips, and making people uncomfortable for that reason, to what we are looking at now. Once we start categorising any genre of music as bad, we have to be very clear about what makes it qualitatively different from the stuff that is acceptable.

Q188 **Chair:** Country and western music talks about guns and violence.

Dr Weinstein: Exactly right.

Beth Murray: There's a lot of pretty violent imagery in that, isn't there?

Dr Weinstein: It is imagery and lyrics. It may be more of the same, and we do not have any reason to believe that more of the same is changing things and producing behaviour in a qualitatively different way. That is the first thing. It may be that we can identify the kind of content more specifically that causes problems. For example, where there are direct threats it is easier to say that that is qualitatively different from the kind of content we see online.

Sheldon Thomas: I entirely disagree with that—totally. The reason why is that these guys don't need to come to your town any more. They use the music to recruit and spread their culture, the culture being the gangster image. Whether they join the gang or don't join the gang, those kids in Chelmsford are white kids; they are not from broken homes, yet they impersonate, act on, walk and smoke—the whole nine yards. I go to Surrey—same thing. It is the same in Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire, where I went two weeks ago.

Chair: Just don't mention Norfolk.

Sheldon Thomas: In all those little suburban towns, young white kids are listening to this music and buying into the culture. I disagree with anyone who says it does not change behaviour. When you have a white kid who is now speaking as if he is from Brixton, or an inner-city area, yet he was born and bred in Surrey, I have to question how that music didn't have an influence on him, or her. In particular, trap and drill, but not necessarily all the other music, is spreading that culture across the UK to all walks of life.

Dr Weinstein: I would argue that we have been seeing that for many years. MTV did the same thing. Of course culture is spread, but does it mean that, if someone is dressing or behaving in a different way, they will go out and stab somebody because of what they heard in the music? Until we know that we are talking about criminal behaviour, we do not want to restrict culture because it changes the way people dress.

Q189 **Neil O'Brien:** This is a brilliant discussion. I have one tiny question about something Beth mentioned. All of you referred to more resource and smarter approaches. Beth mentioned AI use. Are you aware of any firms that currently deploy AI to detect particularly violent and gang-type culture, or are they only using it for copyright?

Beth Murray: Wearing another hat, I am vice-chair of a funder called Nominet Trust. We fund social technology. Although it is not directly related to violence, we invest in organisations that use AI, for instance, to scan social media channels to look for young people who are exhibiting negative mental health. They might be making threats to harm themselves. That sort of thing exists.

Thinking about smarter approaches, I feel that Google has got a bit of a bad rap today. Google has been at the front of our minds, but that is because they have been the most proactive in coming out and engaging with communities and working with them. It would be wrong for Google to get the majority of the responsibility.

Q190 **Neil O'Brien:** What have they done on this?

Beth Murray: What they have talked about, which is really interesting—it relates to Keir's point as well as Sheldon's—is hitting people where it hurts. Why don't we turn off the ability for people to monetise their videos? Your videos stay online, but you are not able to make any money off the views, unless you put up a video that is the same but takes away some of the negativity. I do not know whether it will work, but those are the kinds of smart approaches we need to consider. You hit people where it hurts: in the pocket.

Q191 **Vicky Ford:** First, please can you stop using my constituency as the constant example? It is not helpful. There are many areas that have this issue. I understand you are making a point about the middle class.

Sheldon Thomas: I used the example of Croxteth when you were gone.

Q192 **Vicky Ford:** Thank you. I am sorry I had to pop in and out. You gave the example of YouTube and videos, which is not something that came up in our other hearings about online bullying and social media. In particular, you talked about the link between music videos and being able to do the chat through the social media to the producers. That to me is what is fundamentally different from the music videos of MTM in the past, or what we used to watch on "Top of the Pops" when we were little. It is the ability to get the music and hook in with direct conversation. Is that part of the issue?

Sheldon Thomas: Yes. Obviously, with the music spreading across the UK, these guys don't have to leave their area. People e-mail them or talk to them through their stuff, and they respond. The point I was making was about how quickly they get a response. The quickness of the response makes a young person feel, "Oh, that person checks for me." We have to look at the social dynamics, because when a young person

does not feel a sense of love and purpose at home, and the person they have just e-mailed via YouTube, or sent something down to, literally responds within a minute or two minutes, it makes the young person feel affirmed; it makes them feel, "Oh, these people like me," so it is easier for those guys to manipulate them into that way of life.

Chair: We have taken that point.

Q193 **Bill Grant:** I have been scribbling: what is the weakness or desire that allows an individual to be drawn to crime by music or videos? Where is the weakness in their existence? What allows them to be drawn into it?

Sheldon Thomas: Vulnerability. I agree with Beth totally about the word gangs. When you use the word gangs, it is very narrow, but when you start talking about vulnerable children—

Q194 **Bill Grant:** They are vulnerable individuals.

Sheldon Thomas: They are vulnerable children. You can look at what attachment theory says about children's emotional and basic needs not being met. I am talking not about outside but in the family home. We have to look at this as a societal problem. Where children do not feel their emotional needs have been met and do not feel love, they will look elsewhere, so that answers your question as to why they look elsewhere.

Q195 **Bill Grant:** You are suggesting that is the weakness; it is the vulnerable point in that journey.

Sheldon Thomas: Yes.

Martin Hewitt: The other point is about what other options exist for that young person in their life at that point in time. I have sat round loads of tables where people talk about youngsters who get involved in the drugs scene, gangs or whatever. People talk about it as if they have made a deviant decision by taking that route, but, when you sit in their shoes and live in their life, what are their options? Over there, they see people with money, reputation, status, girls and cars, living a lifestyle that looks like an attractive one. The lifestyle, otherwise, is very unattractive because they do not see all the options available to them. The real tragedy is that youngsters are growing up in places where that is an almost inevitable route, and social media are a much more effective way for someone to draw them into that. It was harder when they had to do it face to face.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring Darren in now, as he has to leave early.

Q196 **Darren Jones:** Apologies for having to leave early. I am finding this really interesting.

Before I put my question, I just want to make this point. In some of the original answers to the first question, the point was made that social media regulation was fine, but we have to solve the underlying issues. We all understand that. The remit of our Committee is looking at this

particular piece of the puzzle. We are not saying that it will solve the issue.

What we are interested in as a Committee is whether there needs to be more research or evidence in particular areas to understand what is happening, and whether we need to make recommendations to Government on regulation. My question is about who should be in charge of what. This was played out a little bit in the European Parliament yesterday in the Zuckerberg inquiry; Verhofstadt said he was uncomfortable with the idea that it was Facebook's responsibility to have staff to police the issue, and that it should be the police, as an arm of the state.

Our serious violence strategy was published recently and it was debated in the House yesterday, and I think £11 million has been allocated to early intervention work. Martin, from a policing perspective how are you managing the demands for resourcing online activity versus the huge demands offline, and how is that interacting with the tech companies? For others on the panel, do you think the current balance between tech and law enforcement is right?

Martin Hewitt: Crikey. I do not think we can police the internet. That is, effectively, what you are talking about. I do not think it is either desirable or, quite frankly, practical. We work with all those companies. We are working with them in the counter-terrorism space, which I alluded to. There is loads of work with those companies on child sexual abuse, and we are now working much more on the violence we are talking about.

It is a challenge for us to resource what we need. The people we have are busy people. In exactly the way Beth talks about her workers, we have some people dedicated to working exclusively in the online arena, but that is really challenging in terms of volumes because they are enormous in all these areas.

It is about us working collaboratively at every end. At the first end, it is about all of us working, whether it is with parents, schools or anybody else, to inform people and do the preventive work that allows people to be as self-aware as they can be. Even though we are where we are, in a range of different ways, it is almost as if, when you are in the virtual world, it is not real and there aren't real-world consequences. People still do things that are remarkable because it is as if it is not happening. Everyone has to take that responsibility.

We have to work with all the organisations that are able to regulate this. As we have already said, you have to find where the lines are. Those lines have to be absolutely firm and things should be dealt with very quickly, but in all the spaces you have talked about, and the other spaces, it cannot be us doing all of that; it is just not possible.

The really important point is about cleverness and technology, because ultimately that feels to me the way we have to go. If we are relying on people sitting somewhere and working their way through everything that

is loaded up every day on to the various platforms, it is impossible. It is about how we drive clever thinking and clear regulation for everybody involved, and use technological advances to allow us to deal with it in an automated fashion. That is how you get there, but, if the concept is that the police should be doing all of this, I cannot begin to think how many people we would have to have sitting in a warehouse somewhere doing that, when we have to deal with the real-world consequences as much as anything else.

Q197 **Chair:** I will bring in Netta and Keir before we move on.

Dr Weinstein: One resource that maybe we have not spoken so much about is the potential victims or those who are exposed, and what we can do to intervene, using them, in a way, as a resource, as well as trying to protect them externally.

In our research, we found that there is huge variability in how much young people are willing to disclose the types of things that they have seen. If someone is exposed to sexual or violent content online, some youngsters are very willing to talk to a parent or teacher about it, whereas some feel really inhibited. Part of that is the kind of support that they get from caregivers and educators. We may have put less energy into increasing the awareness of those individuals, those kinds of caregivers; in eliciting those conversations from youngsters. We will need to do less policing if we get young people telling us, "This has made me really uncomfortable," or, "This is really intriguing, but I'm not sure how I feel about this." That is one place where we might want to put our resources and energy to increase awareness.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: I agree with Martin. It is not just that it is not possible for the police to do it; it is not desirable either. When the police start to be the primary actor, young people know about it. I am not sure how they know about it, but they know full well that it was the police who were starting the interference on YouTube videos. When they were going down, the comments were coming back and it was damaging police legitimacy to a very high degree. It should be the social media platforms that are responsible for doing that. They provide the mode of communication; they should be enforcing their own guidance and regulations.

Darren Jones: That is very helpful. It is on those types of recommendations that we might want to look at resourcing grand challenges to say, "What are the AI technologies that we need for people to deal with this?" Regulatory guidance from the tech companies to set firmer guidelines is particularly helpful. Also, your suggestion about monetising videos on YouTube, if they are getting more viewers than all the celebrities, was useful. Those practical types of recommendations are very useful, but I will leave it there, Chair.

Q198 **Damien Moore:** Touching on a point that you made, Netta, about parents, is there any practical way of parents being involved in their

children's participation on the internet?

Dr Weinstein: Yes, absolutely. We try to increase awareness of youngsters' behaviours online in terms of what parents know, but now we are mostly communicating fear responses—terrible things are happening—in a vague way that does not help parents to understand what is going on.

What seems to be more effective is parents being more closely engaged with their youngsters' social media use. We find through research with families that youngsters who, for example, have parents as part of their social network—a parent who is on their Facebook—are less likely to perpetrate those kinds of violent behaviours. Parents' engagement more broadly allows them to have the kinds of discussions that they need to have if something comes up. Awareness of the social media platforms that are available to their youngsters is one tool. If a child is not very co-operative and does not say, "Okay, sure, I'll tell you about everything I'm doing and I'll add you," parents can still learn about those platforms and the possibilities that they have, by experiencing it directly themselves.

Beth Murray: I would argue, at the risk of broadly generalising, that we are talking about young people who do not have positive adult figures in their lives. Everything you are talking about is absolutely true for the vast majority of children, but we are talking about children who are fundamentally missing a sense of belonging and guidance from adults. They will go down negative paths to find that, which is Sheldon's point.

At Catch22, we say that you need three things to live a good life. You need purpose—something to do. If you are a kid, it is going to school, being in education, and having a job when you are older. You need a good place to live in a community where you feel safe and you feel wanted, and you are happy to lay your head there. And you need good people around you. If any one of those three things is missing, you have a vulnerable child. If you don't have good people around you, you are vulnerable.

The youngest person who has been referred to our child criminal exploitation service this month in Merseyside is seven, and they were referred because their older brother who is involved in criminality had given them a gun to hold under the bed, and had been sending them out to do drug runs.

If you do not have good people around you, we can educate people as much as we want about social media, but, fundamentally—going back round the circle—we need to look at those societal problems. These kids do not often have good adult role models.

Dr Weinstein: I agree, but I would add that educators can play some of that role as well, in the absence of parents who are deeply involved. If there is an educator a child feels they could talk to openly, that might go a long way to help.

Sheldon Thomas: That may not happen too often. I would differ with Beth again. We need to look at the realism of the whole thing. I know what you are saying. You are trying to look at it from the point of view of research, but this is not research. All the time, we say, "This research says this." This cannot be researched, because the kids we are talking about are not the same. Every single day, they are different. They get up; one minute they are this way and tomorrow they are another way.

As Beth says, we are not talking about functional. We are talking about a society that has gone down a path where a high percentage of children are growing up with no father, which means they have no idea of what a father is or what a man is. There is a female and a male. When you are talking about research, the kinds of kids we are talking about lock themselves in their room and say to their mum, "You ain't coming in my room." There is nothing that mum can do. We've got a 12-year-old whose mum went into his room three times to wake him up for school. He smacked her in the mouth and knocked her out. Okay, he was 12, and he wasn't from Chelmsford—he was from Hackney.

Chair: Thank goodness for that.

Sheldon Thomas: What I am saying is that we need to be careful when we keep talking about research. This is a lot deeper than that. These are problems that are societal, which we need to look at from a societal point of view. We are not talking about kids in our world; we are talking about kids and families who are in a different world from us, and the world they exist in is not the world where we go home and we are happy families. They go home to misery—okay? These kids are going home to not feeling loved, and I am not just talking about poor white kids or black kids. I am talking about middle-class kids too.

We need to be clear that this is a problem that breaks all ethnic, class, racial and religious barriers. This culture is eating everyone up alive, and we need to understand the world they are in and not keep talking about research. That is not to put down what Dr Weinstein is saying, but we need to be real and honest. Right now, the piece of work we are talking about here is going to be difficult to research, because every day those kids get up and their minds don't think in the same way as the day before.

Chair: At that point, can I interrupt to say that I have to leave because I have a meeting with the Secretary of State for Health? Sincere apologies. On a personal basis, I am enormously grateful to you all. It has been the most fascinating, stimulating and interesting discussion about an incredibly important issue. I am going to hand over to Stephen Metcalfe to chair the rest of the meeting. Thank you all very much indeed.

The Chair being called away, Stephen Metcalfe took the Chair in his place.

Chair: We will make the changeover as quick as possible. Damien, please continue.

Q199 **Damien Moore:** We will move on to education and the role of digital literacy education. How much is that going to help deal with online cyber-bullying and being exposed to these dangers, or is it the case that the people who would be involved in that would have better role models anyway, so you are talking to the same audience twice rather than getting to a wider audience?

Dr Irwin-Rogers: A lot of the young people we are talking about are not in school, are they, Sheldon? You talk about going into classes and doing some interventions and training. They are not there; they are not even in pupil referral units a lot of the time, so you are not reaching them.

It depends on the particular issue you are talking about. As an end in itself, it might be valuable to speak to young people about safe online education, sure; but if you are talking about the issue we have been discussing—the serious violence that goes on in response to some of the things on social media—you are not getting near the children that we are talking about. I would say it is limited, at best.

Beth Murray: The answer to this is not digital literacy training; it is really good social work, and I mean that in the broadest use of the term. I do not necessarily mean a social worker running it, but how you make good choices. When somebody approaches you that you don't know, how do you respond? How do you engage a young person in education? These are the much broader things that we need to teach young people, which will help them throughout their whole lives, because, frankly, young people know a whole heap more about being online than any teacher could tell them.

Sheldon Thomas: I was talking to Martin outside. We had a guy from Beckton. He had done eight GSCEs, five A*s and five As. He went for a job and they were offering him £6.79 an hour. He said, "I'm sorry, I can't live on £6. I ain't got a dad and my mum's struggling." The people in these gangs in east London said, "Look, I'll pay you £350 a day if you do this for me."

You have to understand that even kids who are in school are feeling deceived by the system, because the system is telling them to study all these GSCEs, only to come out with no significant job that they could think of, because not every child wants to go to university. We have to acknowledge that. Some children just want to go out and graft. What they are saying is, "We've done these GSCEs. The least you can do is pay us a decent wage." What the gang members are offering is a decent wage.

We are in a system where we are talking about education as if it is a great thing, but our education is flawed. Our kids are beginning to realise that the jobs that are being offered are a joke. For instance, one apprenticeship was offering £4 an hour. What kid is going to spend his or her time right up until 18, to study that amount of GSCEs, only to come out and do a job for £4 an hour? That is what we are up against.

For me, we need to look at the whole idea of what we are offering our kids. What is the vision for our children when they go to school? If we do not have a vision, we are going to have more and more kids who are going to go to the other side and say, "I'll take my chances with them." I am not agreeing with it; I am saying that we have to be realistic.

Dr Weinstein: This kind of argument makes it feel very doubtful that, if we are able to restrict the online content children are exposed to, it is going to solve the problem. If we think about that, we have to seriously consider how effective those kinds of actions are going to be.

Q200 **Chair:** But it must have a part to play.

Martin Hewitt: The kind of people we are talking about, and we have focused on today, are at the margins. They are a small minority of the people who are sadly getting dragged into this kind of thing. In a general sense, there is the concept of how we educate and make aware. The work we do in schools with young people is all about how you make responsible decisions, not just about your online life but about knives, sex and drugs. It is trying to equip young people. We need to do that, because anyone can become vulnerable at any point to all sorts of different things; and different groups of children, depending on their circumstance, will be vulnerable to different things.

The group that we have been focusing on mostly are very much at the extreme end, and, as has already been said, many of them will not be in formal education. None the less, making sure that every interaction that responsible adults have with young people to help them make sensible decisions has to be where we get ourselves to.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: I go back to the fact that, as Sheldon said, some young people can make £350 a day. No amount of education is going to stop a young person taking that option.

Sheldon Thomas: Correct.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: You try to tell a young person that they should stay in school and do well in GSCEs and A-levels when they can go and make that kind of money. It goes to the vulnerable factors as well. We cannot insulate young people via their vulnerabilities against participation in drug markets. While the option is available, young people will take it. We can rearrange the chairs on the Titanic and say we do not want this young person to be involved, and we can go and intervene and get that young person out, but someone else will just take their place. There are tens of thousands of young people in cities like London who are ready to go into it, and Sheldon knows that. It is an inevitability while the drug markets are there.

It has been acknowledged in the serious violence strategy, which I welcome. The Government have said, "Okay, drugs are playing a big role, so we need to do something about it." Do what about it? There is no

solution there. It is more of the same, and until you tackle that, it is not going away. Options need to be on the table.

Q201 **Chair:** But, as Martin pointed out, there is a range of people. We have focused on those at the margins. There is a more mainstream issue of those who are perhaps being drawn into violent, abusive activity more than they might otherwise have been. They are being dragged down the rabbit hole towards this. I suppose what we are looking for is how we can try to control some of that.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: I think you can see it more. It is more visible now, but if you look at the violence figures, they are still not at the levels they were in 2006 and 2007. We are making an assumption that this is a bigger problem than it used to be. We see it more now, but the violence figures, as I say, were higher 10 years ago, and social media—YouTube, Instagram, all those things—were not as prevalent back then. It is a dangerous road to go down when we start blaming social media for that.

Sheldon Thomas: For me, the problem isn't that. When we talk about tackling the point that Keir is making, we do not tackle the crime families or the criminal networks who actually bring the drugs in. We do not tackle the middle class who smoke the cocaine, who take the cocaine. That is where the money is being made. You do not find £7,000 a week being made down on some estate in Harlesden or Peckham. It is made in suburban areas. That is where the money is being made. We must address the issues around the white middle class who take cocaine, who are fuelling the market, and the crime families, criminal networks and big businesses that bring the drugs in. We are trying to look at these young kids in isolation from societal issues and in isolation from the big criminalisation.

Q202 **Vicky Ford:** I would just like to remind you that this is a particular investigation into social media and screen use. I really want to grab the point you have just made about taking action, because what I want to come out of this is, what action should be taken about the use of social media in order to change this. Drugs are happening, but how can we focus on the social media platform use to recruit or, as you said, amplify the anger? Because I know we are short on time, can we focus again on that? It was not really a question.

Chair: Does anyone want to respond?

Beth Murray: To summarise, social media platforms need to be incredibly clear about what their terms of use are. The terms need to be written for a seven-year-old. Their audience might not be people until they are 13, but they need to be incredibly clear about what is allowed and what is not. If they take down content, they need to publish at that URL the reason why that content has been taken down. We need to use technology in the same way as they are investing in technology in other areas, and we need to get them to invest in the technology that will

identify questionable content. At that point, you can work with community groups to understand whether it is questionable.

We need to use creative means to encourage people to put up less provocative violent content. Whether or not that is demonetisation of people who are regularly putting up videos that contravene use, we need to be incredibly clear and work with the young people, as opposed to against them, so that they understand why it is not acceptable.

Chair: The final set of questions is from Bill.

Q203 **Bill Grant:** Sheldon's words about crime bringing a significant increase in salary are in my mind at the moment.

Statistics tell us that there has been an increase in suspended or custodial sentences for those convicted of knife crime. It has almost doubled. Is that part of the solution? Is harsher sentencing a way forward?

Sheldon Thomas: I am not sure about the effect of harsher sentences. You are putting teenagers in with hardened criminals and they come out worse. The prison system is a failing system and it does not really rehabilitate the minds of young people. The services in prison cannot relate to the inmates. A service is supposed to be working with them, but young people do not engage with the services—they just sit in the sessions. I am not sure about tougher sentencing. It would work if rehabilitation was properly defined in the prison system.

Dr Weinstein: More important than investing in harsher sentences would be to provide more support to young people. If we have resources, the best place to put them is into more support for young people. We often think that there are perpetrators and there are victims, but in reality they tend to be the same. If we can provide support for expression, and that kind of relatedness and community, even in the context of conversations about social media or education about social media use, it might go a long way towards rehabilitating youngsters, as compared to punishing them.

Q204 **Bill Grant:** When they have been found guilty through the courts of knife crime, are you suggesting that that support should be in prison, or that it should be different from prison?

Dr Weinstein: Throughout.

Martin Hewitt: I would support what both of you have said. The point is that more support to stop people getting into the situation in the first place is fundamental. A really important point was just made that, when we talk about this, we talk about offenders and we talk about victims. In the traditional sense—if I can use that word—in the vast majority of the serious violence and knife crime we have in London, most of the offenders have previously been victims and most of the victims have previously been offenders.

It is not clear cut: there is a group over here and a group over there. To some extent, they all commit some criminality and to an extent, they are all victims. People who have been stabbed multiple times are people we arrest for stabbing, and vice versa.

Dangerous people need to be locked up, because it gives respite to the community. You would expect me to say that, but I absolutely support the point that if and when we lock people up, if we do nothing to alter positively what happens when they come out, and in some cases the change is more negative, it is not helpful in the longer term. We end up with a kind of revolving door.

Beth Murray: I echo that. At Catch22, we advocate secure schools. If young people have to go into custody rather than a community alternative, let's use the time in a meaningful way that gives them the skills they need when they come out. That is the Government's proposal for secure schools.

Technology can play an amazing part in the rehabilitation of young people. If they are choosing between going for an apprenticeship or going for £350 a week, we need to understand that. If they are coming out with an element of status, they want to keep that status. They do not want to come out and then be cleaning up on their estate. If we give people an alternative career, and technology can provide that, they can walk out with their head held high.

There's a fantastic piece of work in HMP Humber called Code 4000. It turns out that to learn to code what you really need is to sit in a room for three months with no distractions. People are coming out as fully-fledged coders, with the skills that the economy needs in order to grow. They walk out saying, "I'm a coder now." That is pretty cool. They walk out as a social media manager and that's pretty cool. Why can't we use technology creatively and imaginatively as part of the rehabilitative solution? It is part of the problem. Let's fix it.

Q205 **Neil O'Brien:** Going back to screens and social media, a couple of people mentioned useful and interesting things. You just mentioned one, Beth. Does the panel have any examples of things the Committee should be aware of, overseas or in the UK, that have been effective or show the promise of being effective, particularly relating to the question of violence and gang violence? Is there anything we could draw on? Yesterday, in the context of bullying, we heard about German laws on parental control over their children signing up for social media at a young age. Have you seen anything that you think is particularly useful, or that you would draw on?

Beth Murray: It is so nascent.

Neil O'Brien: There is nothing you have seen. That is interesting in itself.

Q206 **Bill Grant:** Martin, this relates to your boss, the Commissioner, who stated on the radio that it would be "naive to say that the reduction in

police finances has not had an impact on knife crime." How have the reductions in police numbers impacted on this spate of crime? Is it part of it? Would it have happened had finances been higher? How has it impacted? I know it is tricky; you do not want to answer for your boss.

Martin Hewitt: Again, I do not think you can make a simple, straight causal link, but it is self-evident that, if you take out of policing the amount of resource we have taken out, it will limit what we can do. As we have already said, all the offending that is happening online has created a new set of demands on the system that we clearly have to manage.

Particularly on violent offending, there is something about our presence in communities and places as a deterrent and as a link to communities. I do not think there is a straightforward causal link. That would be too simplistic. But, as the Commissioner said, you cannot look at the degree to which resources have come out of policing and think that it will have no impact at all on some criminality, not just this specific area.

Q207 **Chair:** Keir said that the level of violent knife crime was higher when the funding was much higher as well.

Martin Hewitt: But we do not just deal with violent crime.

Q208 **Chair:** I accept that, but it is an interesting comparison. There is not a direct correlation between the two figures, is there?

Martin Hewitt: With particular types of violent crime, there are peak and trough periods. We have a particular phenomenon now, with a younger element, as we have said. There have been times previously when levels have been higher for other reasons, and it balances out with other types of criminality.

The point I think Keir was trying to make, and that I seek to make, is that there has been a lot of focus on violent crime, and the levels are way too high, but we have to look closely at the actual stats.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: Bill's point about enhanced sentences for knife crime links to the point about Met resources. Deterrence is made up of severity of punishment, how likely it is that people will be caught and how quickly they will be punished. You can start implementing heavy sentences for knife crime, but at the same time the vast majority of young people who carry knives are not being detected. The certainty of being detected has a much bigger impact on whether people are going to break the law than the severity of the sentence. The real issue is that, if you enhance the severity of the sentence without looking at certainty of being caught, you will have a lot of young people in custody. They will not respond to more severe sentences. They are carrying the knives because they fear for their safety. They prefer to carry a knife and think that they might remain alive over spending a couple of years in jail. That is a real problem.

If enhanced sentences worked, I would back them, but I really do not think they will. You will just end up with a load of young people in

custody, and we have made good advances recently in youth justice in bringing that number down.

Sheldon Thomas: To add to Keir's point, we tend to look at this the wrong way. We are always looking at whether the police are doing enough. Personally, I think this is a societal problem that families have to address. Those young men walk out of the house with a weapon. They do not walk out of a police station; they walk out of a house. At what point is it the responsibility of the family?

Secondly, when kids as young as 11 are out until 1 o'clock in the morning, where is the responsibility of the parents? Are we talking about functional parents or dysfunctional parents? We are in a society where kids are out on the street at all kinds of hours, being groomed, working, hanging out with gang members and hanging out on street corners until 1 o'clock in the morning. I am not sure what the police can do about a child who is out until 1 o'clock in the morning if the parents have no control over when he or she goes back to the house, or whether they carry a weapon.

The other point, which Keir made, is that we need to understand that more kids who are not in gangs carry knives because of fear—not because they want to be in the gang. There is a fear factor, which we do not understand because we are not in their world. They carry a weapon because of fear.

Q209 **Bill Grant:** I'm afraid it's back to you, Martin, but we can broaden it out. Catch22 suggested that the police were not using social media wisely in securing proper convictions or identifying perpetrators. How can professionals involved in these difficult situations—not just the police—make better use of social media in the context of knife crime, to reduce it or to bring people to justice, but preferably to reduce it?

Beth Murray: I would like to clarify that. The report was put together a couple of years ago, and the police have shown a lot of leadership in how they have dealt with social media.

Q210 **Bill Grant:** They have listened and moved on.

Beth Murray: Since the report was put together.

Dr Irwin-Rogers: I am not sure I know what the comment was.

Beth Murray: The report said that the police needed to do more monitoring to tackle what was being put on social media.

Q211 **Bill Grant:** It was not confined to the police. I think the report suggested that professionals involved in the whole scenario were not using social media to best advantage.

Beth Murray: It was primarily about social workers, youth workers and caseworkers, who maybe did not understand all the platforms that were

being used, so they could not have intelligent and meaningful conversations with the young people in their care.

Martin Hewitt: But I accept that it is about us trying to learn, catch up and respond. As we have already said, the way it is being used by people generally is changing all the time, and we have tried to catch up. There is a degree to which we are able to monitor, and we are working with providers to try to identify ways of doing that. We use that kind of evidence in criminal proceedings and there are lots of examples. We use it for intelligence as well, to fill gaps in our understanding of who is doing what. It is about constantly trying to improve the way we do that.

We are also looking at how we improve our people's understanding. In certain units, such as Trident, which deals predominantly with gangs, and in our units dealing with individual areas, there is a good degree of understanding. Spread around the rest of the organisation, there will inevitably be less.

Vicky Ford: I am listening to what you are saying and I have read the internet safety strategy Green Paper that the Government published at the weekend. You raise the really important issue of social media being used to recruit people to commit crime, which is not an issue that I have heard a lot about in other areas, or one that I see covered a lot in the internet safety strategy. There will be another consultation period before real action is taken. Some of the things you said about clearer terms of use need to be in that.

Reporting back on why content has been taken down is a really important point, as are the tools to identify questionable content when social media have been used to encourage crime or incite people to take part in crime. We probably cannot do it at this session, but there could be a really important report from this group of people. If you have further evidence on that, specifically on how, from your areas of expertise, you see the annexes and draft codes of practices for internet social media platforms, please put it in writing so that we can get it to the Government.

Chair: I suspect that many of you have yet to read that paper—although you may have done. In the interests of time, perhaps it would be better to have more thoughtful consideration of your points on the paper. Bill has a tiny question before I wrap things up.

Q212 **Bill Grant:** I have loved this late-afternoon discussion. I am picking up that social circumstances and the environment these people live in are a common thread. I am not naming places. It could be places in Scotland as well. It could be Glasgow, Liverpool or London. Would housing, social circumstances or opportunities stop people being drawn to the dark side?

Beth Murray: Good people, something to do, with good purpose, and a place they can live in. Three Ps.

Sheldon Thomas: I'm sorry, but without an emotional relationship with parents, none of that will work. That is where we seem to be afraid.

Beth Murray: Good people.

Sheldon Thomas: Yes, good people, but they want their own biological people, and that is where the problem is. I hear what Beth is saying about good people, but that does not replace an absent father and it doesn't replace a mum who may be struggling. What young kids tell me when they go to prison in Aylesbury is, "I just want my mum," or, "I just want a dad." We as a society need to ask ourselves serious questions about why it has become so easy for fathers to be absent. Why has it become so easy for us to blame the mum for the child's misbehaviour when there is no father? As a society, it is not just about good people; it is about addressing why it has become easy for a father to walk out of the house and have no relationship whatsoever with his children.

Chair: This has been an absolutely fascinating session. It has been very interesting. I admit that we have strayed somewhat from the terms of reference of an inquiry that is really about the impact of social media and screen use on young people's mental health and wellbeing, but that is not to say that these are not very interesting related points, so I am very grateful for your input.

I have one final question. To bring us back to the social media and screen use aspect, in light of what the Government have discussed, and the £11 million that the Home Office announced for an early intervention fund, are there any areas where you think that £11 million fund could be spent to change the way social media is used at the moment? I am sure we could all think of many ways to use £11 million to tackle some of the wider issues, but as we have to make recommendations based on our terms of reference, I am particularly interested in where you think that money should be used to improve the way social media is monitored, regulated or accessed.

Dr Weinstein: The theme is that social media content is a symptom of the problem. That is where we started, and I think that is where we should end. Given that, if we put too many resources into trying to put out fires, we will constantly get new fires, because we are not tackling the underlying problem. If we can, we should put money into interventions that provide supports and into research to understand what those supports should be.

One of the things that has emerged is that we know very little about this topic right now. We all have different reactions, but there is not a lot of great research. If we have a clear understanding and a systematic approach to solving some of these things in a direct way, it might be money better spent than on creating more censorships and creating more restrictions.

Q213 **Chair:** I understand. The underlying issues are serious and have been well rehearsed here today. There is obviously money to be spent there. It was specifically on social media.

Beth Murray: I would argue that money needs to be spent, but it needs to be spent by the platforms. That £11 million would be incredibly well spent on early interventions on societal issues. The money and the capacity that needs to be unlocked can be unlocked by those who have that capacity.

Chair: Thank you. Huge thanks on behalf of the Committee. It has been excellent. We are all very grateful.