COMMUNITY LINKS

Community Conversations

Unearthing community-led ideas for tackling youth violence.

About Community Links

Community Links is a social action charity that has been transforming lives in East London and beyond for 40 years. From our base in Canning Town in Newham, we apply the learning from our local work to influence and achieve positive national change. Through running our open-door advice services, community hubs, youth sessions and employability programmes, we have our ears firmly to the ground and are well placed to understand the impact of government policy on our community.

We believe in three core approaches that underpin all of our programmes, advice, services and policy work. We believe that these three approaches enable and empower communities, and simultaneously help them to make better use of resources.

1. **Early Action** – Intervening early to prevent problems before they occur, or to prevent them from getting worse.

2. **Deep Value** – Building strong, trusting relationships to improve services and outcomes.

3. **Ready for Everything Communities** – Our strategic goal between now and 2020 is to build the foundations of what we call "Ready for Everything Communities". This is a community that is united and empowered with the knowledge, networks and social capital to take up opportunities, and face challenges, collectively. To be successful, "Ready for Everything Communities" must demonstrate resilience, but must also be proactive, open and positive.

About Community Conversations

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FOREWORD

For too long, the root causes and impact of violence on our communities have been misunderstood.

The shocking scenes that have been transmitted across newspaper pages, television screens and social media in the past 18 months mark a noticeable increase in serious youth violence. There have been 125 violent deaths in London since the beginning of 2018, 72 of which have been fatal stabbings, and it seems like each week brings a new tragedy.

Yet too often, these stories are forgotten as soon as they leave the front pages. Many questions have been asked about whether drugs, gangs or music are to blame, but not enough time has been spent listening to young people and communities about what is happening to them.

By April 2018, it was clear that this situation demanded a response. Two shocking incidents of youth violence directly affected us at Community Links. We have seen not only the traumatic impact of such violence, so close to home, on those directly involved, but also the fear and anxiety it engenders in the wider community. Our approach has begun with these people, the real experts in our community who have lived experience of the daily aggression, poverty and inequality we seek to tackle.

Whilst Community Links is by no means the only organisation looking for answers, we have always felt that we are well placed to understand the relationship between government policy and local impact. As an organisation rooted in our local communities in Newham and East London, we believe that the only appropriate response to youth violence is one that involves the whole community and works from the ground up.

As the Mayor of Newham Rokhsana Fiaz has said, it takes a whole village to raise a child. This idea is fundamental to how we have approached the subject of youth violence. We have not started by seeing young people as the problem, but by asking: what does the village think? How can we empower the village? What role do we want that child to play in the village when they grow up?

Community Links is committed to collaborative, preventative, place-based working. Our aim is to act as a focal point, an anchor institution, to bring together the public, private and social sectors and generate a whole community response to systemic problems. By listening to the needs of our local community on this issue, we hope to achieve three things: to make an impact locally; to amplify the voice of our local community to speak truth to power; and to take the findings from our local work to generate national change.

We have our own vision that communities that are collaborative, proactive and have the capacity to take advantage of opportunities will be "Ready for Everything". Fear, violence and anger undermine this goal, and so it is imperative that we support our communities to tackle these problems together.

Arvinda Gohil,

Chief Executive, Community Links

SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE: THE CONTEXT

"Nine young lives have been lost to violent crime in West Ham [Newham] since 2017. Nine teenagers and young adults, with their whole life ahead of them, needlessly and tragically stolen from us."

Lyn Brown MP (West Ham), House of Commons, 5 September 2018.

London is experiencing a surge in serious youth violence. Media reports and crime statistics show that Newham has one of the highest rates of serious violence in London. There were 8,151 instances of serious youth violence across London in 2017, up from 6,278 in 2015 (MOPAC, 2018). Violent crime – including harassment, assault and grievous bodily harm (GBH) – increased by almost 7.5% from 2017 to 2018, and there were more murders in Newham than in any other London borough (MOPAC, 2018). 445 instances of violent crime were reported in Newham in June 2018, a 22% increase from June 2017 and the highest rate for almost six years (UK Crime Stats, 2018).

These figures represent an increase from already-high levels of violent crime in Newham in preceding years. In 2016, there were more gun crimes in Newham than any other London borough (MOPAC, 2018). According to the Metropolitan Police, Newham had the second highest rate of knife crime offences in London with 674 recorded offences (MOPAC, 2018). There was also a 21% rise in knife attacks by under 25s in Newham, with an attack taking place "the equivalent of every three days" (Youle, 2017). Stratford & New Town ward has the highest rate of Serious Youth Violence Victims of any ward in London, with 107 victims in 2017 compared to an average of 11.2 (GLA, 2018).

Two incidents of serious violence have touched us directly at Community Links. In one instance, youth workers at our community hub in the Royal Docks had to provide life-saving first aid to a young man who had been stabbed. In the other, a young volunteer was murdered near her home in Walthamstow. The combination of recent increases in serious youth violence across the capital and our own experiences closer to home has made us feel duty-bound to investigate the root causes of violence, and unlock possible solutions, by working with our local community in Newham.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the beginning of July 2018, Community Links has hosted eight Community Conversations on serious youth violence. These events were designed to test a new way of engaging with the community to gather feedback and proposals on the causes of, and possible solutions to, recent increases in serious youth violence across London. These Conversations were hosted with a wide range of partners in Newham including the Renewal Programme, the University of East London (UEL) and the East London Citizens Organisation (TELCO). Over the course of the Conversations, we spoke with over 200 people in Newham, over a third of whom were young people aged 25 and under.

This report details the findings from these Conversations along with key policy recommendations for local and national government, communities, the social sector and the private sector. By taking these recommendations seriously, Community Links believes that engaged organisations can generate a systemic shift towards a preventative, cross-sector, and whole-community-based approach to tackling serious youth violence.

Violence, it seems, is not the exception in the lives of many young people, but something that permeates the social relations and interactions between young people, their families, the police, and the communities around them. In this sense, whilst there must always be individual accountability for premeditated violent crimes, it is vital that policymakers and service providers take into account the wider structural and systemic factors that can, at times, make violence appear to be the only way to survive for young people.

Our findings suggest that many young people growing up in London today suffer multiple forms of structural disadvantage (e.g. poverty) and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which take a traumatic toll on their emotional resilience.

The recent increase in incidents of youth violence has engendered a climate of fear across communities, further undermining the emotional resilience of young people and their families. In situations where this lack of resilience is exposed, physical violence can often seem like the only means of resolving a dangerous situation. For some young people, violence has become the first, not a last, resort as a means of self-defence.

Broadly speaking, participants in our Community Conversations were supportive of a shift towards a public health approach to tackling violence. Such an approach would move away from seeing violence solely as an enforcement issue, and would invest resources in preventative measures, Early Action and community spaces.

Our research also suggests that there is an enabling and capacity-building role for "anchor organisations" (e.g. charities, community centres, housing associations) to play in communities. By forming better relationships between individuals, families and the state, these anchor institutions can plot a path towards a multifaceted, place-based approach to serious youth violence, unearthing local community-led ideas and generating buy-in across the public, private and social sectors.

Our research found that there are multiple structural, systemic, environmental and individual factors that underline London's challenges with serious youth violence.

Structural factors:

1. Inequality and austerity
2. Lack of positive opportunities for young people
3. Disconnect between rhetoric around youth violence and the reality

Systemic factors:

1. The lack of a joined-up approach
2. Young people are seen as the problem
3. Violence is normalised
4. Intervention is too late

Environmental factors:

1. Social media is a catalyst for violence
2. There is a lack of spaces for young people and the community
3. Young people operate in a climate of fear

Individual factors:

1. Challenges to mental health and little investment in emotional resilience
2. Challenging parent-child relationships
3. Lack of sense of belonging
4. Inhibitors on self-expression.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Based on the feedback from our Community Conversations, we believe that the following recommendations will help local authorities, policymakers and communities to begin tackling serious youth violence.

1. **Local authorities, the social sector and the private sector must collaborate in their areas (and beyond).** London boroughs should encourage forums that co-ordinate activities and services locally, enabling a joined-up, whole community response to youth violence.

2. **Public services should work in partnership with the social sector to develop an advocacy strategy that would enable multiple agencies to engage with young people through a single, end-to-end contact.** Engaging with multiple agencies can be a bewildering, stressful experience for young people that compounds emotional strain. Dedicated advocates who work with young people on a 1-1 basis and help them to interact with these agencies would reduce the pressure on vulnerable young people and act as the focal point for a multi-agency intervention.

3. **Mentoring in schools, online mentoring and detached youth work must all form part of the solution.** Young people's mental health across the UK is a growing concern, but positive guidance, role models and opportunities for expression can set young people on positive pathways.

4. **Youth workers should be valued as Community Champions who can act early to prevent grooming and gang involvement.** However, they need the appropriate support, training and counselling to be able to do this job safely and effectively. As the Youth Violence Commission argues, youth workers should be valued in a similar way to social workers.

5. **It is important to begin rebuilding trust between the police, communities and young people.** It is the perception that police use of Stop and Search powers is already heavy-handed and potentially discriminatory. Stop and Search workshops, where young people and police officers meet to have a frank dialogue about the motivations, thoughts and fears they experience during a search, is one option for rebuilding trust that has been suggested to us by young people.

6. **Collaborate to develop Family Hubs, with support from corporate partners and employers, which combine multiple family support services and employment opportunities into a single location.** Safe spaces such as these with co-located services are vital to ending the negative, sometimes violent, associations that young people can have with public services and would focus on a family-centred approach to preventing structural and physical violence.

7. **Gather evidence around successful examples of providing progressive alternatives to pupil exclusions or prison sentences for low-level offences.** Initiatives such as the Glasgow VRU, SPAC Nation and Love 146's "Immediate Safety Plan" (which removes young people involved in County Lines from contact with gang networks and provides 24-hour supervision as an alternative to prison) suggest some models for how this could work.

8. **Creative arts and sports are crucial for engaging young people and setting them on positive pathways for the future.** The arts and creative engagement are a powerful diversionary activity for young people. This is because artistic work allows reflection and can change perceptions. Simultaneously it engages the emotions, which can act as a powerful driver for change and can help different behaviours become embedded. There are numerous examples of where arts and creative engagement are driving social change, particularly in theatre and education (e.g. Roundabout), music-making settings (e.g. Spitalfields Music Endless Imagination, Art Against Knives) and participatory Visual Arts work (e.g. Artichoke).

9. **Strategies for tackling serious youth violence cannot be top-down, one-size fits all approaches. As far as possible, they should be rooted in local social infrastructure and the communal dynamics of each place.** In particular, it is important to realise that chicken shops, schools, youth clubs, bus stops, libraries, the home, and online are all spaces in which young people socialise and learn. At present, these spaces represent certain risks to young people; but they also represent opportunities to intervene early to reduce risk.

10. **Use the Community Conversations model to begin listening to communities and understand how a genuinely community-led approach can be developed in violence hot spots across the UK.** Ultimately, solutions will vary across different local authorities, and the best way for the public, private and social sectors to formulate a joined-up response to youth violence is to listen to the communities around them.

11. **Change the narrative.** All sectors of society need to stop reinforcing the idea that young people are the problem. Communities should promote opportunities to support potential and talent. We need to work together to properly encourage and celebrate the achievements of young people.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: THE FINDINGS

Over these eight Conversations, we heard a wide range of ideas, suggestions and topics discussed. We made audio recordings of each Conversation and have taken the time to carefully revisit each one. In many cases, participants approached the subject matter head on and proposed direct answers to the questions that were posed about youth violence's root causes and possible solutions. However, at times participants talked far more broadly around the subject, discussing additional social issues and highlighting potential indirect causes of youth violence.

In presenting our findings, we have aimed to strike a balanced approach between reporting directly what our participants told us on the one hand, and on the other interpreting the more general perspectives on violence that were alluded to or implied in our Conversations.

The overall impression we took from these contributions was that growing up in East London has become an increasingly difficult, and in some ways traumatic, experience for young people that has to be negotiated on a daily basis. The combined effects of poverty, austerity and cuts to youth services have closed down opportunities for young people. 37% of children in London live in poverty, but that figure is as high as 43% for boroughs such as Newham and Tower Hamlets in East London (End Child Poverty, 2018). Cuts to child protection and family services have made it increasingly difficult for local authorities to meet the safeguarding needs of vulnerable young people and the increase in violent crime (along with the easy accessibility of graphic, violent images through the news and social media) contributes to a climate of fear in which young people do not feel safe.

These factors appear to make life for many young people in East London a brutal existence in which their mental health, family life and relationships are shaped by multiple forms of structural and physical violence. Bullying, ACEs, poverty, sexual abuse, grooming and exploitation can all take an extreme toll on the ability of young people to interact with society in a positive way.

A key focus of our Community Conversations was to allow our local communities to discuss the topics in a frank and open way. What quickly became clear was not only that serious youth violence is far more complex than represented in media reports, but also that representations of violence that boiled the issue down to a single cause-and-effect narrative were counterproductive.

Our conversation participants highlighted a wide range of issues that affect young people and could act as long-term root causes or short-term catalysts for violence. These included (but were not limited to): poverty and inequality; housing issues; trauma and ACEs; poor mental health; substance abuse; family breakdown; educational issues; exclusions; discrimination; and a desire to provide for, or protect, their friends and family. This suggested that the combination of these multiple issues, at least one or more of which is likely to affect a young person's life in some way, could generate a cycle of overwhelming helplessness, fear, anger, and ultimately violence, from which it is difficult to escape.

This perspective suggests that our local community supports the shift towards the much-lauded "public health approach" to tackling youth violence that has been discussed in the media and by policymakers in recent months. This reinforces the view that violence should be treated as a widespread social issue that requires the involvement of communities in a systemic, multi-agency solution. Niven Rennie (2018), Director of Glasgow's highly successful Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), has stated that such an approach requires a long-term shift in approach from seeing violence solely as an enforcement issue to one where it is viewed as a systemic social issue (requiring a mix of universal preventative measures and targeted interventions against high risk groups or individuals).

However, whilst the Glasgow VRU's model has been highly successful, London represents a very different challenge altogether with a population more than ten times larger spread out over 33 local authorities. A public health approach to youth violence in London must also be place-based, taking into account the specific social issues, local characteristics and recent history of the UK capital. This must necessarily involve anchor institutions and organisations that can mediate interventions. The

key findings from our Conversations provide detailed guidance on what a public health model for London's own VRU might look like.

We have summarised these findings under four broad areas, covering factors that are structural, systemic, environmental and individual.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS

1. Inequality and austerity

"We have had a 66% cut in essential services in Newham Council …I think that we've forgotten that the nurturing of our children is the most important thing we can do."

Participant at Community Links, 10th July

- Many of our conversation participants placed a large emphasis on the effects of poverty, inequality and cuts to youth services on sustaining a cycle of violence. In particular, participants highlighted the negative impact which poverty can have on family life and mental health.

- Levels of youth and BAME unemployment were also highlighted as potential long-term causes of young people looking for insecure, informal, and at times illegal employment (resulting in criminal exploitation). Although not specifically phrased in these terms, many participants alluded to poverty and inequality as forms of systemic or structural violence, which were acting as root causes for frustration, despair, and disenfranchisement.

- If young people do not have the emotional resilience or collective opportunities to express these feelings, there is the possibility that this frustration may be expressed through physical violence.

2. Lack of positive opportunities

"How do we connect with people who are not connected yet?"

Participant at the University of East London, 9th July

- The most at-risk young people are not always easy to reach through youth clubs and in schools. Because of this, it is important to also invest in detached youth work and new methods of online mentoring.

- It is clear that there remains a high demand for acute services to work with highly at-risk young people in the 16-21 age group. However, this needs to be balanced with interventions to a younger age group starting in primary school. Taking an Early Action approach would enable cross-sector partnerships to reduce the demand for acute services over time.

- For the time being, however, it is important to continue investing in innovative forms of detached youth work and all forms of mentoring in order to offer young people the chance to move onto an alternative, positive path.

3. Disconnect between rhetoric and reality

"Stop and search is a good thing – but it's really racist how they just go and pick on black people first…My friend gets stopped and searched – like daily."

Participants at Bonny Downs Community Association, 6th October

- At times, it was clear from the conversations we were having that there is a disconnect between the political rhetoric on youth violence and the reality of daily life in London's communities. Whilst representatives of local and national government have scrambled to take action in the past year, the extent to which political rhetoric translates into real change on the street is questionable.

- This seems particularly to be the case with Stop and Search; despite repeated calls for an intelligence-led expansion of Stop and Search, little seems to have changed about the reality of regular police searches for young black men in our local community.

- Critics such as Peter Squires have argued that this is because the Met's controversial Gang Matrix is highly racialised and reinforces the "myth of black criminality" (Gilroy, 1982). There has also been a significant rise in the use of borough-wide Section 60 orders, which means that people can be stopped and searched without suspicion in a given area, with 112 enforced by the Metropolitan Police last year (up from 26 in 2016).

- It is also important that new government proposals and strategies come with details on concrete policy changes and interventions. There has been much debate about the importance of taking a public health approach to serious youth violence in recent months, with the GLA and Home Office now backing this approach.

- At Community Links, we absolutely welcome the idea that governments should be taking into account root causes and preventative measures to treat violence as a public safety issue. Difficulties arise, however, from a lack of clear direction on what this approach entails.

- This disconnect with reality has potentially damaging long-term consequences as communities feel they have heard it all before, becoming frustrated and disillusioned. This has the effect of reinforcing the existing social distance between those who make policy and those who are its intended targets.

SYSTEMIC FACTORS

1. Lack of a joined-up approach

"We need to start communication between generations and between each other."

Participant at the Renewal Programme, 4th July

"Whether we're neighbours, residents, youth workers, faith groups, the police, local authorities, it is about combined and joined-up effort.

Participant at Community Links, 10th July

- The response of our local community to these Community Conversations showed that there is genuine enthusiasm and motivation among residents to work together to tackle youth violence.

- Many of the participants also referred to other initiatives that are taking place around Newham, but felt that too many organisations were working in an isolated way. Taking a more joined-up, collaborative approach would enable a whole community response to the issue.

- There are a wide range of contact points, public spaces and community advocates that at-risk young people regularly come into contact with. Taking a joined-up approach would mean expanding and connecting this network so that, as our participants highlighted, at-risk young people could be identified early, referred to appropriate services, put into contact with mentors, or helped to find safe spaces to explain their circumstances.

- In this way, young people would be supported at home, at school, and out in the community.

2. Young people are seen as the problem

"[We should think] more about what is great about our society and how great children are and start from that premise."

Participant at Community Links, 10th July

- Many participants noted that young people were too often being framed as troublemakers or as a cause of violence, particularly in negative media reports that focused almost exclusively on drill music, social media and youth culture.

- This was associated with a wider perception that young people are a nuisance, particularly those congregating in public places. It was argued that these negative perceptions of young people produce a negative response from other parts of the community. This can lead to a reluctance to engage with the kinds of institutions (schools, the police etc.) and spaces (libraries, youth centres) which might provide them with a positive outlet for self-expression.

- A youth-centred approach that focused on a positive understanding of the role young people can play in society, it was argued, would signal a significant systemic change in how to tackle youth violence.

3. Violence is normalised

"If you're growing up seeing that [violence] is the norm and you're engaging in conversations about it then obviously there is something wrong there."

Participant at Community Links, 10th July

- Participants also thought that violence is becoming too normalised in society, but particularly in East London. Some made reference to widespread violence in culture, others talked about the sharing of graphic videos on social media, whilst others talked about a perceived increase in hate crime and societal anger.

- Contributors generally framed these forms of social or cultural violence as factors that normalised and embedded violence within communities by transmitting forms of violent behaviour across generations. To break this cycle of violence, it was deemed necessary to provide support to families (such as parenting classes, financial support, mental health support) to help parents and others provide a safe and stable atmosphere for young people growing up.

4. Intervention is too late

"We really need to do more preventative work, from an early age... We need to be working further upstream – nurturing children, explaining what emotions are, where they come from and how you handle them."

Participant at Community Links, 10th July

- One of the most strikingly consistent themes throughout our conversations was the argument that some types of intervention, particularly those designed to prevent 16-21 year olds becoming involved in criminal exploitation and youth violence, were "too late".

- The young people who we spoke with re-iterated this point, saying that children as young as 10 were being groomed into gang culture at school bus stops, chicken shops and youth clubs. By the age of 16, many argued, those who were most at risk of becoming involved in youth violence would likely already be excluded from school, and potentially deeply embedded in criminal networks and / or operating County Lines.

- It is important to approach this idea sensitively, as there is clearly a need for highly targeted, acute interventions to work with young people involved in criminal networks. The important point to take from this, however, is that these acute interventions ought to be supported by a range of more "upstream" activities that can promote expression and prevent young people from being groomed at an earlier age.

- This has been echoed in the Mayor of London's Young Londoner's Fund, aimed at delivering preventative services to help young people navigate more positive pathways for their futures. One potential method of achieving this would be a co-ordinated effort to reduce the numbers of young people who are excluded from school and to promote a culture, as Leroy Logan MBE (2018) has argued, of "inclusion not exclusion".

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ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

1. Social media as a catalyst for violence

> *"There is confusion about how social media is used and what impact it has on young people. Young people are overexposed at a highly impressionable age to a plethora of information which is in no way filtered. Due to the disinterest expressed towards much of social media by older generations, young people are often not taught how to protect and/or distance themselves from negative and damaging elements of social media."*

Participant at Asta Community Hub, 3rd July

- The feedback from participants on the role of social media in serious youth violence was mixed, although the topic itself was raised at every event we hosted. Young people, youth workers and parents all made reference to the increasing accessibility of violent images and videos on social media. Many also referred more specifically to instances where the use of violent language and imagery online had developed into more serious rivalries, and ultimately violence, in the real world.

- However, many participants were also keen to stress that social media was not a starting point in the cycle of violence. Instead, they pointed to the role of social media in sustaining this cycle by circulating graphic imagery, exacerbating low level conflict and generating trauma.

- This corroborates previous research by Catch22 (2017: 3) which found that social media content "should not be seen as a root cause of youth violence…however, [it is] acting as a catalyst and trigger for serious incidents of face-to-face violence between young people".

- The young people we spoke with were also keen to emphasise that although social media can affect behaviour, it is unlikely that simply banning the circulation of drill music and graphic content online would solve the issue of serious youth violence. Ultimately, these are consequences of other forms of violence, not causes.

- As Catch22 (2017: 4) also argued, social media is "commonly perceived to be hidden from adults, a virtual free-for-all space". If this is the case, imposed restrictions on violent imagery online could result in the displacement of young people to other unregulated digital spaces and platforms in which they are more vulnerable to even greater risk.

- For this reason, the young people we talked with were pessimistic about the effectiveness of banning online content (particularly when it came to drill). Instead, many favoured the idea of better education on how to use social media safely and the expansion of mentoring programmes (which could be delivered through online platforms and social media to reach more young people.

2. Lack of spaces for young people and the community

> *"There is a lack of options for young people to engage in activities around their school and family lives."*

Participant at Asta Community Hub, 3rd July

- Young people have a huge amount of creative potential and positive energy that should be harnessed rather than repressed. When participants were talking about the young people they know and had worked with, we felt an overwhelming sense of positivity and optimism about the creative potential of young people, if unleashed in a positive way.

- Young people told us that a lack of spaces and opportunities to express themselves, as well as the demonisation of aspects of their culture, made it increasingly difficult to express themselves positively and reinforced the intergenerational divide. Yet there are numerous projects around Newham (e.g. Fight for Peace, Rosetta Arts, Ambition Aspire Achieve) and London (Art Against Knives, Lifeline Projects) which use sports, art and extracurricular activities to inspire young people and guide them onto a positive path. Projects such as these are crucial for tackling serious youth violence, but there is a need and demand for more of them.

- What also became clear from our conversations was that the voices of young people must be included as much as possible in debates that shape their environments. The young people at our Conversations felt very positive about the process we were using. Young people are passionate, articulate and invested in determining their own futures. Rather than ignoring or suppressing that energy, it is vital that communities, public services and the third sector find a way of harnessing it.

3. **Climate of fear**

"The common trend I see is fear. Fear underpins all of it. A lot of the responses that we seem to be getting over and over and over again – 'Let's have more anti-knife crime workshops, let's have more stops and searches'. These things come down to fear and violence is an emotional response to that fear."

Participant at Community Links, 10th July

- Another issue raised as an environmental factor behind youth violence, particularly in explaining why young people carry weapons, was the widespread prevalence of fear. Many of our conversation participants, but particularly parents, felt that the recent increase in youth violence, and extensive media coverage that went with it, were partly to blame.

- Some even talked of a climate of fear that is difficult for some, particularly those living outside of violence hot spots, to understand, and which makes young people in the community feel unsafe. It was suggested that many young people carry knives as a form of personal protection, but sometimes with tragic, unforeseen consequences.

- Although outlined as a potential environmental factor, this fear was not described as a root cause, but rather the result of ACEs, being witness to violence at home or in the community, or other mental health issues related to anger, trauma and low emotional resilience.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

1. Mental health and emotional resilience

"Young people at a risk of violence are also at a risk of a number of other issues, whether it's mental health issues, alcohol substance misuse, family breakdown, being excluded from school, not being able to deal with their emotions, experienced trauma, anger because a friend or family member was attacked, robbed or stabbed or shot to death. These are the sorts of things they're dealing with."

Participant at Community Links, 10th July.

- Our conversation participants agreed that positive role models and mentors were crucial for tackling youth violence, particularly (as many highlighted) because of the growing mental health crisis among young people. Low self-esteem, witnessing traumatic events, or dealing with a difficult home life are all issues that can affect a young person's mental health.

- Several participants argued that a lack of stability in their personal lives could prompt a young person to take drastic action (such as carrying a knife to protect themselves) or seek stability elsewhere (perhaps by making money through illicit means).

- It is important that, as a society, we provide enough platforms of stability and places of safety for young people to have the time to reflect. The ability to reflect is crucial for behaviour change.

- Being able to spot the warning signs of low-level mental health issues and support young people through these without resorting to other means is therefore an important step in turning the positive energy and potential of young people onto a positive pathway. Mentoring and reflection are therefore crucial components of any attempt to address youth violence.

2. Parent-child relationships

"There is a recurring and difficult to access element of knife crime. The hidden trauma for those who have to watch, provide first aid, and later support the victims."

Participant at Asta Community Hub, 3rd July

- Perhaps the clearest recommendation for a practical intervention came from a series of participants who reiterated the importance of providing further support to the parents of victims and perpetrators of knife crime. This included the creation of support groups for parents dealing with trauma in an effort to further develop relationships to bind communities together.

- Many participants, particularly community leaders, youth workers and parents themselves, highlighted the need for parenting classes and in-the-home support to help parents spot the signs of criminal exploitation or gang involvement early.

- With trauma, ACEs and an unstable family life all highlighted as possible root causes of serious youth violence, the home was seen by many participants as a key terrain in efforts for early intervention and breaking the cycle.

3. Lack of sense of belonging

"It's [postcode wars], kind of a protection for their area. Not recognising your face, or recognising you from their area, they automatically assume you're from another gang or another group and you're coming here intentionally to do something to us."

Participant at Bonny Downs Community Association, 6th October

"There is a disjointedness of communities – we are living way too many parallel lives."

Participant at Community Links, 10th July

- One of the more difficult to articulate, perhaps even controversial, points which came up in our conversations was the feeling that young people feel intensely disconnected and excluded from their wider communities. This disconnection could manifest itself as a refusal to engage with local institutions (e.g. schools, youth clubs, the police) and could reinforce the feeling that young people have nowhere to turn for advice and support.

- It was also raised, however, that some young people were being offered a sense of belonging and purpose by gangs. This was especially articulated by youth workers and youth service professionals who suggested that young people who were being groomed into criminal exploitation might initially see gangs as a kind of alternative community, offering a sense of stability and belonging missing from their own lives.

4. Inhibitors on self-expression

"I think every young person needs a pathway to channel their aggression and to channel themselves. For some, it's gonna be sport. For some other young people, it might be music, it might be drama. Every young person is unique, every young person is different. So it's all about us as members of the community trying to re-hone in on what makes a young person tick and what is that lightbulb moment for that young person."

Participant at Community Links, 10th July

- Finally, we also discussed the perception among young people, youth workers and parents that positive opportunities for self-expression by young people were extremely limited.

- In some cases this was due to individual factors, in others it was outlined with reference to local authority cuts, the closure of youth centres and libraries, and the loss of creative activities for young people to engage with.

- This point was particularly reinforced by young people who said that they would have to travel (potentially outside of their own borough) to find spaces for self-expression.

- Even with the time and money to be able to engage in these activities, however, some raised the point that there remained cultural barriers to the type of self-expression that the wider community found acceptable for young people to engage in.

- Street art and drill music were just two cited examples of forms of self-expression that offered important outlets for young people, but which remain proscribed or frowned upon by adults.

NEW APPROACHES TO TACKLING SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE

Given what we have learned from our Community Conversations over the preceding months, we believe that the following approaches are vital for changing the recent trend of serious youth violence. These approaches can act as a toolkit for policymakers, local authorities, social sector leaders and the private sector across London (and beyond) to take a collaborative and community-led approach to youth violence in their area.

Early Action

As highlighted by many of the participants in our Conversations, Early Action (also referred to as "prevention" or "early intervention") is fundamental to tackling youth violence, particularly any strategy that claims to take a "public health approach", addressing causes not symptoms. Early Action has increasingly becoming a focus of government policy to tackle youth violence both nationally (Home Office, 2018) and locally (GLA, 2018) over the past year, and previous research by Community Links (2010: 11) has demonstrated that this kind of approach can help to reduce anti-social behaviour. However, it is necessary to continue building this evidence base whilst taking Early Action against serious youth violence. For this reason, we welcome the Home Office's (2018b) recent announcement of the Youth Endowment Fund, which will seek to fund further Early Action projects and research.

Social infrastructure

As the Early Action Task Force (2018: 13) has argued, however, Early Action relies on a wide array of physical and social infrastructure in order to be implemented effectively. There is a clear need to invest in more community spaces and social infrastructure as social sector projects rely on support networks, funding, green space and the built environment, without which they would be unable to function. London Youth (2018: 11) argue that youth organisations play a vital role in supporting communities and providing places of physical safety from violence for young people. In order to tackle youth violence effectively, it is necessary to invest in this wider landscape of social infrastructure.

Collaboration

There is a clear need, highlighted by many participants in our conversations, for public services, community leaders, voluntary and community organisations to work together on this issue. Just as Lyn Brown MP (2018) has argued for a "joined-up, strategic safeguarding response to the criminal exploitation of young people", a similar approach is needed to tackle youth violence. It is not enough to focus our efforts on one or two interventions to be delivered in schools and youth centres if this means that young people will be vulnerable to grooming, peer pressure and traumatic experiences elsewhere in their communities. Rather than interacting with multiple agencies, young people would benefit from holistic, personalised advocacy.

Relationships and mentoring

Mentoring, reflection and expression are crucial for helping at-risk young people build emotional resilience, avoid risk and explore imaginative pathways towards a positive future. Trusting relationships that put young people at the centre of services can help turn a young person from negative expression onto a positive pathway.

Positive role models

There is also an urgent need to re-ignite the intergenerational connections that young people have with their parents, employers, members of the local community and the police to ensure that young people can rely on role models, strong relationships and sound advice. Community Links has already begun piloting a Community Advocates scheme in Newham, Croydon and Hackney to test how members of the community can encourage reflection by young people with the hope that this will lead to a change in behaviour.

Empower communities through the social sector

As our work has shown, charities and community organisations can acts as important anchors in the community, generating a sense of belonging for the whole community and providing vital services. However, we have also shown that the social sector can act as an amplifier of community voices, transmitting local concerns to a wider audience and reinforcing local level achievements. In order to be able to continue and expand this work, communities and the social sector must be empowered to thrive and generate solutions to local priorities.

CONTEXT: RESEARCH AND DEBATE ON YOUTH VIOLENCE IN 2018

Community Links is not the only organisation to have seen this recent surge in serious violence as an imperative to understand its causes and possible solutions. Whilst undertaking our own research in Newham, our team has also been engaging closely with current debates by attending events, reviewing recently published research and initiating informal conversations with local community leaders, business owners, political representatives and Community Neighbourhood Forums.

A key component of this recent policy work on youth violence is the UK government's *Serious Violence Strategy* (Home Office, 2018). Of particular interest to Community Links was the Strategy's emphasis on the importance of early intervention (Home Office, 2018: 42), although the government also argued that greater efforts were needed to disrupt drug networks, support communities and develop a tougher law enforcement and criminal justice stance. In her introduction to the strategy, then Home Secretary Amber Rudd said that the strategy was "not solely focused on law enforcement, very important as that is, but depends on partnerships across a number of sectors such as education, health, social services, housing, youth services, and victim services" (Home Office, 2018: 9). The strategy emphasises the role of gangs and drug-related activity on driving violent crime increases, but also highlights other factors such as alcohol, opportunity, individual character and social media.

This Strategy was supported by a series of measures including: investment in a new National County Lines Coordination Centre to prevent the exploitation of young people by drug networks; an £11 million investment for a new Early Intervention Youth Fund to support community-based violence prevention services; a £13 million Trusted Relationships Fund to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable young people; the creation of a new Serious Violence Taskforce; and a new Offensive Weapons Bill which introduces tougher restrictions on the online sale of knives.

In recent months, the Greater London Authority (GLA) has also increased its efforts to tackle serious youth violence through a £45 million investment in the Mayor's Young Londoners Fund. This Fund was designed to "help children and young people to fulfil their potential, particularly those at risk of getting caught up in crime" by supporting education, sport and cultural activities for children and young people (GLA, 2018b). In October 2018, the Home Office announced a further £200m investment in the Youth Endowment Fund that will help to build the evidence for early intervention. In late 2018, the Mayor of London announced that the GLA would set up its own Violence Reduction Unit to tackling violence across the capital.

Whilst local and national government have provided some investment to tackle serious youth violence, it has also been widely acknowledged that top-down approaches alone cannot deliver lasting change. Therefore, a wide range of community leaders, politicians, social sector organisations and policy units have increased their efforts to understand the causes of this recent surge. There has been greater recognition of the need for Early Action interventions and mentoring services that can prevent low-level mental health issues from escalating into bigger problems with anger, social isolation and substance misuse.

As the Centre for Social Justice (2018: 63) and Home Office (2018: 44) have argued, mentoring can also help to disseminate "messages that dissuade the carrying of weapons and change behaviour". Evidence shows that for every £1 spent on operating costs, mentoring programmes can generate £2.03 of social benefits (or £6.66 for every £1 of Local Authority contributions) [CSJ, 2018: 97]. This work on mental health is crucial in Newham as the borough has the highest number of children and young people with mental health issues (5,330) and emotional disorders (2,057) of any borough in London (Public Health England, 2018).

There has been a marked attempt to engage with the public across London on this issue in recent months. Violent crime summits have been held in Tooting and Tower Hamlets. Chuka Umunna MP, a member of the Serious Violence Taskforce and Youth Violence Commission, spoke at an event hosted by Demos in Brixton alongside Deputy Mayor Sophie Linden, former superintendent Leroy Logan and NUS President Shakira Martin. In August, Unmesh Desai AM (London Assembly Member for City and East) and Stephen Timms MP (East Ham) hosted an event on youth violence in which Community Links participated, and in October, the Let's Talk Youth Violence event

organised by Their Voices aimed to gather feedback and suggestions from the community in Bromley-by-Bow. David Lammy MP and the East London Business Alliance (ELBA, 2018) have also made tackling youth violence in their areas a priority, whilst TELCO and the Mayor of Newham (through new Citizens' Assemblies) have emphasised the need to listen directly to local communities.

Engaging with these debates and listening to the opinions of policymakers, researchers and community members from around London has been incredibly useful for setting the context of what is happening around the capital. However, many of these events have been organised around an "expert" panel speaking to an audience with limited time for participation and forming shared views. By comparison, our process has allowed community voices to come through and shape a series of collective ideas. Through these conversations, several key, interrelated themes have emerged which demonstrate the complexity of tackling serious youth violence (as outlined above). It appears clear that there is growing support for systemic change that would enable a collaborative, cross-sector approach to tackling youth violence, particularly one focused on prevention and Early Action.

We believe that policymakers should root their understandings of this issue more closely in the lived experience of London's citizens. This report will therefore be an invaluable tool for local and national government to understand what is driving serious youth violence and how they can tackle it.

METHODOLOGY

By April 2018, Community Links was among a number of organisations that thought it was time to act. In the same month, the government published its *Serious Violence Strategy*, and the Home Secretary Amber Rudd visited Community Links to hear about the impact youth violence was having on our local community. Throughout April and May, we increasingly felt that the voices of frontline staff and community members ought to be at the forefront of responses to an issue that was, and still is, having a significant impact on the day-to-day lives of London residents.

As a result, we began to formulate a project that would enable us to listen more closely to the thoughts and fears of our local community. With the support of Barrow Cadbury Trust, Trust for London, CVC Capital Partners and Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS), we planned to host a series of Community Conversations; loosely structured discussions between groups of 15-50 people.

These conversations were semi-facilitated by Community Links staff and external facilitators, but the idea was that these facilitators would intervene in the conversation as little as possible to ensure an organic flow and to allow everyone who wanted to contribute the time to do so. Having witnessed several similar events, we were keen to avoid having a panel set-up that pitched supposed experts against audience members; for these Conversations we wanted the real experts, the members of our community, to have the space and time to form and share their views.

Before embarking on this project, we agreed on a set of measures against which we would later judge the success of our project. We wanted to ensure that our Conversations were:

1) *Meaningful* – Insofar as they moved away from some of the sensational responses seen in media reports and focused more on the lived experience of our local community.

2) *Progressive* – In that, they would aim to focus less on pessimistic responses and attributing blame, and more on understanding the strengths and capacity of communities.

3) *Useful* – That the Conversations would provide a safe and welcoming space for participants and Community Links staff to share their experiences, but also that we would come away with a set of practical, concrete proposals to move us forward.

We planned and carefully chose the partner organisations and venues for our events to ensure that we engaged with a range of contributors and communities from across Newham. We were able to gather feedback and proposals from parents, youth workers, the social sector and young people in the north, west, east and south of the borough. We also ensured that we were speaking with members of other communities around London through our research, by attending other similar events, and by reaching out to representatives of local and national government. This resulted in a visit from the Minister for Policing Nick Hurd MP to Community Links in July when he met with a group of youth workers, volunteers and young mentors who are embedded in the local community.

In total, Community Links held eight Community Conversations at:

1) **Asta Community Hub (Royal Docks ward)** – 3rd July

2) **Renewal Programme (Manor Park) -** 4th July

3) **University of East London (Stratford & New Town)** – 9th July

4) **Community Links (Canning Town North)** – 10th July

5) **Community Links discussion with Minister for Policing Nick Hurd MP** – 26th July

6) **East Ham Neighbourhood and Community Centre in partnership with the Renewal Programme (East Ham) –** 25th September

7) **TELCO (Green Street West) –** 27th September

8) **Bonny Downs Community Association (Wall End) –** 6th October

In total, 202 people attended these events including 72 young people, 36% of the total. Our evaluation found that 96% of people believed that the events were useful. 90% thought that the

events meaningfully examined root causes of violence and 82% believed that these events had identified possible solutions.

"The events have been a good opportunity to bring people from the community, organisations, and local leaders together to talk about youth violence. Each event raised slightly different themes and issues, but each came back to discussions of why this is happening, and what the solutions might be."

Sundus Masood, Community Links

"I am heartened by the energy and commitment of those who attended, it is imperative therefore that we look to build upon this and not lose any momentum. To this end these initial conversations have ended and the work – to bring the proposed actions to fruition – can now start in earnest."

Dr. Anthony Gunter, University of East London

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Dr Anthony Gunter.

Dr. Gunter is a Principal Lecturer in Criminology and Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Criminology & Law degree. Prior to his career in academia Anthony worked for over 14 years in both South and East London, within a variety of community settings, as a detached community and youth worker and Project / Area Manager.

Darren Hart

Darren Hart is an actor, DJ and CEO of Hartman's House.

Professor Venu Dhupa

Venu has held a number of executive level roles in the public, cultural and charity sectors. She holds a Visiting Professorship at Nottingham Trent University, is a Co-Editor of the International Journal for Creativity and Human Development www.creativityjournal.net; and Non-Executive Director of Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce and a Member of the European Cultural Parliament.

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