



Youth violence, masculinity and mental health

Learning from the communities most affected

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Background

Serious violence is a major public health problem. Since 2014 crime data for England and Wales have shown a continued rise in offences using a knife or a sharp instrument (ONS, 2019). These figures have been mirrored by increases in: (i) admissions to hospital for assault by a sharp instrument; and (ii) the possession of knives or offensive weapons (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018).

Rising trends in serious violence have been observed across the country and South Yorkshire is amongst the top 5 Local Authority districts ranked according to increases in the volume of crimes using a knife or a sharp weapon (Home Office, 2018). Sheffield experienced eight fatal stabbings in 2018, but these fatalities represent only a fraction of offences. In the 12 month period spanning 01/12/16 - 30/11/17 there were 2,375 recorded offences across the South Yorkshire district (South Yorkshire Police, 2018). Importantly, these figures likely underestimate the true extent of serious violence, as they will not capture the large numbers of unreported crimes. Nor will they account for other instances of violence not including knives or sharp instruments.

Age, gender and deprivation status all influence the risk of violent injury amongst young people (Vulliamy et al., 2018). Since 2010 it is the most deprived Local Authorities that have been disproportionately affected by funding cuts, leading to increased demand for support services at a time of diminishing supply (Webb and Bywaters, 2018). Youth Services, Child and Family Services and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are amongst those most affected (UNISON, 2018; BMA, 2018).

Young people and families living in high deprivation areas are the most affected by current increases in serious violence and decreases in service provision. However, it is these families who are often least represented in the design and implementation of service responses.

Intersections: **a public symposium about youth violence, masculinity and mental health**

This dynamic event brought together practitioners, academics, decision makers and members of the general public, to discuss the intersections between serious youth violence, masculinity and mental health, for the communities most affected. A diverse group of over 90 delegates attended the event including representatives from both Sheffield universities, Sheffield City Council, Sheffield schools, youth services, local charities, community organisations, counselling services and the highly acclaimed London based youth organisation, 4FRONT.

This briefing summarises key themes from the day alongside presenting a set of policy recommendations, derived from conversations and feedback throughout the day.

Key themes

1. Social exclusion

Experiences of social exclusion within the city and institutional racism in educational settings were addressed throughout the day. The lack of resources to develop and connect the services dedicated to supporting young people locally was also a recurring topic.

Delegates were in favour of creating more safe spaces for people to express themselves freely and campaigning for investment in front line services, as well as needing honesty and transparency in education when tackling difficult issues such as racism, vulnerability, mental health and other stigmas.

The importance of teaching staff whose diversity reflects the communities that they serve was reflected upon powerfully. Some delegates explained how tailored one-to-one support from mentors with whom they could identify positively transformed their educational experience in schools.

2. Mental health

Mental health was a recurring theme, with particular reference to the harms of racialized stigma and the pressures facing young men to conform to problematic forms of masculinity. Experiences of marginality (exacerbated by institutional racism) and a perceived lack of positive opportunities for young people were said to contribute to poor mental health amongst Sheffield's most vulnerable young people.

Services to support young people with mental health were described as lacking, particularly around the transition of support from young people's services into adult services. In the worst instances, victims of serious violence assault had received no support to cope with the trauma of their experience. Investment in services are needed to support young people, families and communities traumatised by serious youth violence. Those supports need to be holistic and long term.

Local, trusted community services were reflected upon most positively as places where young people could access regular support. There is a need to invest in such organisations with core funding, training and supervision support, in order to ensure that those engaging with vulnerable young people are equipped to deal with their mental health needs in more sustainable ways.

3. Community voice and investment

A key frustration, raised throughout the day, was that communities do not feel heard. Despite some efforts, consultation processes led by Sheffield City Council have been experienced as superficial and communications about emerging responses to youth violence have been absent. Trust and confidence in the council is lacking and this paucity of engagement has left communities feeling neglected and frightened for the safety of their children. The ability to influence higher level council decisions was also questioned by delegates. The emergence of numerous locally based community groups hoping to tackle knife crime arguably reflects the perceived absence of a more central response.

Crucially, more transparency is needed in terms of the emerging responses to serious youth violence. Young people in the communities most effected need to have a more central role in shaping the design, delivery and evaluation of the support that they receive. This can only be achieved through closer engagement with the community organisations that young people access.

“Everyone has a natural art form, a way of portraying their talents, they need to be nurtured. Not just generalized to sport but every other field – public speaking, acting, academics”

(Young person: Unity Gym Project)

Recommendations

1. Sheffield City Council to prioritise, coordinate and support preventative working at all levels:
 - a. **Primary prevention:** preventing the problem occurring in the first place (Schools/Youth Services/Police/Child & Family Support/Mental Health)
 - b. **Secondary prevention:** intervening early, when the problem starts to emerge (Schools/Youth Services/Police/Hospitals/Child & Family Support/Mental Health)
 - c. **Tertiary prevention:** making sure an ongoing problem is well managed (Schools/Youth Services/Police/Probation/Hospitals/Child & Family Support/Child Protection/Mental Health)

Shared vision and partnership working across all services connected to the issue of violence will be crucial to the success of coordinated preventative work.
2. Representatives from the Sheffield Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS) and the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to collaboratively map the range of voluntary and statutory services relevant to serious youth violence operating across the city. Resource mapping will: (i) enhance understandings of, and (ii) being to coordinate what exists and is already working in communities.
3. Violence Reduction Unit to enable local projects to better contribute to violence reduction by (i) investing core funding and (ii) resourcing training in trauma informed practice.
4. Violence Reduction Unit to work with communities in the neighbourhoods most affected to develop a paid working group of young people and adults, responsible for co-designing the emerging citywide/regional strategies for violence reduction.
5. Sheffield City Council to enhance community engagement and publicise forums where they can listen to and react on local community concerns.
6. Sheffield City Council to work with Sheffield CAB and the wider VCS sector to extend the availability of benefits advice and income maximisation support for families living in the most deprived communities.
7. Sheffield City Council and all organisations to enhance and support the provision of culturally specific support for young people and families affected by serious violence.
8. City to develop an inclusion strategy with all partners (LA and schools) with the aim of reducing school exclusions. This inclusion strategy should feature a built in scrutiny committee of young people and parents from schools with the highest exclusion rates, to steer and monitor progress.
9. We welcome Learn Sheffield's commitment to recruit and develop high quality staff whose diversity reflects the communities that they serve. Sheffield universities should seek to build on existing efforts to support those PGCE/PGDE students who are underrepresented in Sheffield schools, with clear routes to local employment.
10. Local secondary and further education to increase opportunities for young people to learn about a variety of employment and work shadowing opportunities and build links between local employers and youth/community organisations.

“I came from the same environment but now I’m at a different place. I shadowed these councillors and did work placements. I had my eyes set on who I wanted to be from young”

(Young person, Unity Gym Project)

Looking ahead

Sheffield is, in many respects, well positioned to develop a sustainable and practical commitment to violence reduction. Despite concerning levels of serious youth violence, police recorded crime statistics for South Yorkshire actually show a slight decrease in the number of offences involving a knife or a sharp instrument between 2017 and 2018. However, these data do not account for other instances of violence that are not recorded or do not include knives. It is important to ensure that the contemporary focus on 'knife crime' does not undermine efforts to recognise, understand and address violence more generally.

Recent commitments to public health approaches to violence reduction are encouraging. In June 2019 the Home Secretary Sajid Javid publically announced a provisional allocation of £1.6 million for the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner to set up a Violence Reduction Unit (VRU). The VRU model is inspired by the high profile successes of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, who have significantly reduced violence through the application of a sustained and long term public health approach.

However, as the Youth Violence Commission 2018 have cautioned:

There is an increasing risk that the term 'public health model' is being used without a proper understanding of what is actually required to affect lasting change.

Where public health approaches to violence reduction have shown the most promise, investments have been evidence based, long term, multi-sectoral and coordinated with buy-in from all partners. Safe cities are unlikely to be sustainably achieved through short term interventions, even if investments within those periods are substantial.

Sheffield currently sits at an important juncture. With significant levels of momentum and will underpinning the emerging commitment to reduce violence, there is a real opportunity to develop progressive, integrated and sustainable responses. With the right political and financial commitment Sheffield could feasibly become an exemplar of coherent violence reduction work. However, short term investment, service fragmentation and barriers, and poor relationships between state institutions and communities all complicate and challenge this goal.

To achieve the goal of increased safety and wellbeing for all, it will be important to build a 'coalition of the willing' prepared to interpret and respond to evidence in ways that are both coordinated and positively driven. We hope that the recommendations listed in this briefing note offer a useful starting point towards that aim.



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Who are we?

Unity Gym Project

Unity Gym Project is a registered charity organisation committed to community cohesion and the promotion of health and wellbeing. We engage with vulnerable young people and adults who often don't access mainstream services and help them make positive life choices, improve their health and wellbeing. Our ethos is to empower young people and families across communities to take ownership of their own development. This is achieved through open access youth work provision, peer mentoring, work experience placements, employability support, early preventative and diversionary activities.

We create positive spaces where differences are celebrated, knowledge is exchanged and talent is nurtured.



Sheffield Flourish

We are a mental health charity rooted in Sheffield and owned by the community, supporting our community to share their stories, get involved in activities, and flourish.

- We stand for hope and positive change
- We engage critically and constructively with key issues in mental health
- We are realistic about the barriers and exclusions which people living with mental health conditions have to face
- We strive to be inclusive and respectful
- We value the knowledge, ideas, and skills of people living with mental health conditions
- We are innovative and creative



4FRONT

The 4Front Project was set up in 2012 to provide a platform for young people who have been impacted by serious violence to create change. Our vision is for young people and communities to live free from violence. We support young people to create change in their own lives, in their communities and in our society.

We are on a mission to empower young people and build peace. We address violence by delivering specialist programmes that support personal development, legal empowerment and social action in community, educational and criminal justice settings.



“I enjoyed being involved as I felt the conference was needed and it was important to see that we are moving forward to look for solutions.”

(Young person, Unity Gym Project)



Unity Gym Project

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