

## **Young Men and Violence report**

This initiative, funded by YouthNet through the EU Special Support Programme for Peace & Reconciliation consulted with 401 young men and provided programmes to a total of 123, through three projects exploring young men's relationship with violence, especially within contested communities in Northern Ireland.

### **Background**

In 1999, YouthNet funded three projects under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (SSPPR) focusing on young men and violence. These projects lasted for a little over a year, and aimed to develop an understanding of the relationship between young men and violent behaviour within contested communities in Northern Ireland. These programmes also aimed to address the consequences of young males' violent behaviour. Each of the three projects were asked to deliver the following elements:-

- A base-line study which documented the experiences of young males, both as perpetrators and as victims of violent behaviour;
- An exploration of the relationship between masculinity and violence;
- The design and delivery of a programme that addresses the needs of young males;
- The development of practice models, which show how youth work processes could effect positive change in violent attitudes and behaviour;
- The monitoring and evaluation of the initiative and the production of a final report, which documented the experiences of those involved and identified learning for wider dissemination.

The three initiatives outlined start from this complex notion of violence. They each developed from conversations with young men, and aimed to identify solutions out of these exchanges. Unless young men themselves are involved, actively

identifying their own motivation for changing their attitudes and behaviour, then for many of them the mechanisms for peace will remain on paper.

### **YouthAction Northern Ireland**

This project focused on the relationship between young men and violence both as victims and perpetrators. Working in both urban and rural communities including interfaces, it aimed to develop new and imaginative approaches to supporting young men in their communities.

One hundred and thirty five young men, aged 14-25 years from Belfast, Lisburn, Derry, Lurgan, Portadown, Craigavon, Bessbrook and Moygashel were asked about their experience of violence. A broad range of themes emerged from the consultations, including young men repeatedly talking about feeling unsafe, fearing what might happen to them, while at the same time, finding violence attractive, even when it could be avoided. There was a very strong acceptance of violence as 'the way of the world', and while most wanted it to be different, there was a general pessimism and hopelessness about their lives changing significantly. The majority of young men saw themselves as victims of violence or as defending themselves or their communities. They were more reluctant to see themselves as perpetrator, or unnecessarily violent. Many of the young men said they wanted more control over their anger and over the ways that they managed violent situations. They wanted environments where they could let off steam, talk and learn skills; most of the young men felt alienated within their own communities, so were less able to identify with community processes of any kind, let alone the current political moves towards peace.

Six programmes were developed and delivered. They averaged 9 hours (usually stretching over 5 sessions). Forty nine young men aged 14-24 were involved, with the majority aged 15-18 years of age, and 73% were Protestant.

The young men during the evaluation process said that the

pilot programmes were extremely helpful in enabling them to reflect and think about violence. To a lesser extent, they questioned their own attitudes towards violence, even though many of them accepted violence as normal. They were pessimistic about this changing, and subsequently evidence of behavioural changes were even less apparent, though evident for some. This came as no surprise in a programme of only five sessions, but these comments suggested that there are substantial possibilities in the approach developed.

While it is difficult to identify the exact ingredients that made these programmes work, the following elements appeared to contribute:

- a) an approach that was generally supportive of the young men and sympathetic to their lives;
- b) an approach that aimed to encourage young men to talk and reflect on their experience rather than to teach them anything;
- c) an approach that actively engaged young men in discussion and reflection;
- d) methods and sessions that related directly to the issues that young men themselves had raised including day-to-day violence, alternatives to violence and understanding and managing their own anger. Sessions also often involved movement, activity and a bit of fun;
- e) While the irregular/low number of young men make conclusions difficult, most of the sessions that went well for the young men and the workers, provided opportunities to reflect and think about violent situations and how they can be responded to. Role play, opportunities to talk and reflect, external speakers with relevant experience and sessions that introduced alternatives, all assisted in this reflective process and provided a very important series of 'first steps' within a non-formal educational setting.
- f) Young men's enthusiasm to continue the programmes, was at least in part, because the five sessions only scratched the surface of both the young men's interests and the breadth of the topic.

### **'Be a Sport' programme**

Initiated by a research team from the School of Psychology, Queen's University of Belfast in partnership with the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, *Be a Sport* used sports and outdoor activities as the vehicle for delivering the programme. As in the other projects, a baseline study and a literature review were used to inform the design of the programme; to identify characteristics of the young men who participated and to provide a basis for the project evaluation.

Twenty-seven young men and workers were consulted in four focus groups. One of the clearest findings was the importance that many of the young men placed on maintaining an image of themselves, that showed they could be aggressive or violent, when necessary. Young men said they felt an obligation to display a capacity for violence particularly against other young men. They also held a parallel view that, in certain situations, there was no viable alternative to violence and that failure to display aggression or violence when it was called for could lead to serious negative consequences for them. An equally important theme to emerge from all of the focus groups was that violence was a common experiences in the young men's lives. Another common theme was that young men attributed the causes of their own violence to forces beyond their control. They said that others provoked them, that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or that alcohol and drugs influenced their behaviour. This was understood to mean (in psychological terms), that the young men lacked self-efficacy and felt little control over their own behaviour.

Fifty three young men from Craigavon, Portadown, East Belfast, and Derry participated in the four programmes. The overall aim was to encourage young men to think about how their masculinity affects their lives, especially in relation to violence and aggression, and to initiate change and provide strategies where appropriate.

Sport was seen as an integral part of the learning process and not as a carrot, as is common in other programmes. The sport element was expected to reduce stress, improve mood, induce relaxation and provide examples to illustrate the learning points raised in the discussion-based element.

There were six aspects to the programme - a focus on enhancing positive, prosocial skills and behaviours; an active, participatory delivery style; explicit aims; the encouragement of practice and reflection between sessions to generalise learning; the integration of the sporting and outdoor activity components of the programme with the more reflective, discussion components within each session and the monitoring procedures to ensure that the aims and objectives were met in practice.

Each session had the same basic format. The session's aims and activities were outlined, followed by a sport-based or activity-based session. Then the group engaged in a discussion based on the issues arising from the activities with Take Away Tasks (TAT) also given to participants. These tasks were directly related to the aims of the session and were intended to enable learning to be transferred to other contexts.

The evaluation indicated some positive impact of the programme on participants generally. In particular, at least a few participants, had begun to utilise their learning outside the programme itself.

During the course of the project much was learned about young men's experiences of violence, and also about delivery of programmes such as this to young men who may benefit from them. However, the project also illustrated that no two groups of young men have the same needs or preferences. Each group had its own dynamics and is set in the context of a specific community background.

This acknowledgement of diversity does not, however, preclude the making of recommendations for good practice which may be applied across the board. Rather it adds another layer of complexity to the task facing those who work with young men, necessitating flexibility in every aspect of their work.

### **Young Men and Violence – a programme to reduce violence and engender peace.**

This project was developed by a consortium of Intercomm Enterprises, the University of Ulster and CTC Associates. The aim was to develop an understanding of the relationship between young males and violent behaviour within contested communities in Northern Ireland and initiate programmes that addressed both the needs of young males and the consequences of violent behaviour.

Totalling questionnaires, individual interviews and focus groups, 239 boys and young men were involved in the consultation process. Young men from two schools, conducted 34 one-to-one interviews with other young men. In addition, focus groups with Chinese, Indian, young gay men and young offenders were carried out. One hundred and eighty six questionnaires were also completed by boys and young men in four schools (two Catholic, two Protestant).

This has yielded a huge amount of material on young men's experiences of and attitudes towards violence, and while this requires much more analysis, a number of strong themes have emerged:

Violence was seen by many as a normal part of their lives. Most had witnessed, been a victim of and/or committed acts of violence. Sectarian but also racist and homophobic violence, affected young men's decisions about where they went and who they associated with. Violence was strongly associated with traditional "manly" traits and related to young men's need to belong (which may explain sectarian and racist violence more directly than sectarianism and racism). Young

gay men and young men from ethnic communities felt excluded from mainstream youth culture and feared violence. Most of the violence young men talked about was inter-personal rather than political or sectarian.

A practice model was developed around a number of concepts which included *Rackets* – where behaviours are adopted because individuals think they will be validated by those around them. *The Hero and the Adventure* – a technique that encourages young men to step outside their daily routines, to discover their talents and to service their communities. *Story telling* - to “explore their internal life”. *Narrative therapy* – encouraging individuals to tell their lives and their futures as a story, which is thought to enable problem-solving and an ability to take responsibility for solutions. *Logical levels* – which involves an exploration of motivation and what might be gained from an action. *The time line* - encourages individuals to tell their life stories with a particular focus, so for example, from their experience of violence. *Scenario planning* – encourages the telling of the future in terms of possibilities rather than resignation.

To further develop the programme, some of these methods and concepts were trialed with a group of seven young men from the Shankill area. They were presented with the course components of rackets, stories and the time line. These components were also tested with a group of professionals working with young people during a two day workshop, and again the feedback was very positive. Three elements stood out for the young men:

1. It was depressing and limiting to grow up in a culture of violence which restricted their choices.
2. It was exciting to be involved in violence. The experience and the telling of stories relieved the boredom.
3. They needed adults to enable them to get away from their community, even if only temporarily.

The project workers are of the view that it would have been impossible to test and evaluate the whole programme and its

outcomes as the full progressive programme would go on for about one year. Consequently, only those elements thought to be the most innovative were tested. These were the workers' stories, the time line technique and the use of mythological or folk tales with both single identity and cross community groups.

The programme was piloted in various forms with three groups, one Catholic, one Protestant and one mixed group. A total of 21 young men took part. Each programme consisted of four 1.5 to 2 hours sessions.

These sessions and the young men's review of the programme, enabled young men to engage in discussions about growing up, being a man, fathers and their relationships with violence, more rapidly and at greater depth than the workers had previously experienced.

While the testing of these methods was restricted, they were effective in engaging marginalised young men from inner city areas, in serious and purposeful reflection of their experiences of violence and related topics.

Though the evaluation of these short programmes was limited, a number of comments made by the young men might point to why the methods and approaches worked.

The two workers were thought to be "respectful", "safe to talk to", "genuine and honest", "trustworthy" and supportive of the young men. The methods were stimulating and engaging to them at both a reflective and emotional level.

This developmental work will be taken forward by 'The Breakwater Project' aiming to reduce violence among young men in the Shankill.

### **Six main conclusions from the three projects**

Many of the young men reported that they rarely talked about violence, especially in this reflective way, and that adults

rarely engaged with them in this type of discussion. For most of the young men, violence was not 'good' or 'bad', but a complex mixture ranging from extreme excitement to extreme fear.

Most young men reported that they valued the opportunities the projects offered and that they had a positive and stimulating impact on them.

There was a strong link between the young men's perceptions of manhood and their attitudes towards violence. Projects were able to use this link as an important access point with many of the young men.

A range of methods were tried including activity, discussion, games and exercises that enabled reflection, and they all seemed to engage the young men. Some methods worked better than others, but methods appeared to be less important than the expectations and style of the workers involved.

Two of the three programmes involved workers or visiting speakers that had previously been involved in the paramilitaries or were currently involved in containing violence, for example training bouncers. Their 'stories' had a particularly engaging impact on young men, and usually on an emotional rather than intellectual level.

Young men, while willing to discuss their attitudes and experience of violence, were particularly interested in learning skills and strategies that would help them deal with unwanted violent incidents and conflict in general.

## **Recommendations**

1. Further pilot projects should be developed before more prescriptive or widely implemented programmes are recommended. These pilots should focus on recruitment, content, delivery style and length of programme, be

documented and evaluated and contribute to models of good practice for consideration by others.

2. Programmes or initiatives working around young men and violence need an approach that works from the premise that young men's attitudes to violence have a variety of influences including community conflict, individual personality, community attitudes, family beliefs and how involved young men are with the peace process.

3. Programmes should be developed on the basis of the complexity of violence not forgetting the buzz, excitement and prestige that some young men seek and receive, rather than the simplistic notion that violence is "bad for you".

4. Approaches that primarily have an aspirational reflective and education-base informed by gender, may form the core of such programmes, rather than the individually-based deficiency approaches, more commonly used in the existing violence fields.

5. Programme length varied enormously, and while there is unlikely to be an optimum length, programmes less than 5 sessions were generally thought to be too short.

6. Appropriate intermediary organisations should be centrally involved to access, encourage and support the involvement of young men as participants on any programme targeting violent behaviour. In addition these intermediary organisations should be resourced to support participants to action their learning and develop strategies in their own communities once the programme has been completed.

7. Further initiatives should be developed to identify what skills and attributes enable young men to be resilient to the impact of violence and integrate the findings into a more holistic programme

8. Strategies for dealing with violent attitudes and behaviours should be developed within the context of non formal

community development educationally-based provision and those settings where stigma is minimal for participants.

9. An inter-sectoral approach should be taken to offer young men the opportunity to meet those active in local communities and/or in the peace process to engage them more fully in their local areas.

10. Methods of assessment will need to be developed to take account of the variety of experience, involvement and attitudes of young men towards violence, particularly focusing on those who will have most difficulties adapting to a less violent Northern Ireland.

11. Targeted programmes aimed at boys and young men should be developed in partnership with the non formal sector and built into the new personal and social education elements of the school curriculum

12. European, government and other funders should target this particular area of work and support the further development of both theory and practice. Evaluation and write-up costs will be an essential element of any project grants awarded.

13. Programmes which have been developed should be promoted widely (i.e. beyond those working with young men) to stimulate debate and interest in developing strategies with local community organisations to counter the impact of violence and the progress the peace process.

14. A range of skills and curriculum based materials need to be developed in partnership with community based organisations, the Curriculum Development Unit of the Youth Council of Northern Ireland and other interested parties to support workers to deliver programmes addressing issues of violence with young men.

15. Workers should be given the opportunity to develop appropriate skills to work with violence and young men generally. This should include modules on existing professional training courses, as well as the development of post training opportunities for teachers, youth workers, criminal justice and health workers.

16. A directory should be created containing contact details for individuals, either centrally involved in the peace process or with histories of violence, who are able and willing to use their experience, to enable young men to explore issues around violent behaviour.

17. Projects need to develop within a broader context of community safety, or initiatives such as these cannot be expected to make a huge impact unless there is a wider strategy.

The full report titled "Young Men and Violence" is available from YouthNet, 7 James St. South, Belfast BT32 4JL. Telephone 028 90331880. Email [linda@youthnet.co.uk](mailto:linda@youthnet.co.uk). This report was written by Trefor Lloyd of Working With Men.