



Centre for Young Men's Studies

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

(Some young men's attitudes and experience
of Violence, Conflict and Safety)

June 2009

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The Centre for Young Men's Studies (CYMS) is a partnership between the Community Youth Work division at the University of Ulster and YouthAction Northern Ireland. It resides within INCORE (International Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies at the University of Ulster) and the School of Sociology and Applied Social Studies. The aim of the Centre is to promote a culture of learning, development and excellence in regard to young men living in Northern Ireland through innovative practice, training and action research.

The Centre has five key strands:

- Strand 1: Action Research with young males aged 11 - 16 about their experiences of growing up in Northern Ireland
- Strand 2: A 5 year longitudinal study in nine post-primary schools across Northern Ireland funded by the Department of Education and the Northern Ireland Office
- Strand 3: The development of models of best practice
- Strand 4: Training for teachers, youth work practitioners and support workers in order to develop new approaches to working with young males
- Strand 5: Dissemination of learning

This paper reflects consultations with boys and young men from certain communities within Northern Ireland. The paper sits within Strand 1 of the CYMS work programme and looks specifically at themes of violence, conflict and safety.

The purpose of this paper is to give

- **a voice to some young men's attitudes and experiences of violence, conflict and safety;**
- **initiate discussion and debate about both the needs of young men and the problems some young men cause within their communities;**
- **and make tentative suggestions of initiatives and interventions that would increase safety and reduce violence and conflict within communities.**

Executive Summary

As part of the CYMS action research brief, consultations were carried out with 130 young men aged 13-16 from more than 20 areas and estates across both Catholic and Protestant urban and rural communities of Northern Ireland. The consultations also included discussions with 8 eastern European young men.

Very few of those reading this paper will be surprised by anything these young men said, but what we should be surprised about is that very little seems to have changed in spite of the peace process. Too many young men appear to be stuck inhabiting a ceasefire world, rather than one that is changing with peace.

Main findings were as follows:

- **Sectarianism, ethnicity and geography** emerged as important factors in regard to young men's experience of violence.
- For the young men we consulted **conflict and violence impacted on their lives on most days** and their personal safety was a daily consideration.
- Young men had **developed a number of avoidance strategies** that were integral to their lives. For some they moved from home to school and back avoiding contact with anyone who might have been perceived as a danger to them. Young men also had a view about which areas, people and situations were safe. In fact most of the young men's lives were severely restricted by geography which was the primary consideration when they left their homes.
- Young men reported conflict and **violence as 'the way it is'** and something that was not out of the ordinary.
- For some, **the 'buzz' associated with violence was an attraction** and for many it was two edged, both a 'buzz' and also something to be feared. Most young men suggested that violence was on the increase and alcohol was a contributing factor, particularly at weekends.
- Weapons generally (rather than knives specifically) were a strong day-to-day issue for young men. Most young men said that **weapons were carried for protection** (over 10% said that they carried weapons), but a significant minority believed that weapon carrying was for those that could not fight.
- Young men described their **schools and homes as safe, their own communities often as being unsafe**, and certainly most other communities as being out of bounds, unless they were in significant numbers and looking for conflict.
- Young men said that the **police were too often absent from their communities**. They also said that there were many incidents that were never reported to the police. Sometimes the **police** were perceived as being against the community, and even to be out to **actively harass** groups of young men.
- Young men reported that the **paramilitaries were still active in both sides of the community** and their views of them were mixed. Some saw them as a positive force in their community, while others again thought they 'harassed' young men and made the area 'less fun'.

- For those young men who were more likely to be involved in anti-social and criminal activities, they saw both the **police and the paramilitaries as competing forces in their communities, who 'stopped them' from doing what they wanted to do.**
- Young men consulted with were often **both victims and perpetrators** within their communities, with young men out on the streets, drawn to riots, anti-social activities even if they were only observers.
- Young men said that there was a **dearth of age-specific activities** in their areas that were supervised (by adults) and provided them with attractive alternatives to the street.
- Young men reported that **as they grew older**, other young men, their communities, police and often paramilitaries saw them as **a threat** and approached them as such.
- As they grew **older**, they reported that there was **less organised activity for them** (or they thought what was there was boring), so they felt they were only left with home or the street for their enjoyment.
- About half of the young men we talked to had experienced **cross community activities** and said that they had **impacted positively** on their attitudes and beliefs about the other community. However, while many described themselves as active participants, none of them were involved in setting up the initiatives. This suggests that any change of attitude about the other community for these and other young men may need to be initiated by organisations.
- The suggestion of **programmes teaching conflict resolution skills were received positively** by most of the young men, even though young men were generally lacking any suggestions for initiatives themselves.

This paper goes on to propose a range of initiatives targeting young men through schools, youth services, criminal justice settings and communities that would reduce violence and conflict as well as increase safety for these young men and others like them.

This paper aims to initiate discussions and inspire projects / positive interventions to address both the needs of young men and the problems some young men cause within their communities. If you would like to be part of these discussions or would like someone to come out and present the findings to a conference, large meeting or staff group please contact:

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What we did and why we did it

The relationship between violence, conflict and safety continually emerges as critical to young men's everyday lives. The purpose of this paper is to give a voice to young men's attitudes and experiences of violence, conflict and safety; to initiate discussion and debate about both the needs of young men and the problems some young men cause within their communities, and make tentative suggestions of initiatives and interventions that would increase safety and reduce violence and conflict within communities.

Methods

Using a semi-structured interview schedule, we set up a series of small groups where young men could talk openly about their communities and their lives. We knew from previous experience that young men might be reluctant to talk about certain potentially controversial issues, so we asked a number of experienced workers with boys and young men to help us carry these out.

We approached this task pragmatically, going to areas where young men and projects were known and could easily be accessed. In some cases, these small groups already existed (meeting around a project), others were in settings where young men knew each other (such as school or youth project) and were usually selected by a teacher or project worker. A smaller number were brought together for the purpose of the consultation with the worker meeting young men for the first time.

All of the consultations were taped, and the worker completed a pro forma highlighting the main issues they thought had emerged from the young men. These forms were consolidated into a list of the main themes. This list was then used as a series of hooks to listen to the tapes. Comments, conversations and quotes were taken to illustrate these hooks and other emerging issues that were not so apparent within individual consultations.

As you would expect the consultations varied enormously. Some were very active conversations between the young men and the interviewer; others were more a series of conversations between individual young men and the interviewer, while four, unfortunately, were much more stilted where the young men were reluctant to engage and the interviewer found himself having to tease out young men's views.

Of course, within each of the groups, there were some individuals who were much more vocal than others, and our view would be some young men exaggerated (sometimes in sharp contrast with other young men from the same area) and others responded to the consultation in a much less serious way than the majority.

Interestingly, very little emerged that was of the 'same voice' (young men agreeing or highlighting exactly the same views or attitudes), some themes were strong (and we have highlighted this in the text below), while often young men's views were shaped by a number of important factors, the main ones were:

1. The community the young men lived in
2. How much they were drawn by the 'buzz' of trouble
3. How comfortable they felt on the street

Who we talked to

One hundred and thirty young men were involved; they were aged 13-16. Eighty-five told us they were Catholic and forty-five Protestant. Group size varied from 3 to 10, but the average group size was 6. We accessed young men in projects or areas the interviewers were familiar with, so the disproportionate numbers of Catholic and Protestant young men was a result of this

process, rather than by design. One of the consultations was carried out with a group of eastern European young men.

The young men were from different urban and rural communities and areas. These were Ballymena, Ballymurphy, Bushmills, Carrickfergus, Cliftonville, Ardoyne, Clonard, Cullyhanna, Derry, Divis, Donegal Road, Glen Road, Limavady, Loughmore, Lower Falls, Monkstown, Newry, Poleglass, Rathcoole, Sandy Row, Springfield, Upper Anderstown, Upper Falls, Whitehead. These areas are located within wards with primarily low academic achievement and other deprivation indicators, although twelve young men were from a grammar school.

We were not aiming to reflect the views of all young men in Northern Ireland, or within these specific communities, but these young men nevertheless do represent a significant group.

The young men reported some dramatically different experiences of violence and conflict. At one extreme were those young men who were generally frightened and looked to avoid conflict as much as they could, while at the other extreme were those that were drawn to violence and / or were actively involved in rioting, anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. By far the majority of those we spoke to placed themselves somewhere between these extremes, sometimes drawn by the 'buzz', but usually knowing when they should stop.

What and how have we reported?

Our aim was to present what the young men told us without judging what they said. The extent of their beliefs and perceptions may surprise some readers, while others may say 'that isn't true' or 'they would say that, wouldn't they'. What is true obviously matters, but perception also matters. We know, for example, that the fear of crime is as critical to understand as crime itself if we are to address community safety. Our expectation is that the reader will take this report in the way it is presented, as young men talking openly and honestly about their lives.

What young men said about violence, conflict, safety and solutions

About violence

1. There is still a high level of violence and disturbances in a number of communities

"People in my area get really annoyed. Where I live is at the peace wall, so there are always bricks, and a little while ago, we were building a fire on our side, then there were golf balls coming over the wall and when my mate looked, it was grown men in their 30's chucking them over because they saw our fire."

"We have people coming through our area and throwing bricks and smashin` cars. This is only occasionally, but I try to stay out of the way." (interface area)

"There are a lot of groups of youth standing about street corners drinking and throwing glass bottles at cars, usually wee lads showing off to the girls."

"The joy riders are stealing cars most Friday nights in my area, they are mainly 14 or 15 and have usually been drinking, it makes it dangerous. A cousin of mine was killed."

"More happens at night, people have their curtains closed, and it is dark, so no one will see you, you can break into cars without getting caught."

"Life is harder now in the last couple of years, more stricter rules, people chase you for standing outside their doors, if not the community, it is the peelers. Me and my mates get right out the area at the weekends."

“When you think back it was really good like, but times have changed, it’s more boring like, neighbours and the peelers are putting a hard time on you. When I was 8 or 9 we would be out on the street playing football and no one would bother you, but now it’s no fun.”

“If there is trouble in the street, usually neighbours break it up, but if it more serious or too aggressive (meaning a weapon involved), then someone will call the police.”

“There is a lot that goes on that the police do not know about, loads of fights the police aren’t called. The police fly around in our street every now and again, but that’s all.”

The majority of young men said that there were high levels of violence (or threats of violence) and anti-social behaviour within their communities. Most thought this was on the increase. This certainly appeared to be the case in interface areas, but in other communities, young men reported regular incidents, especially at the weekends and at night.

A number of young men also highlighted changes in the way members of their community react to them as they have grown older. Reports of aggressive and negative responses toward them were common.

A number of young men suggested that there were many more incidents than were reported to the police, thus suggesting that statistics on violent crimes were lower than in reality.

2. Violence was seen as a part of life and with its own rituals

“If you are walking past a group and they are slabbering at you, the biggest one in your group will walk over and the biggest one from their group will come forward, and they will start fighting and everyone will join in. If you are the biggest, it is your decision, depends what mood you are in.”

“If it is a sober fight and you draw blood you walk away, especially if it is over something stupid, if you have been drinking or on coke then you just can’t stop until you can’t lift your arms. Coke especially if you are angry already.”

While some young men were very quick to describe regular violent incidents that they witnessed, virtually all of the young men described incidents they had not witnessed, but had heard about within their communities.

Young men often described violence as though they were talking about playing football, with its own etiquette and rules. This suggests how strongly this is part of some young men’s everyday lives and how ‘normalised’ this has become.

3. Most don’t look for violence, but some don’t mind when they find it

“If it’s an enemy area, and you go there with a lot of people, then you would come out smiling wouldn’t you, there is a real buzz.”

“If you are skint it’s something to do, a bit of a craic.”

“I wouldn’t run unless there was about 10 of them. But it depends what mood you’re in – if you’re having a psycho, going mad, you just get stuck in.”

“If someone is looking for a fight, I’d stay and fight. I wouldn’t walk away, but mostly I’d just walk away unless I was pushed or provoked.”

For a small number of those young men we talked to, conflict and violence was much more likely because of what they themselves did. This might involve going into another community; robbing people or be in situations where violence was more likely; but for many others, they were more inclined to avoid the more dangerous, but if, for instance, other young men came into their areas / estates they would resist these attacks and get a 'buzz' from this. These young men were more likely to describe a mixture of excitement and fear, knowing that they could get hurt, but getting a thrill from the fact that they didn't, or even if they did, that those they were fighting came off worse.

4. While there was less sectarian violence in some communities, there were more race and immigrant-related incidents

"Used to be you knew everyone in your community, but now with immigrants, you don't feel as safe. It's breaking up the community."

"Too many Polish in our area now, should get them out. They shouldn't be living in this area."

"Every day there is a crime. Not just where we live, it's everywhere. A fella was killed at the bottom of the road – he was with Polish fellas before he was killed. I've never seen so many different people coming in and out of our community. There's Chinese, Pakistanis, Polish, Romanians, Black, White, Protestants and Catholics. Every single day you hear about some sort of trouble."

"The community has changed because of immigrants coming in and there is more fighting amongst locals now than ever before."

"Sometimes we (Latvians) get together to fight boys from Northern Ireland. I think there will always be violence between us. The Irish ones always call us names. It's not so bad in school, but some people just don't like us. Usually we just run away."

"Someone threw eggs at my house a while ago. You're scared in case they bring knives or something to your house. I hate it when people walk up to you and want to fight you. I always say I'm not fit, but they just keep going and nobody helps me. This happened at Sainsbury's. One jumped on my back and the others hit me as well. They had to call a security guy and then they got the police. I was with my friends but we could not do anything because they were far bigger than us."

"I got a brick through my window. My mum was really scared and called the police. This makes me feel angry. We don't know why it happened, but it scares you. You feel sometimes as if you are in jail. Say you go out with a girlfriend and they start shouting at you. You feel you can't go anywhere and you don't know what they will do to you."

"People ignore me. I don't know why. They tell me to go back home to 'Litho' (from Lithuania) they throw things at me. I try to fight them, but I feel afraid. If someone calls me names, I would call them names back. I wouldn't want to fight. In case I get injured. Sometimes they run after me and put a glass up to my face."

In some communities (especially some Protestant communities), young men reported an increase in race-related violence. Young men mentioned people from Poland and Pakistan in traditional racist ways (of them taking jobs and houses). Some young men made a direct link between their communities becoming more multi-cultural and more violent incidents. Even if this is a perception and not a reality, if others share this view, they offer yet another barrier to moving away from one-religion communities.

5. Alcohol and drugs often contributed to violence and violence was much more likely when alcohol was involved

“There’s always violence when there’s drinking. Sometimes when girls are there there’s also fighting. When fights start you always try and phone your mates to come round. The other night, I phoned my mate to come with me when I was walking my girlfriend home. It’s only up the road a bit, but you don’t trust anyone.”

“People also fight with bottles when they’re drinking. All drink should be in plastic bottles to stop this type of fighting.”

“There are some places where people drink alcohol but if you just stay away from there you will be ok.”

“Friday and Saturday nights, people are drinking, it’s less safe, especially if it is people our age” (aged 15).

“There has been a lot more drinking on the street in the last couple of years.”

“You don’t see people with weapons in my area, except if it is drug dealing related.”

Many of the young men mentioned alcohol and drugs as contributing factors for violence in their areas and within the Belfast city centre. Young men becoming drunk and getting involved in fights and conflict were common features, and many of the young men said that they avoided pubs and corners where there were drinkers. While some young men suggested some drug use reduced the possibilities of violence (a stress reducer), the dealing of drugs too often led to some of the most extreme violence, whether this was between groups that wanted to control the sale of drugs or those who wanted to stop their sale (paramilitaries).

6. The internet and mobile phones were regularly mentioned as an integral part of street violence and conflict as well as part of young men’s avoidance strategy

“Some young men get our phone numbers on the internet. The other night I went down to the bridge (interface area), and I got a text saying I was nothing but a drug dealer and all. But I knew someone had given him my number because he’s a Catholic and I’m a Protestant. This happens a lot. You swap numbers on Bebo or MSN - everyone does this and then they find out who you are and send you threats. They try to set you up. You think you’re gonna meet girls, and then fellas turn up for a fight.”

“Fellas have to defend wee girls especially in front of other fellas. We chased some fellas the other night from the bus station. Then later on one of my mates got a text telling him to stay away.”

Mobile phones were often mentioned as part of young men’s safety kit (if you need to call for backup), as well as a threat (for example, other young men ringing making threats or challenging them to a fight). MSN and Bebo were mentioned as ways of organising fights and threatening others, while YouTube was used for post footage of past fights and conflicts. These appear to be a variation on the theme of bullying and intimidation via mobiles.

Conflict

7. The police were viewed as ineffective and often hostile towards young men.

“My area is safer now, it has all quietened down, the police come into my area a lot and chase people. There are also the barricades to keep the others out.”

“There might be people smoking and drinking and the peelers don’t do anything. They just drive through.”

“The main families control our area. The police are never in it. Well, maybe a few times they drive through, but that’s all.”

“The peelers don’t let you have fun. They want to stop you doing everything. You can’t even sit in the park, they stop and ask you for your name and address.”

“There is no authority in my area, its crazy, people drinking and no one does anything about it. The police don’t do anything, if there are crowds drinking and a cat is up a tree, the police will go to the cat. There are some men in the community that come down and might say to the youth “Stop throwing bottles and get out of our community.” I don’t know if they are paramilitaries, but...”

“When we start rioting against the Catholics and the peelers come, we start rioting with them as well.”

“The peelers like the rioting as much as we do, gives them a chance to get the taigs. They like to show they are hard and bigger men.”

“The peelers don’t chase them (rioters on the other side), they just chase us.”

There was only one area where young men reported that the police patrolled regularly and as a result their community was safer. The police tended to be seen as more of the problem than the solution.

Particularly the young men who were more on the street said that the police ‘harassed’ them. If they were on the street in groups, they would be moved on or told to disperse. Young men often said that this had changed as they had grown older (even if they were 13 year olds), and they were possibly seen as more of a threat by the police. These young men presented a picture of continually being moved on and seen negatively by most people, but they felt the police took this further. A small number of young men said that it was police attitudes that led to them going out of their own areas or into the woods or waste ground where they could just be with their mates.

8. The paramilitaries were seen by some as a positive force, but by others in the same negative light as the police.

“The war here is over, but during the troubles you wouldn’t do anything because of the paramilitaries. Where we live things have changed. In the past, paramilitaries would sort things out. But look at the news - the other night 14 houses in our area were broken into. This wouldn’t have happened during the troubles.”

“No one protects the community now. You felt safer with the paramilitaries. Police have put community safety wardens in our area, but they won’t even come into the area (Sandy Row) because they don’t even feel safe. But all they are after is teenage drinkers and all.”

"We have seen less drugs in the area over the last year. The paramilitaries have got rid of the dealers. Before then you would see people injecting in the street."

"In our community, the paramilitaries ask for protection monies."

"For our area to really change, you will have to get rid of the paramilitaries and the guns."

"If you steal from your own community, break into houses or sell drugs, the paramilitaries will come knocking. The first time you will be warned, and they would take your stash and maybe give you a slap. The second time they would break your arms or your legs and tell you to get out of the area. Some people in the community are happy enough with this and the ones that aren't keep their mouths shut."

"The older paramilitary men are the ones who have the control. The younger ones run around doing stuff, but the older ones would go as far as killing you. It has calmed down a lot. I don't think they kill as much with the peace, but if you are selling drugs, who knows? In our area, there was one boy whose house was broken into (north Belfast), had two AK47's, but that was 5 or 6 years ago."

"All the shops pay protection to the paramilitaries, a community tax, to stop people from robbing and stealing cars. People are happy enough to pay. You have to show them respect or you will get your head kicked in."

A significant number of young men in both Catholic and Protestant communities said that the paramilitaries were still very active. Often the young men who were more likely to be on the street talked about the paramilitaries in the same way as the police. They were to be avoided and were a threat to their enjoyment and activities.

In some communities, the paramilitaries were overtly talked about, but for others they talked about active 'neighbours' who people went to, to sort out estate difficulties. Some young men they feared doorstep visits from the paramilitaries and the beatings that might follow.

Some young men described paramilitaries as contributing to the safety within a community, either in the past or the present. Interestingly, some of the young men talk about the past in ways they are hardly old enough to remember.

9. Conflict between Catholics and Protestants is still commonplace and the fear or attraction to conflict is still strong.

"I feel safe here because it's all Catholic, although if you were in another Catholic area you might not feel safe. You wouldn't feel safe in Protestant areas, even if you were on a bus going through those areas."

"Rioting is just fun for the wee kids. It isn't about Catholics and Protestants. It's different for the older ones they still hate each other. It is holding everything back in my area, no one wants to live here. It's not a bad area, but people think it is."

"We were all brought up to hate Catholics and they were brought up to hate Protestants. Nothing will change until we have mixed schools. It's not those my age, it is my dad and his dad. It goes back too far."

"I don't care whether they are Catholics or Protestants, but they do!"

“You can tell Protestants - spiked up blond hair, the way they say ‘h’. If you get talking to people downtown, you can tell and it changes what you say.”

“My daddy was in the troubles and he says the Protestants would be shooting at them when they came out of school, so I don’t like them.”

“My daddy was walking home about 11:00. He had a beer bottle in his hand because he had to come through a Protestant area, and they shot him in the leg. He had trials for Ipswich and it messed him up.”

“In our primary school, we used to meet up with protestant schools and do things, but we don’t do that now we are at secondary.”

The common view amongst young men was that divisions were still as strong between Catholics and Protestants. There was still very little contact between communities that didn’t involve actual or potential violence and conflict. While some suggested it wasn’t quite as hate-filled as before, many described a ceasefire mentality rather than peace. Many young men indicated that attitudes have changed a little, but not much, and they were often pessimistic about the peace process which they suggested had not filtered down to local communities.

Some suggested that recent immigrants replaced Catholic and Protestants as the threat, but the term ‘enemy’ was still very commonly used. Young men too often had inherited stories and attitudes from their fathers and grandfathers.

We asked young men about whether they knew people outside of their own community and very few did. Although we did hear occasional stories of chatting after fighting, seeing girls from across the divide, sometimes tense conversations in Belfast city centre, and also some positive experiences (through school or cross community initiatives), but interestingly, these were almost always initiated by others. Left to their own devices and given current housing and school policies, young men are unlikely to look for or initiate cross community contact or relationships.

10. The buzz makes violence and conflict a magnet for many young men

“I like getting talking about fights I’ve been in before – then you get all wound up and go into town looking for a fight.”

“There’s definitely some who look for it, probably for the same reason I like it, for the adrenaline, and to get a name for themselves, like to try and build a reputation – so nobody wants to fight them”.

“That makes you want to get involved, the adrenaline. You don’t go looking for them, but wee girls you’re with start fights and you get stuck in – and you do like them sometimes.”

“I don’t have time to fight, I can’t be bothered – the only ones I fight with are the police.”

*“I like it [fighting], it’s good craic. I dunno why, I just do it if I’m bored, knock some c*** out.”*

Those that said their communities were safe were more likely to be on the street and very often talked about the ‘buzz’ of rioting, violence and conflict. They were drawn to violence and conflict even if they watched rather than got involved. Many became animated as they reported or discussed incidents. For these young men, the ‘buzz’ was exciting and strong enough for them to want to be involved in violence. For some of these young men, the rest of their lives (including school) were pale in contrast. For a much smaller number of young men, they seemed to live for the buzz, whether it came through fighting, rioting, drinking or using drugs.

Safety

11. There is a lack of safety for too many young men even in their own communities.

"I don't go out at all, I am just afraid of going out in the street, I would need body armour. Poleglass is a war zone. I come out of my house, get in the car and come to school. I get the bus home, straight indoors and play on the computer most nights. Weekends are the same. People in my area hang around on corners, and they just have to say something to you when you walk past. Some people will steal your trainers if you stop."

"I stay away from others, and stay in my house a lot, maybe play football in the street. We don't go too far away because it is difficult to get home."

"To avoid violence, you have to keep yourself to yourself. People tell you stories about what people are up to, but you don't say anything about it. If you are out your area, you just don't look at anybody, make sure your phone is fully charged so you can ring mates if you get into trouble. If someone is giving you trouble you just keep walking,, and if they come after you just keep walking, don't say anything."

"You can't go out of this area on your own. At the moment, because of the attack at the weekend it is too dangerous. It may settle down in a couple of weeks, but at the moment, no one feels safe."

"If you are from a popular or respected family, you are safer. It might be something you have done, gives you a name, a reputation, it might be bad things to some people, like stealing cars, but it makes you safer."

While some young men said they felt safe within their own communities, the majority said they did not. For these young men, techniques were important as ways of avoiding potentially violent situations, whether this involved staying indoors, going to safe and organised activities, not spending time on the street at more dangerous times or going out of their local communities to safer more rural areas.

For some of the young men who said they felt safe in their communities, their safety was conditional on who they knew and who knew them.

12. Safety was usually based on numbers, being a man, geography and not being alone

"I was walking up the Ormeau Road going to the dentist with a mate. There were about 20 people about my age, and they chased us up all the way to the dentist. It was because there were two of us. If there were 20 of us they wouldn't have. I carry a flick stick for safety".

"If someone has a go at you, and you walk away, people would think you are a coward".

"You sometimes don't want to get in a fight, but you have to back up your mates. It is so hard to say no. It's really hard to say no".

"People get involved because they want to show off in front of their mates. Some are just forced to get involved by their mates. There are those that make trouble. They will come to you and say 'he's been saying this about you' and runs back and forward, telling stories, trying to get people to fight".

"If you are in a group, the police always think you are being suspicious. They will stop and just look at you, They may ask you where you are going".

"You can't tell when something is going to happen. On Halloween, people were drinking. We were in the park playing football. We got a phone call because a mate of mine got beaten up, and everyone, about 100 of us, went down and loads from the enemy were there as well. Because we were in 'no man's land,' they thought we were there to start something. We broke into stuff".

Most of the young men only went out if they were in numbers. They described high levels of inter-dependency on mates to enable them to have a social life. This also, of course, meant that travel was seriously inhibited and where they felt they could go was often very restricted. For some, they described this as a necessity rather than a choice.

13. Weapons, generally and knives in particular, were carried for protection, but not always thought of as effective.

"My two mates were going to stab each other once. They had been drinking, I don't know where they got the knives from, but they were swinging them at each other."

"People carry knives for protection, but a lot end up being stabbed by their own knives."

"If I'm going out of my area, even to my granny's, I would take a knife with me."

"People carry weapons for protection, they are worried. I wouldn't carry a weapon unless I was in a big group."

"I know a couple of people in this school who carry knives for protection. If someone jumps you, you want a knife to show them, just to scare them and make them stay away from you."

"A lot of people carry knives for show, and will throw it away if the peelers come around."

"You don't hear much about people getting stabbed here, beating yes, and you can get a sawn off shotgun for £50 and people with knuckle dusters, machetes and other weapons, but not knives."

"I carry a knife for protection. I always keep it in my pocket. I just feel safer. I don't take any chances. I think in the future some people will carry guns. People aren't scared of paramilitaries, so they carry what they like. People aren't gonna stop making kitchen knives, so there will always be knives. My uncle was beaten to death with a hammer in the back of the head."

"When there is violence I just stay in the house. None of my mates carry weapons, but some people I know do. You have to watch in case you get stabbed. My friend's brother carries a knife all the time in case someone attacks him."

Many of the young men said that weapons (knives, bats and screwdrivers) were often carried on their estates and occasionally used. Protection and safety were usually offered as the reasons why. A smaller number of the young men openly said that they would carry a weapon. Attitudes varied with some thinking that only those who couldn't fight would carry a weapon (so less of a man), while others thought those that were more dangerous were more likely to use a weapon.

14. Young men's movement is determined by safe and unsafe areas, but the city centre (Belfast) was seen by most as safer if you kept to some basic rules

"I don't go out in my area. If I go down the Lower Falls, I get a bus or a taxi."

"All the Protestant areas you don't go near. We just stay in West Belfast."

"When I arrived here, people just told me not to go out of West Belfast, so I don't" (arrived from Lithuania last year).

"If you were to get hit when you are in the city centre, there are more people and you can get help easier, and there are more police and accident and emergency."

"You wouldn't go to the city centre on your own."

"It is safer in the city centre because of all the cameras, but on Saturday nights things happen. You have to go down in groups of 4 or 5 or you do not feel safe."

"You can't wear a football top in the city centre. Someone looks at you and you look at them and then it starts off."

Geography determines where almost all of the young men feel safe and where they feel they can and can't go. This appears to be the same whether the area is urban or rural. If young men were going out of their immediate area, they would make a risk assessment which would usually mean they went in number at certain times (not when it was dark), sometimes carrying a weapon and by transport, although this, for some, was still too much of a risk.

Belfast city centre was seen by many as a 'neutral' area, but still one you had to approach with caution and with a strong set of 'do's' and don'ts'. Young men were very quick to point these 'risk rules' out and suggested that they usually observed these rigorously.

Towards possible solutions

Significant numbers of young men were interested in learning skills in dealing with violence

"If you are going to learn skills in conflict resolution, it would have to be from a proper man, not one who has been taking drugs, but someone you can look up to and from our community. Not someone who comes in from outside or someone from the school. Most men from the community would be no good."

We asked young men whether they were interested in learning skills in dealing with violence and conflict. By far, the majority said that they were interested. Given most young men's general pessimism about change, this suggested that young men's pessimism was as much about their inability to see what could change and the suggestion of conflict resolution skills was welcomed.

However, a smaller number of young men responded to this suggestion with reluctance, either because they saw this as 'avoidance tactics' which they were not so interested in, or ways to avoid the 'buzz' which they were drawn towards.

We heard a number of examples of cross community activities that young men thought had been useful

“We did something, where there was a top UVF person and one from IRA, that had changed, both had done time, the UVF man said he had started when he was 11. He told us everything, he had done drugs, had a daughter, went to prison and then he changed.”

“Getting away from the area is a good thing, once a month, not going to France, but out walking, archery, cross community, you get to know them when you are doing things, not just sitting in a room listening to leaders. You are just sitting there eyeballing the others, if you are doing archery or something, you are focussed on that.”

While young men were generally pessimistic about the impact of cross community activities, we heard a range of examples of initiatives they had been involved in and some that they felt had been beneficial. Critical elements included initiatives when they were in primary school (before suspicions and threats had become significant barriers), where the messengers had made significant changes in their lives and were credible (usually meant a paramilitary history, done time, possibly killed people etc.), and that the focus was somewhere other than talking to each other (i.e. activity based).

Many young men saw few alternative activities to being on the streets, especially as they grew older.

“Where I live, there was only one place we could play football, but that closed down and now we don’t have anywhere except the street. There are clubs, but they are not that good, we need places to play, but they won’t put them here, because they think the kids will wreck it.”

“We want places in our own area which are safe and have things to do, with adults you can trust and you know. We don’t have a park or leisure centre in our area.”

“If we had more things to do in our area, it would make it safer.”

“There is a place near me where you can play football, but it is used by adults. We try to climb over the fence at night so we can play. We need places like that where there are workers and it is safe.”

Most of the young men we consulted were either within a school or youth centre setting, with a smaller number within a criminal justice environment. Interestingly, by far the majority said that their reason for being out on the street was because they had few alternatives. Some were of the view that as they grew older youth centres were less appropriate, or their perceptions of them was that they were “*rubbish*”. For many, they wanted more sport-related activities and facilities in their communities. But for some, they thought schools should provide more activities after the academic day. For these young men, they seemed to be asking for ‘safe’ activities and opportunities, which meant controlled by adults, but also allowing them enough freedom to enjoy themselves.

Conclusions

While recognising the limitations of these consultations, they do throw up a number of issues that have implications and challenges for those working with boys and young men. These conclusions aim to help focus discussion and debate about violence, conflict and safety for local communities.

- For the young men with whom we consulted, conflict, and violence impacted on their lives on most days and their safety was a daily consideration.
- Sectarianism, ethnicity and geography emerged as important factors in regard to young men's experiences of violence.
- Young men had developed a number of avoidance strategies that were integral to their lives. For some, they moved from home to school and back avoiding contact with anyone who may be a danger to them, while at the other extreme, young men had a view about which areas, people and situations were safe. In fact, most of the young men's lives were severely restricted by geography which was the primary consideration when they left their homes.
- Young men reported conflict and violence as 'the way it is' and not out of the ordinary at all. For some, the 'buzz' associated with violence was an attraction and for many it was two-edged - both a 'buzz' and also something to be feared. Most young men suggested that violence was on the increase and alcohol was a contributing factor.
- Weapons generally (rather than knives specifically) were a far stronger day-to-day issue for young men. Most young men said that weapons were carried for protection (over 10% said that they carried weapons), but a significant minority believed that weapon carrying was for those that could not fight.
- Young men described their schools and homes as safe, their own communities often as being unsafe, and certainly most other communities as being out of bounds, unless they were in significant numbers and looking for conflict. For young men, this often meant same-religion estates as well as the other.
- Young men said that the police were too often absent from their communities. They also said that there were many incidents that were never reported to the police. Sometimes the police were perceived as being against the community, and even to be out to actively harass groups of young men.
- Young men reported that the paramilitaries were still active in both sides of the community and their views of them were mixed. Some saw them as a positive force in their community, while others again thought they 'harassed' young men and made the area 'less fun'.
- For those young men who were more likely to be involved in anti-social and criminal activities, they saw both the police and the paramilitaries as competing forces in their communities, who 'stopped them' from doing what they wanted to do.
- Young men consulted with were often both victims and perpetrators within their communities, with young men out on the streets, drawn to riots, anti-social activities even if this was only as observers.
- Young men reported that as they grew older, other young men, their communities, police and often paramilitaries saw them as a threat and approached them as such.
- As they grew older, they reported that there was less organised activity for them (or they thought that what was there was boring), so they felt they were only left with home or the street for their enjoyment.

- In spite of the peace process, very little seems to have changed for these young men in regard to their experience of violence. Too many of these young men appear to be 'stuck' inhabiting a ceasefire world, rather than one that is changing with peace.
- About half of the young men we talked to had experienced cross community activities and said that they had impacted positively on their attitudes and beliefs about the other community. However, while many described themselves as active participants, none of them were involved in setting up the initiatives. This suggests any change of attitude about the other community for these and other young men may need to be initiated by organisations.
- The suggestion of programmes teaching conflict resolution skills were received positively by most of the young men, even though young men were generally lacking any suggestions for initiatives themselves.
- Young men said that there was a dearth of age-specific activities in their areas, that were supervised (by adults) that provided them with attractive alternatives to the street.

Suggestions for projects and initiatives

The intention of this report is to indicate ways in which agencies can address some of the issues raised by young men during the consultations. While more investigation will always be of value, to focus discussion and debate, we have suggested seven possible initiatives we think would go some way to address some of the conclusions above.

1. Conflict resolution programmes within schools, criminal justice and youth services. These need to be a mixture of physical and talk-based sessions that increase young men's confidence in dealing with conflict and violence as well as their ability to assess dangers.

Young men responded well to this suggestion. This initiative would aim to increase young men's confidence in dealing with violent situations and enable them to recognise when the dangers are real rather than perceived.

2. Initiatives that bring together all those involved in community safety to include young men, to look at common interests and critical roles that need to be played. This would be a wider frame than the common held view that policing is the same as community safety and that everybody else's role is to inform the police. Community-led safety initiatives that actively involve young men are more likely to achieve their aims.

Young men are prominent in crime and anti social behaviour as both victims and perpetrators. These consultations suggest that they have a lot to contribute to the community safety agenda.

3. Schools (both primary and secondary) to be even more active in after school and evening activities that build on the safety that young men get from school. This could mean much closer partnerships between schools and youth services for example providing safe, high quality, age specific and varied initiatives.

Young men consistently said that school was a safe environment for them, and often this was in sharp contrast to their views of their own communities. In the short term, services targeted at young men could be built onto the school day, and sometimes even into the evening to ensure that young men have alternatives to the street with its dangers.

4. Build cross community programmes on the basis of geography rather than people to adopt more conflict based strategies (such as truces, mediation and negotiating territories) in order to make places safe for people. The rationale for this is that conflicts and safety are so strongly

interwoven with geography and territory that any strategy will have to focus on place as well as people.

Young men talked to us about dangerous places as much as dangerous people. This suggests that we need to look at how we can make geographical areas safer for young men (and others). Cross community programmes tend to concentrate on people's perceptions of each other, rather than geographical issues.

5. Selected communities, where levels of safety are particularly low (interface and others), should become the focus of activity, sport and talk-based youth work strategies that meet the needs of a broad range of young people, but particularly young men.

Too often young men said their own communities were unsafe for them, which suggests a level of social exclusion that is unacceptable. This suggested initiative would approach particular communities from a perspective that looked at young people's routes to particular youth provision. Some projects may only be accessible to young men from its nearest streets (dangers for young men getting to the project from a little further away) or by a particular group that are dominant in the local area and their presence stops others from access. This focus looks as much at how young people access provision as much as what they get when they are inside.

6. Programmes are initiated and developed targeting recently arrived young men to ensure that they have the skills, language and understanding to live in Northern Ireland safely.

Evidence from other countries suggest that the more that immigrant young men understand the language (formal and street), have well developed conflict resolution skills and understanding of the host culture, the quicker they settle and the safer they are. Many have suggested that as sectarian conflict reduces, race-related conflict may well increase, so this project will ensure that some young men who are likely to be the primary victims of these attacks are equipped to deal with conflict and violence.

7. Initiatives targeting parents of boys (under 5) that address the concerns of parents about the safety of their sons. Parents are more likely to either be over-protective (try to keep their sons indoors) or under-protective (allow them to be in the community unsupervised or within safe environments) leading their sons to become maybe too street-wise.

Within the consultations young men often talked about when they were younger and at what age they were outside playing with others, often unsupervised by adults, and how the younger ones they see now get involved in throwing bricks and lighting fires. Parents are often concerned about their sons; both in terms of difficulties they might find themselves in and their futures. This initiative will aim to increase parents' confidence in supporting their sons and understanding their development.

Credits

There were 9 people involved in carrying out these consultations, they were:– Michael Mckenna, Jonny Ashe, Barry McGinley, Peter Wray, Martin McMullan - YouthAction Northern Ireland; Matt Crozier – Include Youth; Ken Harland and Trefor Lloyd – Centre for Young Men's Studies, University of Ulster; and Colm Walsh.

This report was written by Trefor Lloyd while acting as a consultant for the Centre for Young Men's Studies at the Ulster University.