REFLECTIONS ON A TRAGIC EVENT

Lessons for youth workers, other agencies and policy-makers working in the context of young people and violence

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Manager's opening comments

By Chris Macintosh

YPAC MANCHESTER

My name is Chris Macintosh, I'm a senior youth worker with YPAC Manchester which is based in North Manchester. YPAC runs a range of activities for young people including youth clubs and detached youth work.

We also work with a number of partner organisations including 4CT, the Water Adventure Centre, M13 Youth Project, the Active Communities Network and Manchester Youth Zone.

It was 6.30pm on a Friday in September 2023. I'd just finished a surprisingly quiet youth club and was doing my usual decompress and was checking my phone for what was happening locally. The breaking news headline was a knife incident on the local precinct where we do most of our detached youth work.

Knife incidents are quite common in the area. I'd seen various videos and heard several stories of them and thought this would be like the others. I imagined I'd find out about the story eventually and see images of someone with superficial scars millimetres away from what could have been a fatal injury. I imagined also having a conversation with colleagues and partners about safety and consequences; the kind of conversation we've had several times before. I closed my laptop, texted one of our detached youth workers to let them know about the incident and decided to leave it until the next day.

I woke up to the news that a 14-year-old had died in the incident. I went straight onto our Instagram account and messaged some young people we work with who let me know bits of information about what had happened - the who and the where. I discussed with them their thoughts and emotions, and watched footage of the arrest of Boy A, as he became known. We knew him, and the boy who had died, as we had been working with him too. In fact, they knew each other well.

At a pre-planned event later that morning I discussed with youth work colleagues visiting the area to see if we could support young people who lived there.

At the same time, a youthworker from a different organisation put out a Tweet about the need for young people to be supported in dealing with their emotions. I texted her saying YPAC was out and about. A day of conversation and planning about joint responses, support and care for those traumatised ensued.

Twice that day I went to where it happened, talking to professionals and councillors at the scene, explaining from young people's narratives that this was not gang-related, which was the presumption of those present. And that the blue plastic gloves in a picture that had been placed at the memorial of the victim was more a hangover from Covid than a sign of gang affiliation.
The second visit was the hardest. My colleague Issy and I walked around a corner to the precinct and there was a group of 40 young people staring at the growing makeshift memorial. Among them were many of the young people who attended our Friday group. As we noticed each other they moved away from the crowd to gather by me. We stood silently for a moment then talked about their shock, their interactions the day before, the life of the young man who had died. We listened, trying to engage with their emotions, allowing them space to express what they felt.

We spent the next five hours with the young people there, meeting new young people, organising out-of-school support sessions, and generally looking after everyone, including providing food.

That day was the beginning of a long process of work and collaboration between three organisations (Harpurhey Neighbourhood Project, Kids of Colour and YPAC Manchester) aimed at helping young people deal with what had happened and any trauma.

A month or so later the five workers who worked closely with the young people (myself, Kenny Stenton, Isabella Martini, Zara Manoehoetoe and David Lulengo) decided that we needed to reflect on the process we had been involved in up until that point. We asked Graeme Tiffany to help facilitate this reflection.

This document records that process and draws out themes from the dialogue and reflections on the work we had done. It tries to distil and rationalise the workers' deep emotions, heaviness and attempts to care for the young

people and community affected by this tragedy. It also highlights both the frustrations we experience, and joys associated with the many often simple accomplishments of being detached youth workers on a long-term basis within a community.

We hope what is said in this document can initiate wider reflections of benefit to other community and youth workers, funders and policy-makers.

A final note: there is significant cross over with the themes set out in the Manchester Detached Youth Work Protocols created in 2023. The basis of our practice – the how and the why of detached youth work – is described within that document. We recommend reading it too.

Chris Macintosh

REFLECTIONS ON A TRAGIC EVENT

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REFLECTIONS ON A TRAGIC EVENT:

LESSONS FOR YOUTH WORKERS, OTHER AGENCIES AND POLICY-MAKERS WORKING IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND VIOLENCE

When workers state that "Discussions like this only happen when tragic events occur" they are expressing a deep frustration that wide-ranging, multi-service, enquiry into working in the context of young people and violence seems to take place only when something tragic happens; in this case, the death of a young person. The fact is that many frontline staff working in neighbourhoods affected by violence discuss these matters (and the related needs of young people and the wider community) almost every day. And they often do this in their own time as resource constraints mean they have little, if any, time to do this as part of their ongoing professional practice. What they are saying – asking – is, why does it take a tragic event before investment is made in creating the professional space and time for frontline workers to have critical conversations about young people and violence?

It is important to state that this particular piece of work may be an exception: it was made possible due to the support of three funders* whose flexible grant aid enabled these reflections and the initial interventions to take place; it allowed workers additional space and time within their work to engage in this process.

1 The three funders were the Henry Smith Charity, the Garfield Weston Foundation and The Tudor Trust.

It is noteworthy also that these conversations do seem to be going on elsewhere, albeit at a distance; indeed other 'power players' (policy-makers and the like) are seen to be heavily invested in creating narratives (and, ultimately, policy discourses) about young people and violence. The problem for frontline workers is that these conversations appear to be detached from the realities of the work they are doing. Rarely, if ever, are the workers themselves asked for *their* opinions, or invited to advocate on the basis of *their* experience. They feel undervalued, cut out, not listened to. They say: *"We need to expose other professionals to the kind of discussion we are having, especially those who don't value youth work."*

The following thematics have been identified by a group of youth workers who took the time to document and reflect on their work in the context of young people and violence and, particularly, a tragic event in which a Black boy[2] died as a result of a stabbing.

Power, powerlessness and politics

It's important from the outset to assert the impact of structural and systemic issues on work with young people in the context of violence. There is an inescapable political context that influences greatly what is done in the name of 'tackling youth violence'. This higher-level framing of perceived issues exerts a 'primacy' of power that dictates the form of many top-down 'interventions'. This is a reductive approach that fails to encompass the bottom-up community development models of youth work advocated by the workers involved in this case study. It is also antithetical to good practice. What happens is that the ideological framing of 'youth violence' contextualises the direct work with young people and renders it neutral. In effect, it silences these voices, it actively de-politicises what's happening. The perverse irony is that youth involvement and participation are defining of youth work: young people are acknowledged to have the potential both to participate in and create solutions to violence.

2 The use of the term 'Black boy' is deliberate, an attempt to draw attention to the process of 'adultification' of children from minority groups who are often treated as more mature than they are.

The issue then is that the prescription of externally-determined 'solutions', or even perceived effective interventions, at best, sits uneasily with this participatory ethic.

We can say then that this process of 'externalisation' and neutralisation is indicative of a lack of commitment to youth participation. It is a constant concern of youth workers who are adamant that responses to violence must include "looking at the political aspects of the work": it cannot be enough for the politics to be decided 'on high'; it is essential to engage with the local. They ask: "why are young people's views not taken seriously by people in positions of power?" And wonder if: "Young people voting at 16 would lead to more interest from politicians in youth issues." All this sits within a wide range of systemic issues that disturbs them greatly: "It all comes back to the bigger picture: structural issues, the political landscape." Whereby, "this often becomes a stopping point because it's hard to change this stuff."

This assessment aims to validate the critical importance of celebrating and supporting detached youth work as a form of political education – this is all the more important as many youth workers believe that successive policy agendas have eroded detached youth work. Youth workers argue for a radicalisation of their sector as a response to its perceived and ongoing domestication; they want freedoms to undertake political work, work that aims to change the political circumstances that act as a backdrop to violence. They call instead for youth work to be framed as a form of political education, which supports bringing young people into decision-making environments. This would make it possible, in the first instance, to challenge the view held by so many young people that 'nothing ever changes'. The emphasis here is not on 'formal' politics; youth work respects the fact that young people are politically engaged even if they don't have the language to articulate their politics in the way adults are perceived to do. Indeed, their sense of justice – moral justice – is deeply held and regularly observable, and is evidence of these political inclinations. Without this radicalisation, they say, their contribution to wider violence prevention work will always be constrained in its effectiveness.

We should remember that the youth worker's job is to work with these inclinations *as they are presented*. This fits with the philosophy of popular education as a democratic process that actively supports young people to 'contest and dissent'. There are implicit linkages between political education and social action, which identifies young people as agents and actors in

the fight for peace and non-violence. In support of this, young people (as well as youth workers) need **training** in peace work. This training would expand the notion of social action, which many youth workers tend to view as reductive, watered down, presented as a menu to choose from, where others – rather than young people – have decided what's needed. Social action needs to be *social* – inclusive of engagement in participatory processes within which young people have the power to determine what actions need to be taken. This is a process methodology that creates space for political thinking about class, race and other issues. Therein, youth workers are calling for investment in and support for activities that enhance the consciousness-raising of young people, particularly in relation to systems and structures. These activities typically include 'power-mapping'. Questions need to be asked about the role of local elected members and strategies to activate these people in the service of young people, such as Councillor education programmes.

The reflection on this tragic event suggests that re-asserting the political nature of youth work is essential to increasing its impact on the issue of violence. Some further analysis of the conceptualisation of youth work also emerges from the reflective activities of this group of youth workers.

Youth work as a 'floating concept'

Asserting that youth work is a form of political education is one thing, but this only makes sense when the core elements of the practice are clearly defined. Some people, including some working in other services, get no further than the assumption that youth workers working in street-based settings do little more than 'walk around chatting to kids'. This misunderstanding stems from youth work (and especially detached youth work) being an example of a 'floating concept': something understood very differently by different people.

These misconceptions may stem from different beliefs about the concept of the child. The issue here is that individual and agency perceptions of young people can drive both positive and negative attitudes toward young people. The view of the child as lacking in abilities, only ever an adult in formation, essentially in deficit, and often a problem, is pernicious. According to the workers involved in this reflection, such attitudes are "very embedded in our country".

The youth workers say, determinedly, “We don’t come from that stance”. Instead, they hold the appreciative view that children and young people have creative capacity and possess agency. They want to escape from the “institutional language” that many partner agencies use, preferring instead a narrative that comes from a “base perspective” and that is “community-led”. Their assumption that young people are capable of involvement in peer education programmes is an example of this. A further perhaps radical interpretation of this is to understand that young people are activists, with the power to play an essential in violence prevention and peace-building.

Inevitably, the position adopted by many external and partner agencies (that young people are incapable of being the authors of solutions) leads to the view that the role of youth work is to ‘fix’ young people. Not only that, but they then look to youth workers to fix the problems that these agencies have identified and decided need fixing. This is a world of difference to responding to the problems young people themselves say they face. In short, this is the difference between seeing young people *as* problems rather than young people *with* and *experiencing* problems.

The important, and defining, question for youth workers is not ‘how do young people *fit* the services and systems that others design for them’ but 'how does youth work *work* for young people?'

Youth workers *see* what happens to young people when they are in contact with these other services. They see the control and hold those services can exert over young people. Youth workers see what is *done to* young people in the name of these services. Once again, it is important to reiterate (ad nauseum) that, by definition, youth work is ‘youth-led’: it focuses on what young people have to say (in their own terms) about the world (‘their voices’) and their experience of the world. Young people’s own definitions of youth work matter greatly, and it matters greatly too that the practice itself is informed by young people’s reflection on their experiences of youth work. So, youth work is about ‘being there’ for young people. It is not about trying (on the basis of external forces) to ‘intervene’ in their lives.

By the same token, young people’s services are defined by ‘working in the service of young people’, a conceptualisation that sits in tension with the notion of youth work acting in the service of other agencies’ priorities. In this

sense, youth work always stands on the side of young people, regardless of what they have done or not done. That includes supporting them even if they fall foul of the law or have been convicted of a crime. Youth work also seeks to extend the responsibility for supporting young people beyond youth work itself, to all services. This is not to suggest youth workers don't have aims (even 'agendas'), rather that they purposefully expose these agendas to the scrutiny of young people. In practice, this means that youth workers what to talk about the quality of their interactions with young people as opposed to the quantity.

This misunderstanding of youth work so routinely held by partner agencies, then affects questions of **accountability**, especially in the context of partnership-working. Without clarity of understanding, the demands made of youth work to be accountable can be problematic. For example, some funding regimes (and the accountability regimes associated with them) assume particular **relationships** with young people that youth workers view as controlling. As ever, it becomes essential to engage partners and funders in a dialogue about what youth work is, what its aims are and what practices are reasonable in these terms, from the outset.

In terms of working with young people in the context of violence, bringing a number of these themes together implies adopting a broader concept of violence. This emphasises that systems, structures and policy agendas can also constitute forms of violence – that violence is a product and outcome of a range of social phenomena. A particular issue is the ease with which 'gang' narratives take hold in relation to groups of young people *per se*. Youth workers have an important role to play in challenging and disrupting these narratives.

Funding and resources

Many detached youth workers have the knowledge, skills, experience and positive attitudes needed to do good work with young people in the context of violence, though their "wings are severely clipped" by a lack of funding and resources. A lack of time is often cited; 'good work' demands both a commitment to 'professional thinking' and ttime to invest in this thinking.

In relation to this case study, this means considering the many contexts of

community life, including the root causes of violence in those communities. This implies also thinking about what it is to help and care for young people both as individuals and, in a communal sense, as a collective. This commitment to thinking is essential both for promoting healing after tragic events and also to implementing protective and preventive measures on an on-going basis.

A further casualty of funding and resource constraints is that the development of 'organisational consciousness' is inhibited. This can be understood in terms of having a deliberate focus, at an organisational level, on the issues that young people face, *their* interpretation of these issues and support for their efforts to deal with them (the promotion of young people's self and collective advocacy and social action). The challenge here is that this demands appreciation of complexity and the need for a range of approaches rarely imagined by funders and policy-makers. Indeed, youth workers identify a diversity of approaches as essential when working with young people in the context of violence.

The thinking that took place in relation to this case study questioned the rationale behind 'hotspots' (the use of data collection to identify areas where crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour appears concentrated), given that many become permanent. The conclusion is simple: the typical interventions made in relation to these hotspots rarely create change. Put simply, this 'hotspot permanence' suggests that the models of practice currently used are ineffective. Workers argue that the frameworks within which they are asked to work are in conflict with the participatory models that are necessary to engage communities in a dialogue about what would actually make a difference. They call for greater autonomy and the freedom to engage in 'experimental youth work' (which draws upon an established, proven history). It is clear that youth workers have a strong desire to 'think differently' as a means to identify models of practice that do work. They find the organisational and resource constraints that directly inhibit this kind of practice frustrating. Ultimately, these constraints don't help the workers; instead, they thwart the workers' ability to identify what really works.

The prevalence of thinking from a particular systems-based culture appears to drive a form of economic pragmatism that is actively disdainful of organisational consciousness and rarely supports 'awareness-raising'. Typically, policy makers' and funders' needs are prioritised, over and above the needs

of young people and wider communities, as could be determined in dialogue with those communities. The dominant culture is of 'agenda-adoption' in relation to the funding that is available. The concern is that these agendas are 'externally constructed' rather than informed by young people, wider communities and local circumstances. This disconnect causes many workers a great deal of anxiety (see also **emotional labour and moral distress**).

Other manifestations of funding and resource constraints include the part-time nature of many youth worker posts. This makes it difficult for staff to provide the intensive and on-going support needed by young people involved in and affected by violence. Then there is the pressure to spread resources thinly. In relation to this study, which focused on a relatively small number of young people, workers said: "This one group could be a full-time job / project." However, the prospect of this level of resource being available is highly unlikely.

There are also temporal pressures. Funding regimes rarely extend beyond several months. This kind of 'short-termism' is viewed as little more than a 'sticking plaster' approach to mitigating harm and makes the identification of longer-term solutions impossible.

There are also systemic resource constraint problems associated with the now typical contracting and commissioning arrangements. Youth work managers and lead workers often spend a great deal of time each week working to secure funding, when their experience would be better employed in working directly with young people. Violence-oriented work would benefit greatly from such 'advanced practitioner' roles (as found in other services like teaching and social work), but these roles are rare in youth work.

A further systems-related problem that inhibits good and effective practice is the single issue focus of many funding regimes. This is in contrast to the holistic violence prevention work of the Violence Prevention Units (VRUs) as advocated by many youth workers with experience of working in the context of violence. The irony here is that holistic violence prevention work sits in an even wider context of mainstream, 'grassroots', community-based youth services. And yet, these have been subject to the most egregious cuts, particularly over the last 15 years or so. It is no surprise that the National Youth Agency (NYA) has identified a correlation between the areas worst affected by youth centre closures and an increased likelihood of children being involved in crime and violence - which is not to suggest crime prevention is the primary task.

The workers involved in this reflection are resolute in arguing that youth work should *not* be defined by the concept of prevention, which is the framing often adopted by papers such as *The Social Cost of Youth Work Cuts: Preventing youth offending though youth work*[3] . They see this framing (as stated in the section **Youth work as a 'floating concept'** above) everywhere. They know that the fundamental issue faced by youth work today is its problematic, singular, conceptualisation as a means to prevent crime, violence and anti-social behaviour.

Some youth organisations draw attention to the 'externalisation' of needs assessment (as compared to that 'internal': research carried out (and historically prioritised by) detached youth workers). Typically, Violence Reduction Partnerships undertake this 'external' analysis, the outcomes of which often inform the prescriptive responses many workers are asked to implement. These, they say, fail to tackle the root causes of violence, including those that workers associate with poorly resourced and often controlling systems and structures. For example, the demands made of many youth workers to share information in the name of 'partnership-working' (which implies handing over information about young people to the police) can undermine workers' capacity to establish and maintain relationships with those young people, other young people and wider communities. All of those involved in this reflection questioned whether the widespread claims made about a commitment to 'working holistically' were evidenced in practice.

In extremis, this information-sharing versus intelligence-gathering dynamic can lead to some organisations deciding not to engage with VRUs.

It is clear then that these issues must be discussed and addressed for VRUs to be more impactful.

3 See: https://www.nya.org.uk/youth-work-and-crime/ The finding is drawn from a study of 74 academic sources and shows that in the London boroughs worst affected by youth centre closures between 2010 and 2019 that was a 10 per cent increase in 10 – 15 year olds involvement in crime. Furthermore (for context) the profile of youth crime has changed with more violent and drug-related offences being recorded. Convictions for offences involving knives, for example, are more than 30 per cent higher now than in 2014/15. Relatedly, the Youth Endowment Fund's (YEF) second annual report on children, violence and vulnerability: https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2023/ revealed that nearly half of all children had been a victim or witness to violence in the past year and that the phenomenon of young people being both victim and perpetrator was very much in evidence.

What's needed is a multi-faceted approach rooted in trust-based relationships rather than mandated on the basis of centralised expectations. This approach would then facilitate and enhance diverse interventions in relation to a wide range of issues such as adolescent mental health ill, school exclusion, poverty and disadvantage and those associated with young people's involvement in the juvenile justice system or those incarcerated – all of which are implicated in the context of crime and violence. There is an obvious tie-in with the points made about short-termism that workers are particularly critical of: while there are issues with the *quantity* of resources available to youth workers, there are also problems associated with the duration of funding regimes. Maintaining relationships with young people in the secure estate is a case in point, as this may take years.

Then there are the resource implications of dealing with particular catastrophic events such as the violent death of a young person or engagement with the perpetrators of such incidents. In these situations it is common that a massive amount of work needs to be done, including providing intensive support to the family and friendship groups of, potentially, victim and perpetrator) as well as the wider community (including the many other young people who may have been affected).

Some people may express considerable anger and a desire for retribution. The timely interventions of youth workers in this context can be crucial in mitigating and preventing an escalation of violence. It is essential that this is understood as a form of vulnerability, including becoming involved in the criminal justice system – the experience of which can often exacerbate rather than prevent and solve problems. The concern here is that the system focuses on the punishment of individuals rather than seeking to understand the collective experiences of communities, particularly in terms of cycles of violence. In such circumstances it is essential youth organisations have accessible and flexible financial resources at their disposal if they are to be able to offer this support. And yet, many organisations simply don't have a resource structure that makes this possible; they are tied into the afore-mentioned prescriptive regimes that allow little or no flexibility.

Once again, a consequence of workers not being able to respond in the ways they judge necessary is that they too can suffer considerable moral distress. In combination, it is clear that the resourcing of youth work in the context of

violence must include contingency funds that can be employed in a flexible manner at the discretion of the workers.

Trust-based relationships

There is unanimity among youth workers, managers, policy-makers and funders that trust-based relationships are essential to effective practice and this is especially so when working in the context of violence. However, the complexity of these relationships, including how they are established and maintained, is rarely understood and appreciated. There is a sense that some stakeholders think that youth workers simply need to 'rock-up' in public space for engagement to occur with young people. The reality is relationships with young people, especially in the context of violence, are rarely confidently held, and young people can test these relationships over and over again. Indeed, the demands of this kind of work means that workers must pay constant attention to behaviour, especially when it is out of character, the observance of which also demands regular contact with young people. Trust, then, is not something that can be secured as if an end-point; relationships in the context of young people and violence are invariably uncertain processes.

In practice, this means that day-to-day engagement can never be guaranteed (even if the resources exist that make it possible for workers to be present in the community on a regular basis). As such, weeks may pass between contacts. Resourcing workers to be around more, to be present more often in community, makes obvious sense. Noteworthy examples are the city-centre street-based outreach teams in Norway that have been known to be present on the streets for 10 hours a day, seven days a week, by virtue of having two teams that synchronise their activities with a mid-afternoon handover. In comparison, the resource-poor realities of many UK youth projects (especially those relying on part-time staffing) contributes to the fragility of relationships between youth workers and young people experiencing violence. Furthermore, the demands for youth workers to work in controlling ways exacerbates this fragility and undermines responsive practices rooted in 'knowing' young people (and thus being aware when they are not 'themselves').

Dealing with grief, normalcy and grief education

In dealing with grief, youth work represents an essential space of unorthodoxy that contrasts markedly with the more commonly accepted belief in school that 'what's best' for children and young people experiencing grief is that they should 'get back to normal' as soon as possible: a state of 'normalcy'. Those involved in this reflection argue that many of the young people they work with have had little or no time (or support) to process their grief, and the culture of normalcy acts to suppress their emotions. Youth workers believe they can play an important (perhaps essential) role in supporting young people who have experienced violence, but this relies on having the capacity to create the time and space that many young people need to process their experiences. Youth workers resist asserting, as others so often do, that young people should 'move on'.

A concerted grief education strategy is called for in which young people can have access to support in thinking and talking about their experiences, related issues and are encouraged to discuss the conceptual terrain of violence, grief, retribution and forgiveness. The creativity of youth work can be beneficial here: music, for example, can provide a more accessible medium for many young people to express themselves. That said, the essential, foundational intervention is to first engage young people in discussion about what might be most beneficial for them, whether it be music, art or physical activity. In this sense, these activities can create time and space responsive to anxious minds and bodies, free from the pressure of talking.

The constraining effects of working in a partnership context must be restated here. Of particular concern are the demands made of youth workers to share information, including their own notes about their work with young people. Specifically, there can be political pressure to pass this information onto the police: criminal prosecution appears to take precedence to children and young people's welfare. The workers see this as putting at risk the process of healing; much-needed therapeutic interventions can be rendered inaccessible. These risks extend to those potentially experienced by workers, who may themselves be victims of threats catalysed by community conversations about information-sharing.

Youth workers' reflections on young people's experience of school

The role of exclusion in the panoply of risk factors is hotly contested. Whatever the reality, young people's experience of school (formal education) is a crucial dimension of their lives, which makes it of significant concern to youth workers. Young people often speak of their experience of exclusion to youth workers. They speak of spending time in, so-called, 'isolation' / 'inclusion' units where they say they are 'cooped up' and feel isolated. Youth workers judge this to have a deleterious effect on their attitudes to school and education. On occasion, young people attest to being 'furious', a response that has a clear potential to exacerbate rather than mitigate violence. Likewise, where young people have been subjected to 'managed moves' (i.e. to other schools) due to violent behaviours, it's impossible to predict whether the outcome will be good, or not. It is essential then that these moves are monitored and supported. Indeed, young people often need extra support during these and similar transfers, as such moves can lead to negative reactions and catalyse violence.

Research: "Start with local minds"

Interventions in the context of young people and violence need to be informed by the best possible research. Given the complexity of violence, an analysis of local circumstances is especially important. Geographical tools such as mapping are particularly useful and can help examine questions of where, when and why. Relatedly, the research tools associated with Contextual Safeguarding can help in reviewing the area-based violence typically associated with 'hotspots' and inform interventions in these areas. Accordingly, training in geography for youth workers and Contextual Safeguarding is needed. This contextual analysis should extend to a critique of the judgements made by partner agencies when identifying young people as 'at risk' of involvement in violence.

Without doubt, this is an uncertain arena fraught with the potential for discrimination; enquiry into the logic of 'risk factors' is needed, particularly as this often validates the need for 'intervention' in the first place. For example, many young people are judged as being at risk of involvement in violence on

the assumption that they are experiencing 'neglect'. The concern here is that the label 'neglect' is often imprecise, lacks detail, and can be encompassing of a range of realities symptomatic of poverty. We can observe then a link between the judgements of social workers and other stakeholders and the translation and transmission of these judgements into the expectations directed at youth workers. The widest possible contextual analysis is therefore needed. It should consider, variously, the effects of poverty and deprivation and the negative depiction of some groups of people through, say, social media; a constant vigilance is needed to protect against institutional discrimination[4]. The fact that a great deal of youth work takes place in areas with some of the highest indices of multiple deprivation (IMDs[5]) in the country cannot be over-emphasised and should inform funding regimes.

Similar ambiguities can be found in the presumption that school exclusion is a correlate of violence. Here we might note the work of HMI David Moore who shows many young people are excluded from school on the basis of having displayed 'behavioural issues'. Moore's work infers identification of 'behavioural problems' is similarly imprecise (and rarely qualified) and constitutes a 'catch all' that can mask discrimination. This suggests that principled research should also aim to analyse the effects of wider social phenomena, such as entrenched poverty, the effects of media (especially social media that often fetishises poverty and violence) as well as the potential of institutional racism affecting the practices of agencies working with young people implicated in violence.

4 As powerfully set out by the Lawrence Enquiry.

5 A form of on-going governmental analysis that considers income, employment, health, disability, education, skills and training, housing, crime and environment. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) consists of 37 quality of life indicators including the number of children and young people out of school, numbers of people in higher education, the number of children living in household receiving Universal Credit, the numbers claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) unemployment benefit, and health metrics that assess the likely number of years lost due to health conditions.

Training and the importance of diverse knowledge and skills in the staff team

Working in the context of violence makes many demands of youth workers. Professional training and continued professional development (CPD) is therefore vital. This must include opportunities to secure the diversity of knowledge and skills needed to work in the context of violence. This includes having a thorough understanding of the communities being worked with, wherein training in the use of geographical tools (like mapping) can be useful, especially with regard to the analysis of what's happening in spaces that have been identified as 'hot spots'.

Learning about social phenomena is important too as, for example, this creates an awareness of the prejudices individuals and communities might face, whether based on social class, culture, race or other forms of discrimination (which, in this case included highly negative and threatening attitudes toward young people involved in the criminal justice system). Given prejudices and discrimination can be amplified through various medias, it is important also that workers learn about new technologies including social media.

There are particular theories that workers tend to value highly; these include desistance theory, restorative practice[6], and those associated with public health approaches to violence mitigation and prevention. Those involved in this reflection caution against the view that these theories and practices can be quickly and easily used; their experience suggests that it can take a considerable amount of time to identify underlying problems and change entrenched behaviours. It is also important not to rely on singular theories; those with experience of working with young people in the context of violence invariably advocate 'holistic' approaches.

The logic is of a staged approach: primary, secondary and tertiary phases that are developmental in nature. This can be challenging as youth work often has to work alongside services that have particular (and potentially reductive) focuses, such as assisting and supporting an individual's desistance from

6 The bringing together of groups and individuals, particularly victims and perpetrators, with a view to enabling all parties to reflect on the reasoning behind their thoughts, words and action and explore [their own] solutions. Restorative Practice demands the worker have higher order facilitation skills.

crime. But, again, the complexity of most young people's lives (in terms of the multiple factors influencing behaviours) implies no single intervention can 'cause' desistance. Indeed, research highlights the importance of both internal factors (e.g. what the individual believes in) and external / social factors (e.g. the existence and quality of supportive relationships). An approach that recognises that each individual is likely to have a different 'desistance journey' is needed. And that this must sit in a context of positive social relationships: individuals are significantly influenced by those whose advice they respect and whose support they value. As is common, when many youth workers articulate their practice they identify an appreciative model, a model that seeks to recognise and build upon young people's strengths (rather than viewing them as if 'in deficit').

Youth workers also need an understanding of the youth justice system and the law as it affects the young people they work with. With this they are better able to take on the difficult task of facilitating young people's (and the wider community's) critical understanding of this system and the value of youth workers' support and care for the young people within it (which may well demand a long-term commitment). This implies youth worker training in facilitation skills.

Philosophical enquiry into related values is also needed including those that affirm the positive aspects of conflict (which is contingent on a range of expectations, that participants display empathy and a respect for alternative viewpoints). Here the distinction between 'safe' and 'brave' spaces is useful; what's important is that these spaces are supportive of dialogue rather become settings for polarised thinking.

Knowledge and skills in counselling (informal and formal, clinical and specialist) are also needed. Some models of good practice accept that individuals rarely if ever possess all of these skills; a team work approach is called for. In Austria, for example, workers from diverse professional backgrounds (such as anthropology, law, social work and psychiatry) are often recruited to youth work teams. Certainly, it is increasingly common in the UK for members of youth work teams to possess a variety of professional qualifications such as in law, criminal justice, information, advice and guidance and social work, as well as youth work and this is likely advantageous in the context of working with young people in relation to violence.

Training in the use of evaluation methods is also important to working with young people in the context of violence. It is essential constantly to assess what is working well, and what not, and to use this learning to inform the changes that might be made to improve service provision and make it more effective. This implies also that evaluation is treated as an on-going responsibility consistent with professional practice.

An awareness of the ethics of evaluation is vital too as the routine observation of young people can be misinterpreted both by young people and external agencies as a proxy for surveillance (which the latter might benefit from). Conversely, the value of evaluation as a means to capture 'youth voice' cannot be underestimated; it provides qualitative material that supports the dissemination of good practice which, in turn, helps partners, funders and policy-makers gain a more nuanced understanding of youth work. Story-telling methodologies are particularly valuable here.

The necessity of a community work approach

Working with young people in the context of violence demands a range of inter-connected interventions. Those involved in this reflection express concern that 1:1 work (e.g. mentoring and casework) has come to dominate understandings of 'what works'; therein, they criticise the individuating focus of a great deal of social policy and associated funding regimes.

While important, 1:1 work should not, they argue, take over the activities of youth workers. These workers point out that engaging young people in street and public space-based settings (typically through detached youth work approaches) implies starting from a social context (rarely are young people to be found on their own; they are present, with others, for social and associational reasons).

Individuated practices therefore are associated with institutional geographies where it is considered reasonable (and possible) to direct young people, as individuals, to services. The power dynamics are very different.

In the street, workers must first work with young people in the context of the groups they are a part of. Only later, when trust-based relationships have been developed might it be possible to support individuals within these groups; the power here resides with the young person. It is they who ask for further support. This way of working avoids the potential stigmatising effects of interventions that aim to 'target' individual young people. If the narrative of targeting is to be engaged with, only the theory of 'targeting through universalism'[7] makes sense.

Group and community work approaches are vitally important in effective violence-focused youth work, and this includes engagement beyond young people's peer groups, with parents, carers, families and members of the wider community, including local authority elected members. It is likely all will need support to think through their actions, experiences and responses to violence. Indeed, repeatedly, workers draw attention to the value and effectiveness, the essential nature, of 'community approaches' in order to secure Community Cohesion, Community Safety and the (Contextual) Safeguarding of young people. Workers with a knowledge of the law also identify the 'Neighbourhood Principle[8]' as a basis for promoting a widespread, cross-community, responsibility for the care of young people and the promotion of their wellbeing.

These approaches extend to supporting young people who are on remand or those who have been convicted and incarcerated. It is essential that this kind of work, in order to be meaningful and effective, is explained to young people and the wider community. This is because it is inevitable that workers will face questions as to why they are providing this support (including, say, visiting perpetrators who are in the secure estate). Workers will need to engage with, for example, attitudes that seek to validate an 'eye for an eye' or a lack of appreciation (or acceptance) of perpetrators' contrition or remorse.

All too easily, youth workers can be judged to be 'on the wrong side'. This generates potential risks, not just to the relationships youth workers have with young people, but of violence also. There is further complexity; perpetrators

7 Tiffany, 2007.

8 The responsibility to take reasonable care to avoid acts or omissions which can be reasonably foreseen as likely to injure a neighbour; where 'neighbour' infers those closely and directly affected by acts that ought reasonably be considered as being affected by that act. See: https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100227619#:~:text=The%20principle%20is%20that%20one,likely%20to%20injure%20one's%20neighbour.

of violence will have friendship groups who will also need to be worked with, and this can negatively affect workers' relationships with other young people, especially those who identify as friends of the victims of violence. 'Repairing' these relationships can take a considerable period of time.

Here, it becomes essential youth workers have and are able to articulate a narrative providing an explanation of their rationale for working in this way; they need to be able to explain to the community why they are committed to offering this support. There exists an opportunity to promote a wider and deeper understanding of youth work's principles and values (especially among young people) – namely this being a service that aims at the protection and support of all young people, regardless of circumstances.

The point here is to recognise the very great difficulties of making this case and to acknowledge that many in the community may feel and be inclined to express anger, which youth workers accept is a reasonable emotional response to violence. Having these difficult conversations is, though, essential to peace-building – which must be the aim.

A pragmatic stance is important: how one case is dealt with will inevitably affect community attitudes to youth workers when they respond to further instances of violence in the future. Choosing when to have these conversations is difficult as, initially at least, there may be good reasons for keeping these matters quiet. This said, it is undeniable that many young people who have been convicted and incarcerated will return to the community they came from and be in need of support if they are to live their lives free from violence. Youth workers need space and time (and guided reflection) in thinking through what they might say in these circumstances, which implies (again) being empowered to make judgements about *when* to explain they are supporting perpetrators.

Experienced workers know that this time will come. They need to be trusted to make this judgement. They know also that is likely young people's anger and resentment will manifest itself behaviourally. For example, when asked about the whereabouts of a perpetrator of violence responding by saying: "we know where he is but can't tell you as there are good reasons for not doing so" (while necessary) will likely (initially at least) exacerbate young people's emotional

reactions. Above all, this is about explaining and helping a wide range of people (young and older) to understand both the specifics and the broader meaning and value of youth work and its commitment to supporting all young people.

Language is all-important, particularly in communicating the impossibility of youth workers being politically neutral (in the sense that youth work implies taking a stance, in favour of youth in general). Communicating this philosophy to other stakeholders is also essential as is the deep-rooted commitment to specific models of practice: some say, “We are willing to die for our models.”

A further complexity exists in terms of engaging with familial attitudes, which is to acknowledge the essential role parents and carers can play in violence prevention and the fact that some will have very similar personal experiences of violence. It is important to try to understand why many communities are afflicted by cycles of violence, why love and care can be in short supply, and why working effectively with young people in the context of violence necessitates a community work approach.

Relationships with the police and partnership with other agencies

Youth workers have difficult challenges to face in working in partnership with the police, and this can be intensified in relation to working in the context of young people and violence. This can be exacerbated further when, in particular, detached youth work is viewed as a form of crime prevention (see **Youth work as a ‘floating concept’**) and subject to a range of expectations to act in this way.

The analysis here makes clear the very real problems associated with some of these expectations. Requesting to work ‘undercover’ with youth workers may be an extreme example of misunderstanding detached youth work, but it is illustrative of a context in which youth work, and especially detached youth work, is viewed as a means to assist agencies’ in fulfilling *their* agendas, arguably ‘doing their work for them’.

First and foremost such ‘partnership work’ risks undermining the relationships youth workers have with young people and the wider community, without which it is impossible for them to do good and effective work. Indeed, repairing

and rebuilding relationships in relation to community perceptions about the closeness of youth services and policing can take considerable time and effort. In some circumstances, it may be impossible. This situation is worsened where young people (especially in violence-affected neighbourhoods) have poor relationships with the police. Establishing and maintaining trust-based relationships with young people may mean detached workers and those working in public space thave o maintain a 'professional distance' from local officers.

Beyond this, there is the risk that workers will be subject to verbal abuse, perhaps labelled 'snitches' and suffer reputational damage. In extremis, they can be at risk of being targeted, including violently, when viewed as too closely associated with the police. Nor do 'hidden partnerships' get round this; they create not only ethical dilemmas for youth workers, but the anxiety that knowledge of these partnerships could get out.

As noted above, the pressure to share information can create dilemmas for youth workers, especially when other agencies might see this as 'intelligence-gathering'. Protocols for information-sharing are therefore essential, as is an awareness of these protocols by a wide range of partners (which implies also multi-service training for these partners). These protocols must clarify who (which services) might reasonably have access to youth workers' recordings of their work with young people.

Just as the police have powers to control access to sensitive information, so the same should apply to youth work. There can be no reasonable expectation that youth workers pass on all information, including community 'hearsay' (beyond that associated with safeguarding duties). Here again protocols can establish a culture where discussion and negotiation takes place as to what information is reasonably shared between partners.

Examining motivations is essential too; intelligence-gathering should not be confused with safeguarding. Together, this can give confidence to all stakeholders, including and especially young people and the wider community. There are obvious caveats, like safeguarding, but ironies too; youth workers might be able to use information provided by the police in positive ways, for example in relation to trafficking and exploitation. In conclusion, there should be no expectation of two-way information transmission. Crudely, the crux of the matter is that (as set out above in the commentary on conceptual issues) youth work works in the service of youth, and this can be in tension with the wider aims of other services, including the police.

It becomes clear that there is a strong case, in some areas at least, for youth workers' engagement with the police to focus on their role as 'appropriate adults'; and youth advocacy, where, for example, young people claim police harassment or in relation to young people's negative experiences of Stop and Search (Section 60[9]).

To protect against this, partnership work should rarely be mandated; broadly, informal partnerships, based on voluntary relationships are preferred. This is to assert that youth work does not rely on the police for its effectiveness; in fact, as inferred above, its effectiveness can be undermined by being too close (or even being perceived as too close) to policing. These relationships are, however, nuanced; closer contact between policing and youth work may be more reasonable in, say, centre and place-based settings provided boundaries have been agreed upon and a dialogue has taken place as to the potential benefits and possible negative effects of proximity between youth services and the police.

As with the police, it is important to challenge any misunderstandings that other agencies, and Violence Reduction Partnerships might have about the role of youth work (and especially detached youth work) and the expectations they also might make of youth workers based on these misunderstandings. It is essential then that engagement with other services prioritises helping them develop a clearer understanding of youth work. In so doing, all services' agendas become clearer, which constitutes a more reasonable basis for discussion about partnership work.

None of this is easy, especially when a perceived hierarchy of agency power exists, which often views youth work as if at the bottom of the 'food chain', as a minority partner[10]. This can, again, undermine, weaken and erode the effectiveness of youth work. It becomes important then to consider young people's experience of other parts of the 'system.'

A further complicating factor that can have a deleterious effect on effective practice is the competitive context in which services providers have to work. This is a product of the contracting, commissioning and procurement regimes now commonplace in local authorities.

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9 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/section/60

10 Tiffany, 2007.

For example, when there are tragic events, agencies on the periphery of what has happened might comment in terms designed to protect and secure *their* reputations or advance *their* status as 'preferred providers'. This competitive context can therefore be said to erode the commonly assumed commitment to collaboration, wherein partnership-working arrangements are, at best, 'weakly collaborative'[11]. Relatedly, what's said by local authority elected members can have a similar hue and also prove unhelpful.

Young people's experience of other parts of the 'system'

Young people's involvement in the criminal justice system is of great concern to youth workers, as those workers want to be able to support young people regardless of circumstance. This includes maintaining relationships with those who, for whatever reason, become involved in the system, particularly as very many will return to those communities to continue their lives; the workers want to accompany them on these 'journeys'. Particular attention needs to be paid to young people with no prior history of criminal or violent behaviour or criminal justice system involvement, as the risks to their welfare is high.

Youth workers seek opportunities to advocate for young people by using their community-based experience of working with those young people to influence multi-agency discussions about what is in the young person's best interests. This helps to ensure that service providers keep in touch with 'the bigger picture'.

A commitment to justice-oriented advocacy implies also monitoring the interventions made by criminal justice workers and young people's experience of these interventions. At times, youth workers may have to draw attention to systemic problems and 'call-out' systemic injustices.

11 Language used by the Nuffield Review of 14-19 education that observed similar phenomena: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/nuffield-review-of-14-19-education-and-training

Those reflecting on this case study say that it is essential to speak out about these issues and be prepared to say many systems and structures are violent, therein drawing attention to 'the violence of the state'. They say it is essential to critique the logics that determine who is a 'criminal', what is 'criminal' and narratives that validate securitisation. They seek to draw upon their community-based experience to raise awareness of underlying issues like poverty and advocate for radical interventions such as Universal Basic Income (UBI) in the belief that this would have a greater effect on crime levels than interventions that, they argue, are most-often punitive in character.

Where youth workers have their own experiences of these systems (whether as juveniles or through prior professional engagement) this can be an important resource for reflection and make possible interventions that draw attention to the strengths and weaknesses, and failures, of these systems particularly when young people experience them as harsh and punitive. Conversely, they can facilitate a wider appreciation of the good work that is going on in, say, secure children's centres that are truly looking after and caring for young people and creating opportunities for them to develop, including through gaining qualifications.

The crucial role of supported reflection in relation to emotional labour

Working in the context of young people and violence involves a great deal of emotional labour. Dealing with tragic events heightens the intensity of this work and places even greater demands on the worker. Supporting young people experiencing severe emotional responses to such incidents is, of itself, challenging.

In this case study, youth workers observe the young people "are really hurting" and "they are wanting to talk but unable to do so." They identify multiple consequences and risks if issues are not dealt with, particularly where anger continues to exist (as this can manifest in further violence). However, this is understood as among many reactions; for some young people "violence is part of the initial showing of grief; it is and should be expected".

And then there is the complexity of each case; in this, workers were conscious that for some young people they viewed the arrest of the alleged perpetrator as a vindication of their views, as evidence of guilt which would inevitably lead to prison. The workers viewed this as a 'comfort blanket' which would be disturbed by workers pointing out to young people that a trial reviewing the evidence (including that that many in the community might be unaware of) could have multiple outcomes, some of which might not fit these assumptions, which, in turn, would cause them even greater distress.

Despite these challenges, the workers judged it necessary to intervene in multiple ways, including explaining to young people how the criminal justice system actually works, despite this likely revealing to some (perhaps many) young people how little they knew – their naivety – about the criminal justice system. Indeed, few young people had any conceptualiation of the potential diversity of outcome of a trial (whether not guilty, manslaughter, murder etc.).

Workers identify 'toxic masculinity' as a further inhibitor to young men not processing their grief or, worse still, viewing violence as the only reasonable response to violence.

However, despite the emotional labour, it is important workers model this talking, if they are to secure the trust of young people and encourage *them* to talk. It may be necessary for young people to 'go away', for example have a residential experience away from their community if they are to do this reflection / be able to talk. There are **resource** issues here: do workers have the capacity / resources to do this residential work?

Coupled with this is the belief many young people have that 'nothing will change'. Responding to this is also regarded an important and necessary focus of the work; youth work must be about "breaking the expectation of no change". That many staff share this view (see also **power, powerlessness and politics**) only goes to show the extent of the pressure workers face. Working through these complexities takes a great deal of time, again, putting pressure on the resources available to do this work. In this case study, the resource issues are exacerbated by the scale of the work needed i.e. the sheer size of the group to be worked with: "that the numbers affected was more than 60, once again, draws attention to the issue of **funding and resources**.

An under-acknowledged dimension of working with young people in the

context of violence is the effect this has on workers themselves. It is essential that a supportive regime is in place to help staff deal with these effects; this is essential to good and effective practice. Team-working is an important protective and mitigating factor; in this case study staff recognised the extraordinary benefits of having “worked well together”.

To complement this, workers also need access to managerial and non-managerial supervision and opportunities for supportive group reflection if they are to manage their feelings and the emotional demands of working with young people in the context of violence. There is complexity here too; beyond having time to talk in depth about feelings, workers need to process the very many ethical issues and dilemmas associated with this kind of work. If not, they will likely experience ‘moral distress’. As repeatedly alluded to, this is a likely consequence of youth workers (and especially detached youth workers) being asked to work in ways that they fear might be ineffective, that do not act upon the root causes of violence, are controlling rather than supportive in nature: what they are asked to and what is of value to them are often two very different things. Again, this takes time and resources, including the skilled facilitation of managers, supervisors and other support persons.

About the author

Graeme Tiffany was a detached youth worker and detached youth work manager for many years. He now works on an independent basis, as a trainer, lecturer, researcher and education consultant, with a particular focus on street-based work, democratic education and the use of philosophical tools to support learning. Graeme is the author of 'Reconnecting Detached Youth Work' (2007) and numerous book chapters and articles about detached youth work. He is an advisor to the Federation for Detached Youth Work and a member of the expert group of Dynamo International, the world-wide network of social street workers.

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