

Home Office report on Anti Knife Crime Community Project:

Minus Violence Plus Peace

Introduction

We appreciated the opportunity to test this pilot project of Minus Violence Plus Peace. We feel it has revealed a rich potential way of working with at-risk young people and the adults in their lives. Many strategies to address an increase in knife crime focus on either retrospective action after a young person has been involved in knife crime, or on a 'peace keeping approach', the enforcement of 'measures' to stop violence, often police-led. Our approach is a third way – with a focus on looking at what underlies violence and a peace building response in the community as well as within schools, families and individuals. We need the assemblies, presentations, and conversations to get people involved, stirred up, to stimulate and motivate, but as a result of this pilot, we believe more investment is needed to build on that and effect longitudinal change towards more peaceful communities.

Report on Key Deliverables:

Work in hot spot areas: The work focused on four hot spot areas of Birmingham: Lozells (Holte School), Saltley (Saltley Academy), Druids Heath (Lindsworth School) and Highgate (St Albans Academy). Sadly, knife crime affected these areas during the time we have worked with the schools.

2000 young people in assemblies – we have exceeded that target by delivering assemblies to all the year groups in the four schools, reaching over 3,500 young people. We thought it important to offer the assembly as a universal message in the schools, not just particular year groups. This meant an overspend on the budget for assemblies.

24 young people - at risk youth. We have completed work with 19 young people at risk of being involved in violence in three schools in 'positive peace' groups. The fourth school has had a lot of safeguarding and sickness issues and the work is now planned to happen in the last weeks of the Spring term. In the interim, our partner Ray Douglas, has organised some ad hoc groups with young people in informal settings, with a group in Alum Rock and with a group of Somali youth in Small Heath, reaching another 50 youth. There was an underspend in this area.

4 community orientation sessions with 12 young people – this evolved into something different due to the needs of the community and the young people. It became clear we couldn't ask the young people to co-host until they had worked with us, and due to timings, this meant April at the earliest. We held two community events without young people, exploring violence and peace and starting conversations around community peace building. We have also held an event at the end of March with 18 young people to gather their creative messages around knife crime, to share with their communities. We still plan to co-host an event for the community in May.

Report on Critical Success Factors:

Improved resilience among young people at risk or involved in life-threatening behaviour involving knives. We are happy with our achievement on this success criteria - via the assemblies to every year group in the four schools we worked with, as well as the small positive peace group work with the at-risk young people.

The **assemblies** contain powerful messages to young people, which are both engaging and challenging, a universal message for young people to stay safe, even though not all young people are involved in knife crime. All the assemblies were delivered by Ray Douglas of Minus Violence, and challenge young people's perception of violence such as 'there is a safe place to stab' and how the media and culture promote violence. They give strong factual information such as the perils of joint enterprise, the dangers of just carrying knives or even being around people who carry knives. Drawing on his experience of working in gang units in prisons, Ray shares stories of young people serving long sentences, talks about the waste of lives and offers a wake-up call to young people. He encourages young people to think about the vicarious trauma on families and communities from violent crime. He asks them to think about their aspirations and self-safeguarding in order to have the chance to realise these aspirations.

The audiences, of around 200 young people at a time, were very engaged and focused. The feedback from the Home Office observer who attended was "the presenter of the session ... inspirational in his approach and in keeping the attention of the young people for the whole duration of the session." Feedback elicited from the young people was that the work was "powerful", "deep", "he says it like it is", "respect", "he knows his stuff".

The **positive peace groups**. The young people were chosen by the schools themselves, seen as being at risk of exclusion for involvement in violence and knife crime. The work aimed to determine how young people at risk of becoming involved in violence, particularly knife crime, understand their vulnerability; and to promote self-advocacy as part of building safer, more peaceful communities in hot spot areas for knife crime.

Between them, the three groups of young males (aged 13-15) have been excluded from school, stabbed, mugged, bullied, and witnessed a local shooting. A significant number of the boys have family members who have been arrested and served custodial sentences for fighting, drug selling and traffic offenses. During the project (young) people known to them have been killed in their communities and others sentenced for violence and murder. The boys are aware of other young people generally older than them who carry knives.

In two of the schools the sessions drew from a model of praxis developed by the trainer (Mike Ogunnusi) using semi-structured circle work to respond to issues and experiences of violence and conflict within the groups; and introducing knowledge, skills and attitudes to conflict, violence and peace as fluctuating components in their personal and social relationships.

The use of semi structured circles to respond to issues of violence and conflict shaped the learning environment and the six group sessions introduced the boys to a range of activities to bring in knowledge, skills and attitudes to conflict, violence and peace. Work completed includes:

- Creating a contract for behaviour
- Trust and trust in the group
- Mapping conflict
- Living with knives
- Peace words
- Experiences of peace
- Staying calm
- Conflict escalator
- Anger rules
- Assertiveness not aggression
- Power inventory
- Key issues for young people in Birmingham
- Reviewing the key ideas of the course
- Mapping safe spaces
- Course evaluation
- Intentions and commitments to change
- Disseminating messages for a peaceful community (both inside and outside school).

The boys collaborated and problem-solved together across a number of tasks and challenges. How conflicts escalate and the significance of how they perceived threats to their reputations; how needs, feelings and thoughts act as triggers for violent and/or peaceful responses and resolutions. The boys agreed that they fought when they were “embarrassed” and conflict situations became physical “when words run out”.

The boys worked together to develop strategies for resolving conflicts positively including work on listening, turn taking, positive affirmation, empathy, anger, assertiveness, and calm down buttons as a means of conflict de-escalation.

Improve parent’s ability to identify risk factors relating to gangs, knives and serious violence issues.

In the parent sessions, which were held in schools and other venues, and were well attended with audiences of up to 50 participants, the emphasis was on safeguarding at home. Using examples of young people found with knives from homes that one may not “normally” associate with violence, the message was that nobody can assume anything, and we all have to work to safeguard our children. Practical steps suggested were counting knives, checking social media, creating conversations with children around violence and knife crime, understanding youth culture. Parents were encouraged to mobilise to work with other parents and the importance of community activism and empowerment around this issue was stressed. Feedback from the sessions was positive with participants saying they learned a lot and would not make assumptions about their children and be more vigilant at home.

To increase understanding of knowledge of school staff of the tools and strategies needed to build positive peace and cohesion within school settings

The INSET sessions for schools were a mixture of open half day sessions for staff from a mix of schools, held in conjunction with the Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP) and twilights in schools (75 staff in all). The BEP

sessions were more useful as participants had half a day and were fresh, as opposed to one and a half hours at the end of the school day.

The sessions aimed to make sure staff were also aware of the situation around knife crime in the city, with some of the material from the assemblies, and with a particular message around child violence exploitation through music, media and fashion (Puma advertising for example).

The sessions also introduced some concepts around peace, particularly the difference between peace keeping and peace building and how schools might be doing these two. Staff found it much easier to identify where they were doing the short term measures that equate to peace keeping, and harder to think of the peace building initiatives, although they were there. We also looked at what we mean by peace and the idea of positive peace - not just the absence of violence but also the presence of factors that sustain peace and build resilience to violence. Schools were asked to consider what the 'pillars of positive peace' might look like in schools. This is an amalgam of their responses:

Positive relationships ; Pupil Voice; Peace education; Aspirations; Well Being; Reflective Leadership; Equality; Ethos; Community Outreach; Self Awareness and Role models

All participants fed back that the aims of the session, to increase knowledge of the tools and strategies needed to build positive peace in a school setting, were met. The main criticism, which we share, was that the time was only long enough in the twilights to highlight the strategies and thinking and not enough to practise them. There was a little time for this in the half day sessions, but still not enough.

To support at risk young people to host youth led community engagement events.

The critical success factor we listed was to hold some community engagement events, some of which would be co-hosted by young people. As events unfolded during the time-period of the grant, we adjusted this aim to host some community sessions quickly, in response partly to a spate of stabbings that took place in Birmingham.

Community events: we held a community event at the Impact Hub which booked out very quickly, although attendance on the night was lower than bookings. This event brought together organisations in the public and Third Sector to talk about violence in the city, a positive peace response and the need to capacity build and network with organisations working in this area.

A further community event was held at Naseby Community Centre which was not well attended, although participants travelled from over the city to attend on a Saturday afternoon.

From these events, it is clear that there is great concern about rising levels of violence across the city and that communities don't feel well-resourced to come together to combat this. While having the conversation and listening to views is important and a starting point, much more needs to be done to get communities feeling able to do peace building in their localities.

Increase at-risk young people's involvement in the creation of multimedia resources and positive social media campaigns to help raise awareness and share useful prevention messages amongst peers and their communities.

We hosted a half day with the young people from the small groups, and used a facilitator from Beatfreaks' Free Radical programme - an art activism platform giving young people space, mentally, digitally and physically to tell stories about themselves and their world. We also hired a filmmaker to record their messages.

In this event we brought together young people from different schools to work on their creative messages. It was a very positive event. [Here](#) is a link to a video made about the day which shows the flavour of the work. We realised, however, that to build a campaign around knife crime with the young people would take longer than we had expected. We will bear this in mind the next time around.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, and as all the feedback tells us, we need more long term work in these areas to build longitudinal change. The participants in the small groups want to continue their explorations around peace and have support in making change in their lives. The school staff want more training to understand conflict and peace

better and be able to resource their at-risk young people around conflict as well as build more peaceful school environments. Communities also, and I would include parents here, need more support to examine what peace building would look like in their community and how they recover when violent crime has happened. We hope to find funding to continue this rich seam of work.

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