



## Report on Leap Academy of Youth and Conflict Seminar: Preventing Youth Violence: What's Best? What's Next?

On 29 June 2009 80 youth work practitioners, strategic and policy leaders and young people came together for this Leap Academy seminar. The purpose of the day was to provide a thoughtful reflective space for people to review and share best practice in preventing youth violence. Numbers were purposefully limited so that there would be plenty of opportunity for all delegates to engage in debate and discussion, and a number of free places were offered to young people in leadership roles in their communities, so that young people could be at the heart of the debate.

The format of the day was designed specifically with the aim of stimulating thought provoking and reflective discussion amongst delegates, and ensuring that young people's voices were heard. The morning and afternoon sessions began with short presentations from three different perspectives: those of a policymaker/researcher, a practitioner, and young people.

The round table discussions which followed were carefully facilitated and recorded by young trainers and apprentices from Leap, Leeds Metropolitan students and Leap staff. The outcomes from the morning discussions were fed back to delegates at the beginning of the afternoon, and this report feeds back on the outcomes from the whole day.

Leeds Metropolitan University, Leap Confronting Conflict's academic partner generously provided the Gandhi Hall on the Headingley campus – a fitting venue, and the day opened with Welcomes from **Professor Edward F Halpin PhD MA FRSA, Professor for Peace Education and Director for the Senator George Mitchell Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution**, and **Patrick Dunne, Chair of the board of Leap Confronting Conflict**.

**Jo Broadwood**, the Director of the **Leap Academy of Youth and Conflict**, set the scene for the day and outlined Leap Confronting Conflict's approach in preventing youth violence. Using the Gang Activity Spectrum, developed by Leap following a seven year action research programme on Gangs and Territorialism, she explained that in Leap's experience there were a range of different interventions from preventative work in schools to more direct intervention work with young people who are at risk of becoming involved in serious violence. She emphasised Leap's belief that young people are the solution not the problem, and the need for partnership working with Leap providing the specialist skills in youth and conflict.

This was followed by short presentations from the Home Office, West Midlands Mediation and Transformation Service, and Midnight Street Soccer.



### **Ian McGibbon, Violent Crime Unit, Home Office**

**Ian McGibbon** described the Home Office's current strategies for tackling issues of serious youth violence outlining the **Tackling Knives Action Programme (TKAP)** and the achievements so far: including fewer teenagers stabbed; investment in anti-knives campaigns and education; more for young people to do on Friday and Saturday nights; combating the illegal sale of knives to youth; hospitals and police talking to each other about knife crime. TKAP Phase 2 will include the roll out of TKAP to other areas, and is not weapon specific but covers all serious youth violence, and the trigger crimes that lead to it.

### **Kirk Dawes from West Midlands Mediation and Transformation Service**

The **West Midlands Mediation and Transformation Service** is primarily aimed at mediation amongst the seriously high risk element in the gang culture in Birmingham and the West Midlands. Since WMMTS has been working with gang members there has been a significant reduction in the numbers of people killed through gang violence. **Kirk Dawes**, as a former police officer described his own journey in terms of seeing the efficacy of mediation and conflict transformation work, and the importance of being able to respond quickly and proactively to situations developing in the local community. Kirk ended the presentation by stating that he now believes that 'conflict can only be prevented through dialogue'

### **Billy Wylie, David McEvoy and Carl Wylie from Midnight Street Soccer in Belfast.**

**Billy Wylie** described some of the issues that young people in Belfast are facing and the work of **Midnight Street Soccer** in addressing those issues through Sport. The project aims to develop sport, to develop communities, and to develop people, providing coaching and competitions for young people living in areas characterised by sectarian youth led violence. **David McEvoy**, from a Protestant area, and **Carl Wylie**, from a Catholic area described how their friendship had developed through taking part in Midnight Street Soccer, and how that friendship would never have been possible in normal circumstances.



Delegates then took part in a round table discussion. The discussion format was adapted from Conversation Café – a way of having conversations designed to stimulate reflection and deeper thinking. The discussion focussed on current best practice with each delegate being asked to describe an example of good practice they had seen. Each table then identified all the key ingredients that together go to make up good practice in Preventing Youth Violence. The outcomes from these discussions were collated over lunch and fed back to delegates at the beginning of the afternoon session.

The following in order of frequency were identified by delegates as the key ingredients in best practice:

- **Good quality partnership working:** There was an appreciation that no one organisation could provide all the solutions, and that it was important for organisations to work together. Delegates stressed the importance of sharing information across the partnership; individual organisations being accountable for their part; and one organisation taking on a leadership role within a partnership.
- **Workers who are able to develop positive relationships with young people:** Delegates talked about the need for workers who understand, care about, and respect young people, and who are able to give young people the opportunity to express themselves and develop trusting relationships with adults.
- **Role models:** Developing young people as positive role models for other young people was seen as a key ingredient by delegates

- **Understanding young people in the broader local context:** Young people belong to families, neighbourhoods, peers, and it is important to take a holistic approach to young people taking into account and working with factors in the local area which may impact on their behaviour rather than working with young people in isolation
- **Consistency, simplicity and clear boundaries:** Young people need clear and consistent messages from adults and clarity around boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour
- **Targeting key transitions:** Targeting interventions at key transition points in a young persons' life is particularly important. These can be formal transitions, e.g. the move from primary school to secondary school, or individual moments of transition, e.g. a young person leaving care
- **Use of Restorative Justice and Conflict Resolution approaches:** The use of restorative practices such as mediation and conflict resolution skills training should be built into activities / programmes of work with young people
- **Provision tailored to meet young people's needs and lives:** Provision for young people needs to be tailored to meet their needs and their lives rather than organisational needs. There needs to be a range of interventions and flexibility in terms of provision and ways of engaging and working with young people.

The afternoon session focussed on newer and emerging practice, with short presentations from Simon Hallsworth, Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), and peer educators from Leap Confronting Conflict's Fear and Fashion project.

**Simon Hallsworth** is the Director of the Centre for Social and Evaluative Research and holds the Chair in Social Research at the Department of Applied Social Science at London Metropolitan University. Simon presented a critical perspective on the current policy initiatives for preventing youth violence and instead put forward an alternative model where the young people's anger at how they are represented and treated by society is redirected into political action. He used the examples of Malcolm X's move from crime to politics, and the move from street gang to street community of the Almighty Latin Nation of Kings and Queens as alternatives to current solutions.



Inspector **Jimmy Kirkland** is the Community Team Leader from the **Community Initiative to Reduce Violence** in Scotland. Jimmy described the CIRV approach to working with gangs in Glasgow. There are 55 documented street gangs in the east end of Glasgow involving approximately 800 young men. CIRV is a partnership of statutory and voluntary sector agencies led by the police set up to reduce violence involving young gang members; reduce community tolerance of violence and develop a response based on diversion, employment, education and support services for the young people involved. Jimmy emphasised that many young people involved in gang violence are reluctant gangsters looking for a way out, who are eager to take the opportunities provided by CIRV. He also spoke about the need to provide young people with support and hope for a better future.



**Leap Confronting Conflict's Fear and Fashion project** is a partnership project between Leap Confronting Conflict and **Westminster Youth Service**. Its aim is to reduce violence, weapon carrying and fear of violence in young people. **Jessie Feinstein**, Leap's Action Research manager described the two pronged approach of intensive targeted group work for those most at risk of becoming involved in carrying or using weapons, combined with preventative work in local schools.

**Jannath Rankou** and **Ahmed Ali** have been training other young people about the causes and consequences of knife crime as peer educators since January 2009. They described the personal impact of being involved in the project on their approach to dealing with conflict and violence in their own lives. **Michael Milton**, their keyworker testified to the impact that the project has had in terms of turning around the lives of the young people engaged in the project.

The afternoon discussions focussed on developing current best practice with groups identifying the aspects of youth violence that are not being addressed, and how to address them.

The following were identified as aspects of youth violence that are not currently being addressed:

- **Attractiveness of crime:** Drug dealing and criminal behaviour can bring high financial rewards and there is nothing that can match this in the employment prospects of many young people.
- **Role of Alcohol and Drugs:** Alcohol and drug use by young people can fuel violence.
- **Role models:** Young people need positive role models both in the national media and at a local level
- **The role of family / and the wider community:** Young people are often treated in isolation rather than being seen as part of a bigger picture in terms of their family and their wider community
- **The role of young women:** Young women are often involved in violence either directly or as provokers, agitators, influencers
- **The needs of young people who are new arrivals:** Young migrants who come from war zones, or cultures where there is a lot of habitual violence bringing those experiences, attitudes and behaviours with them

In order of frequency delegates suggested the following as means of addressing the above:

- **Promotion of positive role models:** Many delegates were concerned about the lack of promotion of positive role models and behaviour for young people, both in terms of popular culture and the media, and that good news stories about young people are few and far between. Delegates discussed the importance of forging positive relationships with both local and national media in order to present a more positive picture of young people's contribution, and confront negative stereotypes of different identity groups
- **Funding:** Although not strictly within the definition of a solution. Many delegates discussed issues around funding, in particular the short term nature of much funding when a longer term, more sustained strategic approach is needed to really address the underlying causes. Delegates also discussed that many organisations/agencies find themselves in competition

with each other for the same funds and there needs to be more emphasis on developing partnerships and joint bids

- **Education:** There needs to be an alternative curriculum delivered in schools which focuses on the development of social skills and emotional literacy. Work needs to be targeted around those moments of transition for young people when they are most vulnerable, e.g. primary to secondary; child to youth; school to college / work. Conflict resolution and restorative practices needs to be taught in schools. Education on these issues needs to start early.



- **Support for families and parents:** It is important to treat young people as part of bigger family and social networks and work with all the factors that affect and influence an individual young persons' behaviour
- **Work with the whole community:** We should be working with whole local communities to encourage a culture of zero tolerance around violence. We should work to empower local communities to speak up about violence and work with the authorities to ensure that perpetrators of violence are caught
- **Collaboration between agencies and better partnership working:** Agencies need to work more closely together to provide a comprehensive service to young people. This involves sharing information, being accountable, and actively engaging with other youth sector organisations and service providers
- **Learning from each other:** Projects need to draw on best practice nationally and learn from the experience of other agencies and organisations. We should not be afraid to talk about our failures as well as our successes in order to continue learning and developing in this area
- **Research influencing practice:** More research is needed examining the roots of violence and the causal factors which mean that some young people use violence and others don't. Young people's voices and experiences need to be heard – learning from their own experiences of violence, and using this learning to influence the development of strategy and programmes. This should include the experience of vulnerable and displaced young people, e.g. immigrants and asylum seekers coming from places of war and conflict

### Concluding Remarks from Jo Broadwood Director of the Leap Academy of Youth and Conflict

'The commitment and dedication of the presenters and practitioners present, and the presentations from the young leaders has made for a thought provoking and inspiring day.



Ian McGibbon has given us an excellent overview in terms of the resources that central government are making available to demonstrate a serious commitment to tackling youth violence. Jimmy Kirkland talked about offering young Glaswegians caught up in gang violence a way out - CIRV does that by putting a metaphorical arm round the shoulder of a young person supporting them to make a different choice.

Simon Hallsworth focussed on the need to empower and politicise young people so that they are more in charge of their own destinies, and Kirk Dawes emphasised that the only way to solve conflict is through dialogue. Carl and David from Midnight Street Soccer have described a

life enhancing friendship created through football across the sectarian divide, and Jannath and Ahmed from Leap's Fear and Fashion project have become confident and skilled peer educators, educating other young people in their community about knife crime.

The quality of the conversations that has taken place in the discussion groups has been excellent with delegates demonstrating a real commitment and hunger to tackle this issue.

For me the theme underlying all the presentations and the discussions has been Hope, and the question for all of us as practitioners, researchers and policy makers concerned about young people, is how do we offer hope and a way out for young people caught up in destructive cycles of behaviour and violence within their communities? Part of the solution, as many of the delegates agree, is thinking about young people holistically, as part of families, peer groups, schools, estates, and local areas. By supporting young people to make different choices and to occupy different roles in their communities, young people can experience themselves as positive leaders with their peer groups, friends, and families, and begin to break the cycle of violence.

I am reminded of a quote by Marshall Rosenberg, a well respected thinker and practitioner in the conflict resolution field. He describes Violence as Resourcelessness - people resort to violence when they don't have the capacity or skills to find another response to the circumstances that they find themselves in.

What has been abundantly clear from the example of the young leaders here today is that given the right resources, skills and support young people caught up in violence or conflict are more than capable of transforming themselves into responsible young peer leaders able to exert a positive influence on their friends, their families and their communities. Part of our job, as practitioners working with those young people is holding the hope for them, when they are unable to hold it for themselves, and believing in them, and that given the resources and the support of skilled practitioners, they can transform themselves and their communities.'

