



National Youth Agency

# Responding to Youth Violence through Youth Work



## About the Author

Craig Pinkney is a Criminologist, Urban Youth Specialist, Lecturer at University College Birmingham, UK. Craig is an experienced Youth Worker and academically holds a BA (Hons) in Youth & Community Development, Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning, Post Graduate Certificate in Research, Masters in Criminology and is currently a PhD Researcher in Social Sciences at Birmingham City University.



Craig has over 15 years of experience as an outreach worker, transformational speaker, international gang exit strategist, mediator, mentor and filmmaker. He is well known for working with some of the country's most challenging young people, potentially high-risk offenders, victims of gang violence and youth who are deemed most hard to reach.

Craig Pinkney is also the UK lead for the EU Gangs Project, an advisor for the Ministry of Justice in Jamaica, an advisor for the West Midlands PCC on Gangs and Youth Violence and a full-time lecturer at University College of Birmingham, specialising in youth violence, urban street gangs, social media, violence and trauma.

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## Introduction

The issue of gang and youth violence has increasingly become a problem within some of the major cities across the United Kingdom. As figures related to knife and gun related violence soar in cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, academics, youth work practitioners and politicians alike are seeking answers to explain why in recent times violence is on the rise. What is critical at present is to identify which interventions are appropriate to engage in the issue with the aim of addressing it, reducing harm in the short term and prevention in the longer term. Therefore, this report will explore and highlight the need for youth work as a one of the appropriate responses to youth criminality.

## Youth Violence in the United Kingdom

The 'problematic' nature of youth violence within the United Kingdom, and what could be effective responses to it, continues to occupy the minds of policymakers, academics and practitioners alike (Seal and Harris, 2016). In the last decade there is increasing evidence that suggests that the impact of austerity under the conservative government has impacted services previously put in place to engage with young people in a range of settings (Pinkney, et al. 2018). The impact of closures of youth/community provisions, reduced funding for outreach/detached youth work, reduced funding for educational institutions and reduced funding for the voluntary sector has had an adverse effect on the way youth work in the UK is positioned. Despite the government rolling out millions since 2009 to the police, statutory and voluntary sectors, there has been extensive research that have critiqued the way this has been done which has potentially led to the following:

- New political agendas distorting the focus of youth violence i.e. violent extremism and radicalisation.
- Political agendas which called for more punitive measures as a response to violence increase disparity within criminal justice system processes, which by default has increased more distrust within communities affected by violence.
- Smaller pots of funding aimed to engage the third sector found organisations fighting against one another for £3,000 - £20,000 bids to deal with unrealistic outcomes.
- Well established organisations (that have extensive experience in bid writing) became the gatekeepers for bigger pots of funding to respond to the issue of gangs and serious youth violence.
- Statutory organisations over the last decade have move towards utilising practitioners with 'lived experience' opposed to using qualified youth workers. As the belief that people who have 'lived it' are best suited for working with young people impacted by youth violence.
- The lack of understanding the way how youth work addresses issues faced by young people in the UK, has created a narrative that youth work is only about playing table tennis with young people.

As a consequence of these systemic failures, an increased number of young people are feeling more alienated and marginalised, organisations invested in youth have become less able to offer high quality youth work for all, and there has been less opportunity for young people to engage in youth work at all. These factors (alongside others) have created environments for young people to join/create sub groups (that are often labelled as gangs), as a counter-response to their needs not being met by the state.

Pinkney (2018) argues that the concept of youth violence is not a new phenomenon, however it is important to understand that the factors that explain why young people have become deviant are both historic and contemporary. Issues such as poverty, domestic abuse, fear, trauma, poor housing conditions, lack of opportunities, poor education, school exclusions, limited community resources, poor leadership, poor policing, poor police/community relations and hostile government policies are argued to be some of the core factors to explain youth criminality. Despite these social factors being considered to be a 'root' cause, the question to how youth criminality was reduced historically in the UK still remains to be a point of discussion.

The ragged school movement is considered by many as one of the greatest movements of Victorian philanthropy. Ragged schools provided free education for both children and young people who were marginalised and excluded by mainstream society due to their poverty and in turn were not able to access a proper education (Montague, 1904; Young, and Ashton, 1956; Schupf, 1972; Walvin, 1982; Grigg, 2002; Silver, 2013). It is argued that what we understand to be youth work practice today is founded from the ragged school movement and the principles of informal education, creativity, conversation and critical dialogue were paramount to engaging disadvantaged young people from a range of backgrounds.

## Responding to Violence Through Youth Work

Prior to austerity, Jeffs and Smith (2008) affirm that youth work as a means of engaging with young people has been under constant threat by new structures of practice which are organised around government outcomes, curriculum and delivery. Henry et al (2010) states that contemporary society has also demonstrated a fundamental shift in the value it puts on youth work practice. Subsequently, youth work is now seen as a last resort to respond to youth issues and has increasingly become a burden for many statutory bodies and a matter for criminal justice organisations. Furthermore, it is important to note that as the world becomes more modernised and we enter into a more technological space, new challenges have presented themselves to young people and have posed real challenges for those invested in implementing change. Issues such as:

- County-lines
- Sexual Exploitation
- Street Gangs
- Cyberbullying
- Online Fraud
- Far-Right Extremism
- Cyber Terrorism
- Homelessness
- Teenage Pregnancy
- Domestic Violence
- Mental Health
- New psychoactive substances

Although the focus of this report is to explore the role of youth work as it relates to youth violence, it is essential to recognise that youth violence is not a stand-alone issue and is often linked to many of the issues illustrated above. Where youth work has been found to be successful in engaging with issues regarding young people, this ultimately lies on the foundation of youth work as mentioned above, and sits upon the principles of informal education. A process that Jeffs and Smith (2005) highlight as the wise, respectful and spontaneous process of cultivating learning. A

process that works through conversation as well as the exploration and enlargement of experience. Challenging issues around youth criminality through youth work is argued to be an effective intervention because it is a process unlike school that is compulsory and often framed around a set curriculum within a specific timeframe. Youth work does not necessarily function on these ideals and is often spontaneous, engagement is on a voluntary basis and there are no expectations for young people to participate.

For example, if you wish to engage with a young person that is vulnerable to joining a gang, there are key considerations as to whom might be the most appropriate person to undertake this work. A school teacher may not be as effective as a mentor. Both professionals are trained to ensure that the safety and wellbeing of that young person is addressed, but the process by how they achieve that goal is likely to be fundamentally different. This is not suggesting that a teacher may not have the skills to engage, however the school teacher may have to go above and beyond outside of the classroom to achieve a desired goal. A mentor may have the space, time or flexibility to do this within an informal space that may be chosen by a young person which they will feel comfortable and confident to communicate in.

This therefore supports an earlier assertion that the way society understands youth work practice has potentially 'greyed' the lines between the formal and informal education approaches within youth work (Henry et al. 2010, pp 6). As the Children's Commissioner of England proclaimed or stated:

It will take intensive work to divert and disrupt the pathways to gang membership, work that needs to start from a child's earliest years and carried through into their teens. It needs to be well funded, properly thought through and evidence-based. It is clear that high quality, impactful mentoring has a role to play as part of a wider strategy that involves all services but it must be good.

It is important to mention that a 'properly thought out and an evidence-based' approach is to also acknowledge that young people who may be labelled as deviate or violent cannot and must not be engaged with the same way as young people who are socially included or on the periphery of becoming violent. Models that have been used over the last decade to deal with issues around youth violence are both



outdated and inadequate. The evidence for this is the steep rise in both youth criminal activity and youth violence.

Therefore, we call for new and updated interventions which acknowledge the development of contemporary youth cultures but also includes concepts of public health and desistance. 'On Road' Youth Work is one of many contemporary approaches being discussed as a direct response to engaging the issue of youth violence in the United Kingdom.

## Principles of 'On Road' Youth Work

As mentioned previously, the context of youth work has developed over the years and continues to change, however, young people and their immediate needs should remain the 'defining feature' of youth work environments (Henry et al. 2010). This study specifically focuses on the narratives and experiences of those youth workers on the front-line.

Pinkney et al (2018) states that 'On Road' youth work encompasses intersections of youth work and criminological theorising; locating the sight for critical enquiry within an environment which is urban, disorganised and in need of contemporary understanding. The practitioner is required to operate from an insider's perspective, drawing heavily on ethnographic and phenomenological accounts of subjects through lived experiences. The 'On Road' approach to youth work builds upon the work of Glynn (2014) through 'On Road Criminology'. Glynn (2014: 53) asserts that 'On Road Criminology' is when one gains acceptance, approval, and permission from sections of the community who occupy the world of the 'streets'. He further asserts that being an 'On Road' criminologist means having unprecedented access to spaces, which many practitioners and academics alike cannot and will not access.

Joseph and Gunter (2011) suggest that the notion of 'On Road' generally refers to a street culture that is played out in public places, such as street corners and housing estates, where individuals choose to spend the majority of their leisure time.

Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) expand by declaring that this notion of 'On Road or Life on Road' is not solely about where people spend their leisure time, rather it is

a place where violence and its threat can arise from everywhere. Arguably, 'On Road' youth work contains or consists of some of the points raised by Glynn (2014), Joseph and Gunter (2011) and Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009).

Though the term 'On Road' youth work is somewhat new, the fundamental principles are built upon the work of Glynn (2014), Whyte (1943) and Goetschuis and Tash (1967). Whyte's (1943) ethnographic study 'Street Corner Society' has been 'highly praised' in American Social Science (Andersson, 2014 :74). Van Maanen (2011 [1988]) compares 'Street Corner Society' with Malinowski's 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific' (1985 [1922]), further suggesting that generations of students have 'emulated Whyte's work by adopting his intimate, live-in reportorial fieldwork style in a variety of community settings' (Andersson, 2014: 79).

The key components of the 'On Road' Youth Work approach are illustrated below:

- **Language and Behaviour** - Understanding the changing face of youth cultures and being able to adapt in any settings.
- **Dress Code** - Understanding that clothing is symbolic and depending on the individuals/groups engaged, can be a barrier or used to gain access.
- **Knowledge (Agenda, Grassroots, Geography, History, Interventions and Boundaries)** - Knowledge exceeds just knowing your craft but also includes the knowledge of the people, community and spaces of engagement. Also, understanding which models and interventions have not been successful vs being unsuccessful in particular environments in order to develop appropriate responses.
- **Credibility** – It is not just about what you are but focusing on 'who' you are. Young people that live deviant lifestyles will not work with people who have no credibility amongst their peers, family and wider community.
- **Social Capital** – It is not what you know, but who you know. Most young people will not seek help but if you are the person they trust, using that trust can help them access services that they would not engage with otherwise.
- **Gender** – Recognizing that gender roles are important when addressing young men or women that are victims/perpetrators of youth criminality. For example,

a young man that displays hyper-masculine traits may need a worker that possesses some of those hyper-masculine traits and implements it within his intervention i.e. Rugby, Boxing or MMA.

- **Legislation and Policies - Safeguarding and Risk Assessment** - Ensuring that one understands the importance of following and creating policies aimed at ensuring the safety of both the professional and young people. In addition, it is also important to note that some youth work policies may be very different to other organisations that work with youth, therefore the ethics around it may also differ i.e. with lone working, one to one support or mediation in hostile environments.
- **Managing Conflict** – Acknowledging that when working in environments that are violent or have been impacted by gangs, there could be significant community conflicts. However, the principles of ‘on road’ youth work if applied correctly enables professionals to navigate these environments in a safe way.

Pinkney et al (2018) upholds that youth work practitioners that understand and implement these components in any setting will be effective in engaging with young people faced by emerging societal issues. This is because the fundamental principles of youth work practice recognise the changes within youth cultures and also gains the professionals understanding of their positionality. Gaining an insight in positionality within youth work practice is essential because it enables the professional to explore social and political contexts that creates identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability status. Positionality through the lens of the ‘On Road’ Youth Work approach signifies how identity influences - and potential biases shapes - ones understanding of an outlook on the world.

# 'On Road' Youth Work in Practice

## Case study

Sean is 14 years old, lives with his mother and younger sister on an estate in London. This estate is known to have young people that belong to the '68 gang' and although Sean is not a member, he knows them all because many of them live on his block or go to his school. One day as Sean made his way home on the 115 bus, a group of boys boarded the bus, saw him sitting on the top deck and asked him what postcode he was from. Sean did not respond which resulted in one of the boys slapping him in the face and said "your one of them 68 man ennit?". The other boy showed him a knife that was concealed in his bag, pressured it against his stomach and whispered "don't let me see you pass through here again".

This case is a typical incident that happens to many young people after school. Faulkner and Moore (2018) for the BMJ Open medical journal found that the time when under-16s are in the greatest danger of being stabbed is between 4pm and 6pm on weekdays. Faulkner and Moore (2018) also argue that almost half of under-16s were stabbed on their way home from school, for example at cafes, buses and in other places where pupils congregate. The dilemma that similar cases to this one present is what is the most appropriate response to deal with this issue, whilst keeping this young person safe?



An easy way to look at this is if we analyse the issue using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The main priority for Sean in this case is his safety. Now if we critically analyse the options generally given to young people is:

- Tell his mother or an appropriate adult from school
- Call the police
- Tell a friend

Young people in the UK find themselves in the same dilemma because they know if they take the first option and tell their mum or an appropriate adult that the likelihood is that the police will be involved. Young people fear being labelled as 'informants' or 'snitches' because they have the knowledge of what happens to people within their communities and wider society that cooperate with the police. Therefore, the easiest option for many young people is to either arm themselves with weapons (to protect themselves) or to tell a friend. Both choices can result in further problems because if Sean is stopped by the police he could get a custodial sentence and if found in school he could be excluded. Evidence suggests that the reason why young people prefer to choose these options is because they fear their parents, teachers and safeguarding teams will put their lives in more danger by involving the police. This may help us to understand why many young people in Sean's situation are motivated to join gangs because the gangs in this instance could provide a substitute for both safety to and from school and a sense of belonging as described in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Where the approaches of 'on road' youth work could be appropriate to engage with Sean's issue are as follows:

- 1) The youth worker is not necessarily bound to adhering to rigid policies that may dictate how and when cases such as these should be reported and youth workers will have the credibility within the community which can be vital in helping mediation between individuals involved without a criminal justice intervention).
- 2) The youth worker has flexibility to engage Sean outside traditional hours from 9-5 and can operate during evenings and weekends. This informal approach

may be better for Sean as it can be in a place where he does not feel threatened and is more likely to give information about the incident.

- 3) If Sean feels he is not confident to talk to his mother, the school or the police, the youth worker will be skilled and knowledgeable enough to manage this as an advocate whilst understanding his fears around reporting or appraisals.
- 4) Through the youth worker's networks, Sean will have the opportunity to access services by using the worker's trusted relationships which could be something that the school may have not been able to provide.
- 5) Sean may not feel that he needs to join a gang or carry a weapon to protect himself because the youth worker's approach will facilitate or encourage him to reflect on his decisions without judgment and will enable him to think of realistic strategies with the youth worker to keep himself safe in the future.

This example using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a good representation of where policy makers, statutory bodies, practitioners and criminal justice agencies alike fail young people. The concern to reduce youth violence in recent years has mainly consisted of educating young people of the consequences of knife and gun crime or joining gangs. However, more focus needs to be initiated on ensuring the safety of young people during the times where it is most critical for them such as when travelling to and from school. Educational and training institutions may address needs such as belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization. However, evidence based on contemporary literature suggests that educational institutions are failing to address the safety needs of young people. As practitioners, we do not want young people to be around other people we deem as criminal, violent or dangerous, however, if we are not considering how we can try to address how we can keep them safe outside of school hours and solely focus on challenging behaviour, we will be fighting a losing battle. Gangs and deviant groups are excellent at ensuring safety, security and a sense of belonging. However, my premise is that youth work can likewise ensure these facets if used effectively as the same informal relationships that are formed by young people can also be established by youth workers who also understand the social realities of being young in 2019 and beyond.

## Conclusion

The themes highlighted in this report are significant in recognising future developments and understanding the imperative role youth work plays as it relates to engaging young people in current times. Youth Work as an intervention has particular relevance in inner cities where the challenges linked to violence, extremism, exploitation and gangs are arguably the most challenging. It is important to understand one of the approaches discussed in this paper of 'On Road' youth work, that embodies the lived experiences of professionals working on the front-line. Most importantly recognising the key components of 'On Road' youth work contributes to the wider academic research surrounding youth work practice in the UK. In particular, they contribute to a wider understanding of the difficulties, expectations, challenges and roles of those working on the front-line, in inner-city communities, engaging with young people in violent or gang-impacted environments.

In conclusion, I suggest that understanding young people, youth work and the experiences of practitioners is an ongoing journey. As the government have recently announced new funding streams to bring back traditional youth work in all its forms, we need to take into consideration ongoing developments in technology; the use of social media requires new and innovative ways of engaging young people. For those youth workers that have the passion to work with young people on the front-line, my conception of 'On Road' youth work as an approach might be used as a model to engage with young people around the issues of gangs and violence in such spaces.

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