

Youth-Led Evidence for the Street Weapons Commission – Submitted by the Building Bridges Project, Race on the Agenda (ROTA)

Executive Summary

This submission to the Street Weapons Commission provides youth-led evidence based recommendations for tackling the weapon use and the gang culture in London. It is the result of a two year research project into gangs and the use of weapons in London. This submission, like the report and film that have been produced by the Building Bridges Project, are youth led products.

The Building Bridges Project?

The Building Bridges Project (BBP) is a **youth-led (16-25) research and policy project looking at the causes of and solutions for the gun, knife and gang culture in London**. The project brought together a core team 8 volunteers under the age of 25 to conduct desk and field research with 76 other young people, and used these findings to influence and inform policy and practice in London and nationwide. Project outputs include evidence based reports with recommendations, a film highlighting the findings from the project, policy briefings, newsletters and campaigns. The project is supported by Race on the Agenda¹, and sits within the organisation's broader violent crime policy work. The

¹ Race on the Agenda (ROTA) is a social policy think tank set up in April 1997 to take over from Greater London Action on Race Equality which started in 1984. We are a charity and a company limited by guarantee. Membership is free. ROTA works with London's Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities and others interested in race equality, towards achieving social justice by the elimination of discrimination and promotion of human rights, diversity and equality of opportunity. They achieve these aims by informing London's strategic decision-makers about the issues affecting the BAME third sector and the communities it serves and by making government policy more accessible to London's BAME organisations.

ROTA uses the term BAME to refer to all groups who are discriminated against on the grounds of their race, culture, colour or nationality.

MiNet the regional BAME network of networks joined ROTA in 2002. Its focus is on strengthening the voice for London's BAME third sector in the development of regional policy.

ROTA has facilitated HEAR the Equalities and Human Rights Sub-group of the ChangeUp London Regional Consortium since January 2005. Its focus is on issues affecting London's Equalities and Human Rights (EHR) third sector organisations.

project aims to build bridges on a number of levels; between the young people involved in the project, but also between those affected by and involved in gun and knife violence and those who create the policies aimed at tackling it. It also aims to build bridges between young people and policy, as well as Third Sector organisations with statutory agencies within the criminal justice system.

To us, as young people, it is crucial that our voices are heard in this debate as we are the one's who experience the crimes in question, and we are the ones affected by any policies put in place to tackle it. The BBP demonstrates that when given the respect, support and resources, young people can offer a unique insight into this debate, challenge popular conceptions, and offer evidence-based recommendations for how to make a real difference.

Recommendations

The BBP Report and film which is to be launched on the 21 July 2008² will feature the following recommendations for addressing gangs and the use of weapons in London:

1. Focus on *why* rather than *what*

When it comes to the use of street weapons policymakers and practitioners should be concerned with why people arm themselves rather than what they choose to arm themselves with. The main reasons for this being:

- a) Our research demonstrated a whole host of weapons being used by young people asides from knives and guns – ranging from acid, bricks, maths compasses and bottles, as well as knives and firearms.
- b) Focusing on what is being carried, and using stop and search and deterrence of mandatory sentences to address this, will see girls at greater risk. Rape and sexual assault of sisters, girlfriends and female gang associates has been used as a weapon. Given the low success rates of rape prosecutions and the fact that you can't stop and search for rape the current focus is missing the point.

Given the above we need to be considering the motivations for both weapon carrying and for attacks address these. Otherwise we are simply shifting risk around rather than removing it.

2. Provide youth activities rather than just youth clubs

Given the territorial nature of many disputes, our research has seen young people request more youth activities rather than just youth clubs.

Furthermore, that these activities extent beyond sports and the arts and focus more on work experience and employment. A main incentive for

² To book a place at the conference visit the Events page at www.rota.org.uk

joining a gang or for partaking in activities that will lead one to carry a weapon, such as selling drugs, is to make money. As young people we feel an increasing pressure to meet materialistic demand. This is indicative of our society and not just of us as young people. Therefore, meaningful work experience and volunteering opportunities that highlighted what we could achieve would make a positive change.

3. Provide multi-agency and cross-sector responses

The Building Bridges research highlighted that there are multiple causes for weapon use and therefore any response needs to reflect this. As such we advocate multi-agency responses that incorporate roles for housing, education, health, transport and employment agencies alongside criminal justice. This does not mean to bring the criminal justice system into these other agencies but to allow each to address the ways in which they can contribute to and alleviate the problem. Furthermore, any multi-agency response should also be cross-sector and incorporate the very important community level work that is taking place. There is a specific role being played by the third sector in addressing these issues; especially BAME community groups, and other specialist organisations that can identify directly with the needs of local communities. In addition, local private businesses should also be involved in responses alongside statutory representation. Each sector and each agency has a role to play.

4. Keep the response local

In addition to the above, these responses should happen at the local level. Each area has problems that are specific to their situation; London is a complex city and no borough is exactly the same. Furthermore, given that many young people are feeling increasingly trapped in their local areas, they should be engaged in their own communities first as this is where change is most likely to be felt. We cannot assume that any national strategy can be replicated down, and such a top-down approach would hinder the community based work that is having a positive impact.

5. Use the Education system to Educate

Rather than focus on bringing the criminal justice system in to schools via metal detectors and stop and search powers, the education system should be used to educate. Possible means of achieving this could be to highlight vocational opportunities for young people, and link them into meaningful work experience and volunteering opportunities to achieve this. Peer mentoring programmes could also be introduced in schools. There was a concern among many respondent about the narrow nature of the national curriculum. Many young black people involved requested that the history of black people in the UK be taught rather than just slavery and American icons such as Martin Luther King. For those who had avoided gangs, they felt that education had paid a crucial role in enabling them to achieve this.

6. Contextualise Responses

Given the relationship between gangs and the need for protection or to earn money, there is a clear message in our findings that there is a context within which we make our choices. It is this context that needs to be addressed. Rather than simply criticise young people for valuing themselves materialistically, we should see the way in which many other older people do exactly the same thing. Rather than seem confused at why young people who join a gang, we should place their choice within a fearful context; why do they not feel protected, why are they scared? Once you contextualise your understanding of what is happening your responses will reflect this. We should be tackling the context which breeds these problems, rather than just the problem itself.

7. Harness the Power of Youth Involvement and Leadership

As young people we have led and owned the Building Bridges Project. It is essential that young people are given an opportunity to inform this debate on the same level as adults. Not only do we have first hand experience of the issues in question but we are affected by the policies that are put in place to practice it. Allowing young people to lead on finding solutions also empowers and educates us. Therefore, the Building Bridges Project would recommend that young people be encouraged to lead at both policy and service delivery levels when addressing weapon use and gangs. It is not enough to consult young people and interpret what we mean; allow us to carry out the work.

8. Support positive achievements of Young People

Further to the above recommendation, the Building Bridges Project has identified a real frustration at the negative attention paid to young people. Regardless of the positive things that they are contributing to society, those questioned felt like these were never given much attention and that this had an impact on the way that they were viewed. Words such as 'yob' 'asbo' and 'hoodie' were cited as derogatory terms used to describe young people. We feel that there is an increasing gulf between us and older generations. This could be closed if the positive contributions that we made were given attention and support. Projects such as Building Bridges, should be supported and encouraged by all sectors and stakeholders. It is a clear example, among many, of the good that we as young people can achieve.

9. Be Preventative rather than Reactive

When the Building Bridges team asked our peers what recommendation they would make if they were given audience, not one person made reference to the criminal justice system. As such, our findings are very much focused on preventing rather than reacting to gang affiliation or weapon use. Given the complex nature of the situations, such as the differences between types of 'gangs' and weapons used, it makes much

more sense to focus on common causes to these situations. Therefore, addressing the fear that young people feel, or the materialistic pressures that constrain the choices that we make, is what will make a difference. If you don't address these pressures then you will not remove the problem at all.

10. Do not racialise gangs or the use of weapons

The Building Bridges Team does not see the existence of gangs or the use of weapons as being inherent to any racial culture. It is true that in some areas some ethnic groups dominate gang make up; however, this is as a result of the experiences that they have in their local areas, such as poverty, school exclusions, discrimination in employment. Therefore, we should be addressing issues of racial discrimination and the impact that this has for young people rather than placing blame with any ethnic group. The differences across UK cities indicate that this is not a reflection on any ethnic culture. Furthermore, citing race as an indicator will only serve to alienate and isolate us even further, when we should be engaged.

Conclusion

The Building Bridges Team and ROTA hope that the commission finds this evidence useful and of interest. We feel it is crucial that as young people our voices are heard. By providing an evidence-base for our recommendations we are confident that our project gives voice to the young people of London. Our report and DVD are being launched on the 21st July at a youth-led conference.

For further information on this submission, the project and the conference please contact Carlene Firmin on carlene@rota.org.uk, 0207 729 1310

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