

Serious Youth Violence and the relationship between the Police and young people in Camden

Perspectives of young people from Camden, who are in some of the most at risk groups in relation to Serious Youth Violence (SYV,) and their experiences with the police (e.g. stop and search.) Camden Safer Neighbourhood Board/ Camden Youth Service – Action research project.

Camden Safer Neighbourhood Board
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“ I was stopped and searched the first time at 13. I have been stopped and searched numerous times since and have been stopped and searched by male officers ”

“ The Police need to be less aggressive, violent and racist ”

“ Respondents described a police force that is indifferent towards them and treating them with contempt and even abusing them ”

1 Introduction

Camden Safer Neighbourhood Board is one of 32 safer neighbourhood boards across London that are funded by the Mayor of London to support and contribute to his consultation and accountability structures regarding policing. This work in the past has predominantly focused on regular public consultation events and engagement with the Metropolitan Police and Camden Council through the borough's Community Safety Partnership.

During the pandemic the SNB's engagement work through its events were halted. So for our 2021/22 contract with the Mayor's Office for Police and Crime we focused on delivering three small pieces of Action Research with local community organisations as partners. The three themes were:

- **Girls and women's safety – the perspectives of young women**
- **Islamophobic hate crime – views from users of Somali community organisation**
- **Young people's perspectives on making Camden safer and relations with the police**

This report focuses on young people's views that were shared through a series of focus groups conducted by Camden Youth Service over a three month period in early 2022.

2 Context

Serious Youth Violence/ knife crime has been the dominant public safety issue affecting London for the past 8-10 years. It's a complex area with multiple drivers/influencers from poverty, economic inequality, the drugs market, the quality of local services, structural racism, education, gangs and organised crime to name just a few.

It's hard to assess trends in normal times but in the context of the pandemic and the impact it has had on crime and violent behaviour, even more so. Violence indicators have generally seen reductions over the past 12 months (1).

However as previously stated it's difficult to make any firm assessments, as we have just moved out of the emergency protocols of the pandemic. The Mayor of London has responded with various initiatives to address violent crime including:

- **London's Knife Crime Strategy (2)**
- **Establishing his Violence Reduction Unit (3)**
- **Supporting the Met Police's Violence Suppression Unit (4)**

In Camden the response has been strategic with the council facilitating a Youth Safety Taskforce which was established in 2018 and pulled together a number of partners to attempt to address the problem holistically with engagement and prevention at the forefront as well as supporting Met's enforcement plans (5). The most recent report from the Taskforce highlights reductions in knife crime with injuries to under-25's in Camden and the borough having lower rates than its two comparator neighbours of Islington and Haringey (6).

For this piece of action research we wanted to look at the issue of serious youth violence with young people from groups that are at higher risk of being involved as victims and perpetrators. But we also wanted to talk to them about their experiences and relationships with the police and its interaction with serious youth violence.

- **Do they trust the police?**
- **What has been their personal experiences of encounters with the Police were they treated fairly and with respect?**
- **Is the relationship between young people and the Police helping or hindering efforts to address/prevent violence?**

The Black Lives Matters protests in the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd in the USA and a series of negative incidents, have called into question the culture and ethics of the Metropolitan Police. Public trust in the Met has plummeted to an all-time low (7).

Most recently the case of child Q in Hackney has brought into vivid focus how intersectional experiences of race, class, age and gender can culminate in horrific mistreatment undoubtedly due in no insignificant part to potentially underestimating the power of stereotyping (8). We felt it was therefore right to question local young people living in communities and belonging to groups more likely to be impacted by violence and to have encounters with the police to hear their voice.

3 The Focus Groups – Approach, Structure and Participants

Camden Integrated Youth Support Service (IYSS), conducted research with young people from Camden’s most disadvantaged groups focusing on their relationships and experiences of policing, their views on serious youth violence in the community and what they think should happen to make their communities safer. Reaching out to organisations across the borough to identify young people from these relevant groups to work with, IYSS arranged and facilitated 5 focus groups of young people from the north, central and south areas of the Camden.

In total they spoke to 41 young people to gather the experiences and feedback through a series of set questions devised by CSNB (see below) which were recorded by youth workers through notes of discussions and written feedback from the participants. There was also a sixth focus group which was carried out in June 21 at the borough’s Pupil Referral Unit.

The questions set

- 1 Do you feel violence in the community and amongst young people is a problem in Camden?**
- 2 Why do you think young people get involved in violence?**
- 3 Are there things happening in the community that you think are contributing to violence?**
- 4 Can you identify some things that should happen that would help to make things safer in the community?**
- 5 Do you think it’s important that young people have a good relationship with the Police?**
- 6 Do you think the relationship between young people and the police in Camden is positive?**
- 7 Have any of you been stopped and searched? If yes, what was your experience of this encounter and how old were you?**
- 8 Do different communities have a different experience of policing in Camden? Why do you think that is?**
- 9 What advice would you give to the police if they wanted to build more trust with young people in Camden?**

Some young people were very wary of the purpose of the project. Trust was a big issue to establish in a one off piece of work, with no previous relationships with some of the young people and because of the nature of the questions. The questions involving their thoughts of the police and policing in the community caused some anxiety. Commonly young people would rather give information verbally although the questionnaires were useful to compare with youth workers notes. However, some information for example if they had been stopped and searched, their age and answers regarding policing had higher percentages of young people not wanting to disclose this information.

Feedback and key issues raised

1 Young people feel violence in the community is a problem in Camden

When discussing violence in their communities, young people would often discuss this in relation to people in their communities in general rather than any focus on young people. The most consistent feedback related to issues of:

Gangs – young people feel fear as many gangs terrorise

Drugs

People feeling threat and fear from the police in their community

Many stabbings

Shooting

A lot of robbery's in the community

Some young people identified that in some areas they feel there is a problem, but they do not know about other areas having issues

One group in the north of the borough focused on how violence in their area is something that they are used to with strong beliefs that their area 'is what it is' and will not change 'we are just used to it'. The group initially found it challenging to get past this to answer the question. The group were apathetic not seeing the possibility of any positive change in the future.

2 Reasons young people feel young people get involved with violence

Because this is what young people have been brought up around

Young people being forced, lured, influenced into violence and then it escalates

Because of gangs in the community

People they know, people they hang out with

Peer pressure

Because of families in gangs

Home problems/family issues

Young people don't have anything better to do

Need to protect themselves

Young people want to look good/bad/for girls

To get revenge on someone

Mental health

Drugs/Alcohol

Money issues/to get money

3 Young people identified the following issues in the community they think are contributing to violence

Drugs and dealing

Post codes

Grooming – young people get manipulated into thinking it is easy money

Not enough security

Gangs dealing drugs

Music – Drill music

Gangs

Schools fighting – where you are from

Stabbings

4 Young people identified the following things they thought should happen to make things safer in their community

Street lighting

More cameras

Taking drugs off the street

More youth clubs opening / more activities for young people

More communal sports areas

More security – patrols, camera, lighting (brighter lighting)

Stop police profiling

Targeting gangs

Jobs for people

More better homes people

More opportunities for people

No knives

5 Young people's thoughts on the importance of their relationship with the police

They need to be less violent with young people

Should not just stop black people

They don't make it easy for young people to approach them

They are racist

No they stop most young people because they don't like them as much

Some young people felt having a relationship would have no impact

No because they don't make it easy for people to gain their trust and they are intimidating – yes because they can help and protect you if you have their trust and they have yours

Media make them seem like they are not worthy of respect

No they aren't able to understand youth

Yes so that they can trust them – no because they don't make it easy

Yes its good to know them

Yes because if something happens then you most likely will not go to the police if you don't trust them

6 Young people voiced they do not believe the relationship between young people and the police is positive

No...

They stop people for no reason

They come with aggression

They are intimidating

Police abuse their power

They are scary and will not listen to you when you need to explain

Sometimes I guess – most positive answer!

Many younger children are now being stopped and searched

Young people in one group said no and identified the name of an officer as a reason

7 Number of young people stopped and searched, their age and experiences

This was one of the questions that young people most often did not want to disclose verbally or in writing.

Stopped us for fireworks – 13

Thought I had fireworks – 14

Stealing – 15

Drugs

Weapons

First time, was annoyed, S&S reason not stated – 12

Reason not stated – 14

Stopped for riding an e-bike – 14

It was provocative and time wasting – 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16

8 Young people felt different communities within Camden have different experiences of policing

Young people identified being stopped and searched as young as 11

Yes because there is racism

Black and Asian people get treated differently

White people do not face the same problems as other communities which are picked on

White people viewed differently

Discrimination by police

Areas being more developed than others

Camden being dragged down by gang violence – central London police may be different

9 Advice young people would give to the police if they wanted to build trust with young people in Camden

I feel like they should respect young people's rights

To be kinder to young people, be more polite

Stop unnecessary searches

3

The Focus Groups – Approach, Structure and Participants continued

Total Young People	41
Ingestre	7
STYC	9
KCB	9
Kilburn	8
NW5	8

Discussing relationships and experiences of policing, young people's views on serious youth violence in their community and what they think should happen to make their communities safer raised a variety of feelings and emotions from young people. Where groups of young people had some form of existing relationship with one or both youth workers made a significant difference to their response and behaviour which for some resulted in a guarded and reduced response until nearer the end of sessions.

This had a huge impact in young people responding to their personal experiences of police engagement including on the option of an anonymous form. It would seem trauma is a significant issue in children's experience of policing particularly from marginalised groups. More research is needed. Future focus groups may benefit from two sessions per group to build trust and more opportunity for one to one discussions with young people.

4 Conclusions

The survey response has highlighted the tensions that currently exist between the police and young people especially those from black and minority ethnicities. It also demonstrated that these tensions are not recent phenomena and have been ongoing for many years. And as a result, their views are sometimes shaped way before their first interaction with the police through stories they hear from relatives or their parents. Respondents described a police force that is indifferent towards them and treating them with contempt and even abusing them. Young people recalled an incident where police use any excuse to justify stopping them aggressively searched them.

Respondents talked about their own experiences of being stopped and searched provocatively. Others claimed that they were racially abused and at times roughed up. One young male, who had never been in trouble with the police claimed he was accused of stealing a bike even though he wasn't anywhere near the crime scene. His experience has made him resentful of the police. Young people who have been stopped and searched stated they were made to feel like criminals and police never apologised when they found nothing on them and instead claim they hid it well. Some of the respondents described the Territorial Support Group (TSG) in particular as one of the worst perpetrators of unwarranted aggression against young people. Young respondents were also reluctant to make complaints against the police as they believe nothing would happen. This meant police officers who misbehave are never held to account due to underreporting by young people.

Young people recognise the need for stop and search and general policing however, the conduct of the police officers whether due to racism, bullying, or indifference towards young people needs to be addressed. According to the young people, how can they report criminal incidents to the police if they don't trust them in the first place? This according to our finding is of paramount importance after all young people are the biggest victim of crime and to reduce or eradicate it police engagement with the young people would have to improve considerably.

5 Recommendations

In April the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police had to make a public apology to three of the victims of the Rochdale child sexual abuse ring (9). This case clearly demonstrated the need for public authorities to listen to children and the dangers when they don't.

Nobody is saying the police don't have a very demanding job and that young people themselves can be difficult. But the views and anecdotes that have been shared in this report while disturbing are not surprising for anybody who has worked in youth work or directly supporting young people from disadvantaged communities and/or marginalised groups. It's been a bit of an open secret for many years.

This situation is totally wrong and unacceptable. Many of these Police Officers live in the home-counties and come into London. Many will be parents and I would ask them would they want their children to experience what some of the young people interviewed have experienced at the hands of the body that should be there to protect them?

We want to see change and the young people want to see change. Not fake change, driven by PR and presentation so that we can quickly shift the agenda along to something less uncomfortable. But change that, results in better experiences for all children regardless of race, sex, where you live or how much money your parents earn.

The road to real change will be a long one and clearly the Metropolitan Police are the key body in making that happen. We have no control over what the leadership of the Met do and what politicians decide. However below are some recommendations which the council and the Met at a local level may wish to consider if they want to make the journey.

- 1 The Council should initiate further research/consultation with young people and professionals working with young people. This should include further focus groups and a large questionnaire exercise ideally across all Camden schools but at the least with one or two schools to glean a wider picture on relationships with the police and young people in the borough. We note that the recommendation from the IOPC report into Race and Stop and search, for research specifically into the trauma experienced by young black people through police encounters has been accepted by the National Police College and National Police Chiefs Council (11). We also note that post this development the Child Q case has given greater urgency for the need for public authorities to recognise and give greater consideration to the damage being wrought on children through contact with the police.
- 2 We have touched on how this poor relationship with the Met and children from groups most likely to be impacted by SYV is highly detrimental to efforts in addressing SYV. This needs a greater focus and we would recommend the council, the Met and the Mayor's VRU do some focused work in this area.
- 3 The TSG needs to be held to account. The conduct of this specialist unit has been an ongoing issue around London for years. At the least they should be briefed by local officers on expectations and conduct while on the borough.
- 4 We need to develop third party reporting for young people to make complaints against the Met led by youth organisations.
- 5 Young people should be given information sessions on their rights regarding stop and search in school time from community activists and with the Met present.
- 6 There is good practice in the Met with engaging young people at a local level. This needs to be more than one offs and isolated projects but initiatives that can help to shift the culture. In Camden the Boxing project in Gospel Oak is an often cited example (10).
- 7 Senior leadership needs to be visibly sending out very clear messages within the Met about: children's welfare; racism; professional conduct; and showing greater humility and empathy with regards to the very serious powers that police officers have. The perception of a Police Force that is remote, insensitive and unaccountable is ingrained in the experiences shared by the young people questioned in this research and highly likely to be reflected by many more thousands across London.

6 References

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