

My story: young people talk about the trauma in their lives

Roger Grimshaw describes a new Centre for Crime and Justice Studies research project supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

2008 was a year in which public attention to individual violence and its causes rarely wavered. The newspapers and broadcast media narrated a rising toll of individual killings, especially among young people.

For some years, and especially since it published its series of briefings on knife crime in 2006 and 2007, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) has tried to increase public knowledge about violent crime (Eades et al., 2007). It consolidated this role when invited to conduct research on gun and knife crime in five cities for the Street Weapons Commission, chaired by Cherie Booth QC, and televised in June and July 2008 (Squires et al., 2008). The research published by CCJS has been the product of a coherent strategic focus on violence, which was instigated by our publication of Professor Danny Dorling's analysis of rising trends of homicide victims among the poorest (Hillyard et al., 2005).

We take very seriously the obligations of our mission to educate the public about crime. In 2008, as the media counted every stabbing as it happened, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies was approached for comment by news outlets far and wide on a regular basis. Interviews were given to CNN, Sky News, the BBC and TV channels from Germany, Croatia and Spain, as well as newspapers of every kind.

We were able to comment on trends in violence, the reasons for carrying knives and the significance of location and social class to the spread of knife crime. What we were unable to do was to give any convincing first-hand accounts of the experiences that precede resort to serious individual violence. We consider it a serious fault in established research that the public has little access to substantial personal narratives that would enhance understanding of the feelings that fuel serious crime.

Now, thanks to the generous support of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, we have an opportunity to rectify the omission. The 'My story' project, which begins this year, will seek to encourage and equip a small number of young people convicted of grave crimes to document and report the violence and abuse in their lives. The research and dissemination for the 'My story' project will therefore be a valuable resource for all discussions of serious violence, building on our existing profile and creating a new capacity to engage with the public and influential opinion-formers on the subject of violence.

Combating social exclusion, promoting participation

CCJS is a strong supporter of a participative research tradition that has been nurtured in the children's field, following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and especially Article 12. The proposed research with young people who have committed especially grave crimes will give them access to a stream of work that is now seen as normal and necessary for their counterparts (Save the Children, 2004; Middleton, 2006). The participative tradition upholds qualitative research as the best means of allowing an excluded group of young people to find their own voice. Of course, those proved to have committed seriously violent offences still form a very small percentage of their age cohort. About 19 are convicted of murder in a year, and even five stories would therefore constitute a significant number.

As well as being 'child-friendly' in a methodological sense, it is qualitative research that makes it possible for the deepest layers of experience to emerge in a cogent pattern. It goes without saying that we are not interested in trivial recollections, but in permitting, encouraging and empowering young people to describe scenes of horror and cruelty that, because they are so traumatic, are hard to hold in the memory, never mind make sense of.

Because the underlying material is so painful we have sought to make provision for continuous support to the young people, at the initial stages and after the narrations are complete. Throughout the project we will be working with a team of psychotherapists from the John Bowlby Centre who will make a vital contribution to the process of working with young people. The John Bowlby Centre is committed to the development, promotion and practice of an attachment-based and relational approach to psychotherapy. A large part of the resources devoted to the project are reserved for the support of the participants so that they can progress in their lives. A psychotherapist working with a qualified teacher experienced in prison education will deliver post-storytelling support.

Clearly, making a success of the project will depend on access to expertise of various kinds. Individuals who will compose an external advisory group for the project will be identified and approached during the preparatory phase. Members of the group will include individuals with a track record of expertise within: criminal justice; the psychotherapeutic, psychiatric and/or psychological professions; children and youth services; biography, research and public policy. Because of the complex and

sensitive nature of the work we have allocated 22 months for the completion of the project, including the support and dissemination phases.

From research to public education

Because young people who commit grave crimes attract rumour, speculation and a large quantity of stigma, CCJS needs to present the stories primarily as important human testimony, with the expectation that a wealth of responses will help stimulate calls for a policy debate. We are continuing to build alliances with organisations that work closely with young people. For example, we have recently been working with 11 Million (the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England) to carry out a literature review on young people, guns and knives. The review commission arose out of requests and representations of young people consulted by 11 Million who see violence as a paramount concern for youth in the UK. Victim Support has recently commissioned and published, online as well as in hard copy, qualitative research on links between victimhood and offending, with the aim of promoting effective interventions (Owen and Sweeting, 2007). We know too that within the Prison Service there is a great deal of interest in making support available to young people and ensuring that their damaged lives do not turn out to be wasted as well. All public services concerned with children and violence want to make their responsibilities better understood. With the contacts that we have with the media, and with experts and organisations in the children's field, we are determined to give a high profile to the stories and to

open up a discussion that will influence opinion-formers through events, readings and online conversations. ■

Roger Grimshaw is Research Director at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

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