



Bridging the empathy gap

What stops professionals from listening to, and understanding, the realities of young people affected by violence?


June 2022

RECLAIM



COLLECTIVE
DISCOVERY

“Knife crime is an issue within my community, but it isn’t just the young people carrying knives – the professionals want someone to blame so they stereotype young people.”



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01

Introduction

In late 2019 and early 2020, a series of participatory sessions were held with young people and professionals to explore young people's views about violent crime and what young people feel needs to happen to keep them safe.

The findings of this process were published in the [Listening to the Experts report](#). This report should be read alongside *Listening to the Experts*, and focuses on the challenges that professionals who play a role in keeping young people safe face in truly listening to young people with empathy.

Listening to the Experts highlighted that many young people in Manchester feel that some of the current responses to rising violent crime are ineffective, and some even made them feel less safe. The process also found that young people perceive responses to violent crime to be based on stereotypes and assumptions rather than their lived reality.

The young people were frustrated by what they saw as a lack of empathy when professionals (e.g. the police or teachers) didn't seem to understand their problems and points of view. They felt that professionals didn't care, and that approaches to keeping children and young people safe in Manchester were not responding to their needs.



How does the 'empathy gap' show up in young people's lives?

In conversations that informed Listening to the Experts, young people highlighted various examples:

When knife-awareness campaigns show photos of large hauls knives and other weapons, some young people feel this reinforces the idea of knife-carrying being the norm, and become more scared (and more likely to consider carrying a weapon themselves).

When young people are having a hard time at home, which shows up in their behaviour and then results in them being excluded from school, they feel abandoned and like they have nowhere to turn. This can make them more vulnerable to being groomed by gangs.

When they experience stop and search they can feel humiliated, scared and discriminated against - making them distrust the police.

They said that they wished they could 'get through to' professionals so that they actually understood what was going on in their lives - and that they are often are having to decide what the least bad choice should be in various situations, and that 'good' options are not always available.

In initial sessions with young people for the Listening to the Experts process, we used participatory tools to help them unpack issues around serious youth violence.

In these sessions they emphasised the fact that the system and professionals are very focused on the superficial part of a deeper issue - such as knives & violence and using ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders) and stop and search.

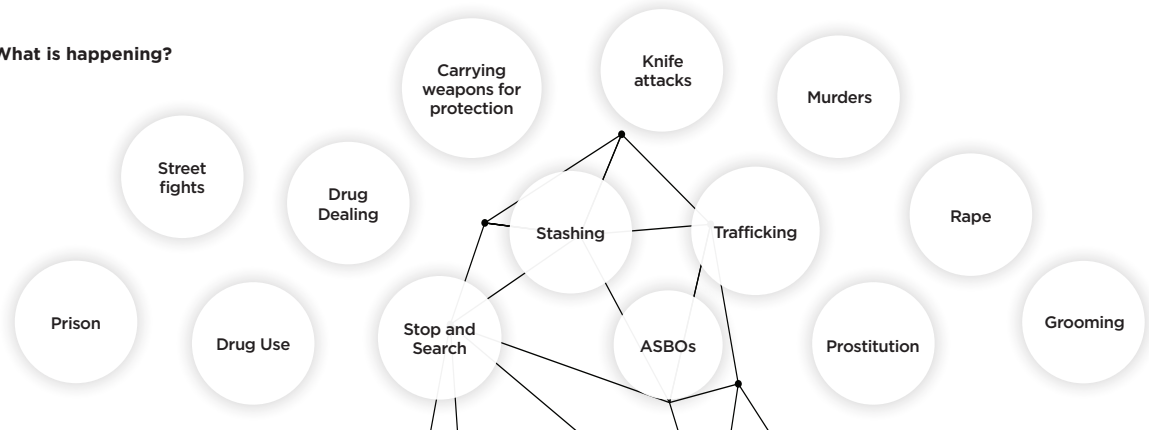
The young people were able to talk about how these surface issues and events are linked to much deeper issues experienced in their communities - racism, classism, lack of respect for young people, toxic masculinity, misogyny, consumerism and fatalism. And how these beliefs and prejudices feed into how the system treats them.

This second report explores the lack of understanding between young people and professionals: the 'empathy' gap - and how it can be bridged. The report is based on reviewing existing research and practice and a series of discussions with young people and professionals.

As part of the research process, tools for framing discussions between young people and professionals were trialled. The project also surfaced a range of challenges to creating stand-alone spaces and structures for listening focused on youth violence, as well as identifying examples of good practice. The quotes included in the report come from the Listening to the Experts report.

This report shares what we heard from young people and professionals - that improving listening skills and creating spaces for listening alone will not be sufficient to overcome the organisational and systems constraints for professionals, and issues of trust and risk for young people.

What is happening?



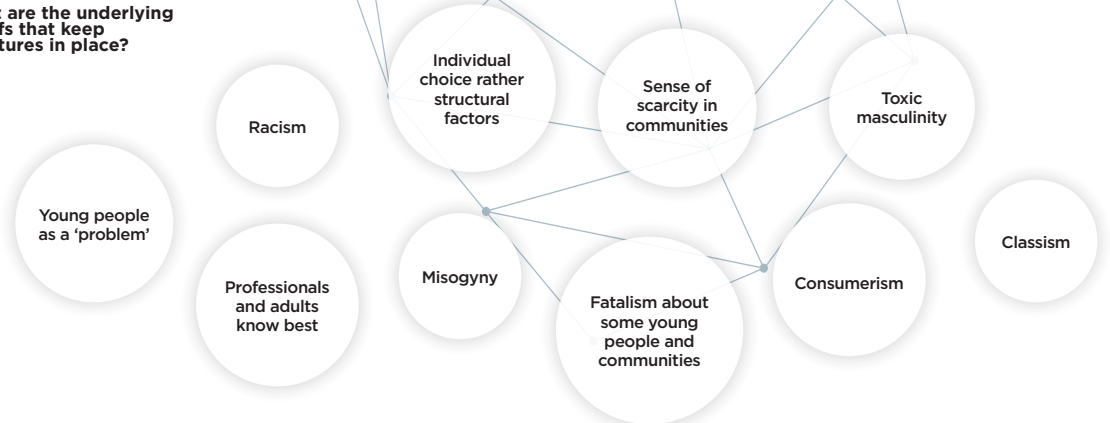
What are the patterns and trends?

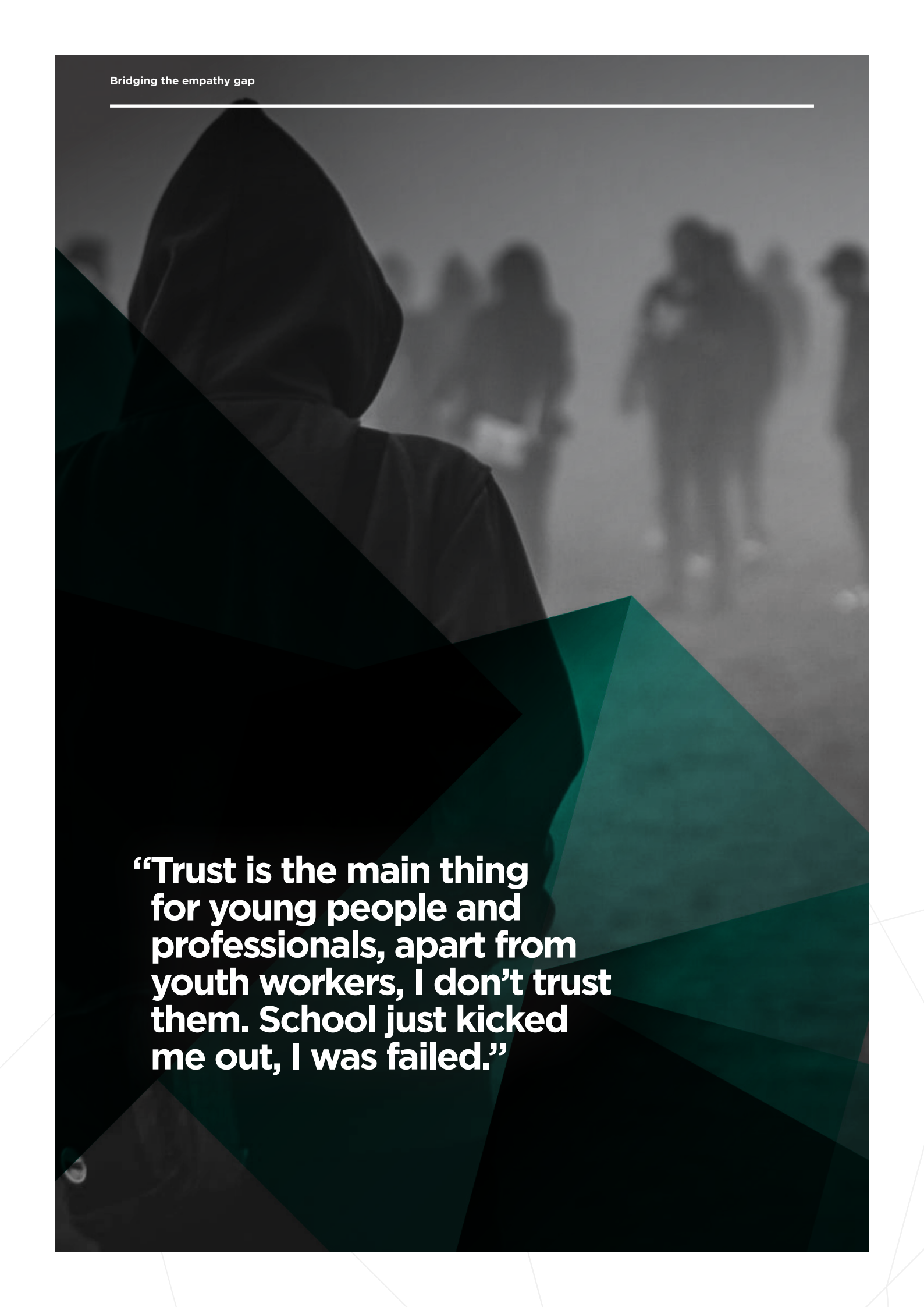


What are the underlying structures driving the patterns and trends?



What are the underlying beliefs that keep structures in place?





“Trust is the main thing for young people and professionals, apart from youth workers, I don’t trust them. School just kicked me out, I was failed.”

Our assumptions after the Listening to the Experts process.

If there is an empathy gap and professionals and policy makers often act on the basis of assumptions about young people and stereotypes that this is, in part, caused by a failure to listen/poor listening.

Then

If we can improve the way professionals and policy makers listen and we can build empathy

This will

Improve Manchester's approach to keeping children and young people safe by engaging with young people differently and making different policy choices



What emerged from our conversation with young people and professionals in Learning to Listen, our follow-up project / exercise / report, was:

01

For children and young people to feel safe

- The responsibility lies with professionals and key adults involved and the systems they are part of
 - To understand and centre the reality of young people at risk of serious youth violence
 - And respond in ways that make them feel like they matter, are listened to, and are supported
-

02

Active listening and empathetic listening is only effective in situations where people feel safe

- And in most instances professionals and policymakers hold the power – they can choose to not listen
 - With no direct consequences for them – only for young people
-

03

Young people (who are at risk of serious violence) don't trust the system/certain professionals

- And therefore don't want to be involved in listening exercises with people they don't trust and which might expose them to more risks
-

04

So this isn't about listening skills, practices and spaces

- It's about how professionals and the system can be more accountable (not just empathetic)
 - Without expecting young people to do the work and the emotional labour
 - With no guarantee that it will lead to positive change
-

05

It's letting young people set the agenda

- Or professionals and policy makers doing the work
 - It's about listening to what young people have already said the problems and issues are
 - And taking positive action to build trust
-

Key terms

Listening

Listening is more than the passive act of receiving a message or hearing. It is the conscious processing and sensemaking of what has been heard.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand another person's experience and point of view/ mental state. Psychologist Daniel Goleman differentiates between three kinds of empathy – cognitive empathy, emotional empathy and compassionate empathy:

Cognitive Empathy

This is the ability to imagine what it is like to be in the situation of others and what they might be thinking and feeling in response to it. This is related to what psychologists refer to as 'theory of mind' (thinking about what other people are thinking), which is an important socio-cognitive skill. This kind of empathy is about thinking your way into someone else's shoes (comprehending on an intellectual level) – rather than feeling your way – it still maintains an emotional distance. Young people may experience this kind of listening approach as being too focused on fixing or problem solving and they may perceive the person listening as cold and detached.

Emotional Empathy

This is a 'felt' empathy – this can help to build trust and relationships but it can also be overwhelming, contribute to burnout and/ or inappropriate in certain circumstances. Daniel Goleman describes it as 'when you feel physically along with the other person, as though their emotions were contagious'. For a young person being listened to it is not necessarily a positive experience to be joined in your anger, despair or sadness by the person listening!

Compassionate Empathy

This combines intellect, emotion and action and the listener is able to remain grounded/ centred and contain their emotions and those of the person speaking. It combines our ability to think and feel.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are a series of widely shared generalisations about the characteristics of a group of people. Stereotyping can be a conscious or unconscious way of simplifying our experience, but it can block accurate perceptions of a person or event and cause people to screen out contradictory information/experiences.

“No message is ever decoded without bias.”

Key terms

Professionals

This was a catch-all term that young people used in our workshops in 2019 and 2020 for adults that they engage with in their professional roles. Youth workers were not seen as part of this 'professional' group, although some of the constraints on listening that we identified could also apply to youth workers.

For most young people the professionals they spoke about most were the police and teachers but for others, it includes a wider range of professionals and services (e.g. mental health, social services etc.).

Young people

The consultation with young people for the Listening to the Experts report focused on young people between 12 and 18 years of age who had a wide range of experiences on this issue. The follow up process for this report reached out to a similar age range of young people, but was more focused on young people who were directly affected by violence and the policy responses to it. As with the Listening to the Experts report, we are incredibly grateful to the partner organisations who made this possible.

02

Young people, engagement and the empathy gap

Conversations with young people highlighted key factors that make it difficult to engage a group of young people affected by youth violence in 'deep listening' exercises with professionals.

These were:

- Framing of the conversation around youth violence
- A lack of trust in professionals
- Concerns about risk and safety
- Lack of tangible benefits or value to the young people engaging with professionals

Barrier to Engagement:

Framing of the conversation - who is setting the agenda?

The Listening to the Experts report highlighted how young people felt that framing the conversation around youth violence was already an expression of their lack of power and control to set the agenda. Whilst the focus of adult professionals is often on 'fixing' the issue of serious youth violence with technical solutions, young people wanted to talk about how they feel they don't matter, aren't respected or supported, and how they want to feel more hopeful about their future.

In addition, talking about violence and crime with strangers (including professionals) can not only be difficult but also traumatic and risky for young people who have been affected. For children and young people there are serious questions about whether these are safe conversations to have at all outside of a therapeutic or confidential setting.

“Knife crime is an issue within my community, but it isn't just the young people carrying knives – the professionals want someone to blame so they stereotype young people.”

Barrier to Engagement:

Lack of trust in professionals

Most young people who are at risk of violence or are involved in crime do not trust professionals. This is based on their own experience and the experience of people within their social circles and communities. Pronouncements by public figures that demonstrate a lack of empathy for young people's reality can exacerbate that lack of trust.

Our consultations highlighted a significant concern amongst young people that Black and other minoritized young people are racially profiled – particularly by the police. Young people told us that school exclusions and criminalisation fed the view that professionals see them as a problem to be fixed, rather than their behaviour being symptomatic of wider issues in the community and wider society.

As part of the Listening to the Experts process, we held a session with both professionals and young people. The sessions with young people were brokered by youth workers who encouraged them to attend and also took part in the consultation to ensure that they felt safe and supported. During the joint session, the young people highlighted how different the professionals (with the exception of some youth workers) were from them in terms of their class, ethnicity, level of education, and the way they spoke and expressed themselves. This difference and lack of diversity makes empathy and rapport-building harder.

“Trust is the main thing for young people and professionals, apart from youth workers, I don't trust them. School just kicked me out, I was failed.”

Barrier to Engagement:

Concerns about safety and risk

Initially it was hard to trial the empathy tools due to concerns about COVID-19 and lockdown, but even when it became more feasible to engage with young people face-to-face, they (and we) had wider concerns about the extent to which risks could be mitigated. Talking about what is happening in their communities with professionals can expose young people to risk of reprisal or being accused of being a 'snitch'.

Whilst it could be possible to ensure that young people remain anonymous (using only voice rather than video on a zoom call) there were still significant safeguarding concerns to work through in terms of how to navigate any risks that were disclosed.

Barrier to Engagement:

Lack of tangible benefits or value from engagement

It was difficult to encourage young people to trial the listening tools when the results are, inevitably, uncertain and intangible. As we found in the Listening to the Experts report – young people are frustrated that professionals don't understand their reality, but they don't necessarily want to create new spaces and structures for that to happen. Young people are aware that youth violence and responses to it are politicised – with politicians and policy makers often having a weak evidence base for their actions, and young people's views not featuring prominently in their thinking.

In their paper 'The terrifying abyss of insignificance: Marginalisation, mattering and violence between young people' Billingham and Irwin-Rogers critique gang injunctions and Knife Crime Prevention Orders and argue that policymakers need to stop focusing disproportionately on the music young people choose to listen to or create, or the specific weapon that they might opt to carry.



How can young people's concerns about engagement be addressed?

Be youth centred

Through the Listening to the Experts project we asked young people what 'youth-violence' interventions would be prioritised if they were informed by their experience. The young people we spoke to highlighted four key areas where change is needed – they wanted to see a focus on safety, respect, hope and support. They left us in no doubt these would be the goals if professionals and the system as a whole centred their priorities and wellbeing.

We were open with young people during the Listening to the Experts process that we did not know what difference a report would make to the current response to violence in the city. We did, however, commit to delivering a report that centred what they wanted in their own words and to finding ways to ensure that they were heard. The response from 'professionals' has been positive, which perhaps speaks to the relative rarity of young people's perspectives being spotlighted.

A growing number of public and third sector organisations in Manchester have agreed to try to adopt the goals set out in the report (safety, respect, hope and support) as a way of guiding their work. To support this, and with further input from young people, the goals have been turned into a Shared Goals Toolkit which organisations can embed in their strategies and monitoring and evaluation. The organisations involved in making this happen hope that this may not only reconfigure how work is done, but also send a clear message that young people's aspirations and welfare should be at the heart of what they are looking to do and achieve.

The Listening to the Experts process highlighted what can be achieved if young people are given the power to direct the conversation, supported by youth workers who they trust: in this environment young people were willing to share their experiences, even in difficult and sensitive areas.

Create trauma-informed listening spaces

It may be that young people who have low trust in professionals or who are directly involved in, or at risk of, serious youth violence are not willing to engage. Alternatives to direct engagement with professionals include building empathy through listening spaces with youth workers or engaging with older young people who have had experience of youth violence or the criminal justice system. In this approach, it is helpful to distinguish between people whose experience is in the past/has been processed to some degree (lived experience) and those who are still living through an experience of being at risk of, or involved in, youth violence.

03

Professionals, listening and the empathy gap

Through our conversations with professionals it became clear that it would be difficult for them to find time to engage in ‘deep listening’ exercises with young people, as services were overstretched as a result of the pandemic.

We also found a wider range of constraints on their capacity for deep listening, including their beliefs, personal concerns and organisational/systems constraints.

We have set out what we found in relation to each of these barriers, giving recommendations for how each can be tackled in order to improve listening and reduce the empathy gap.

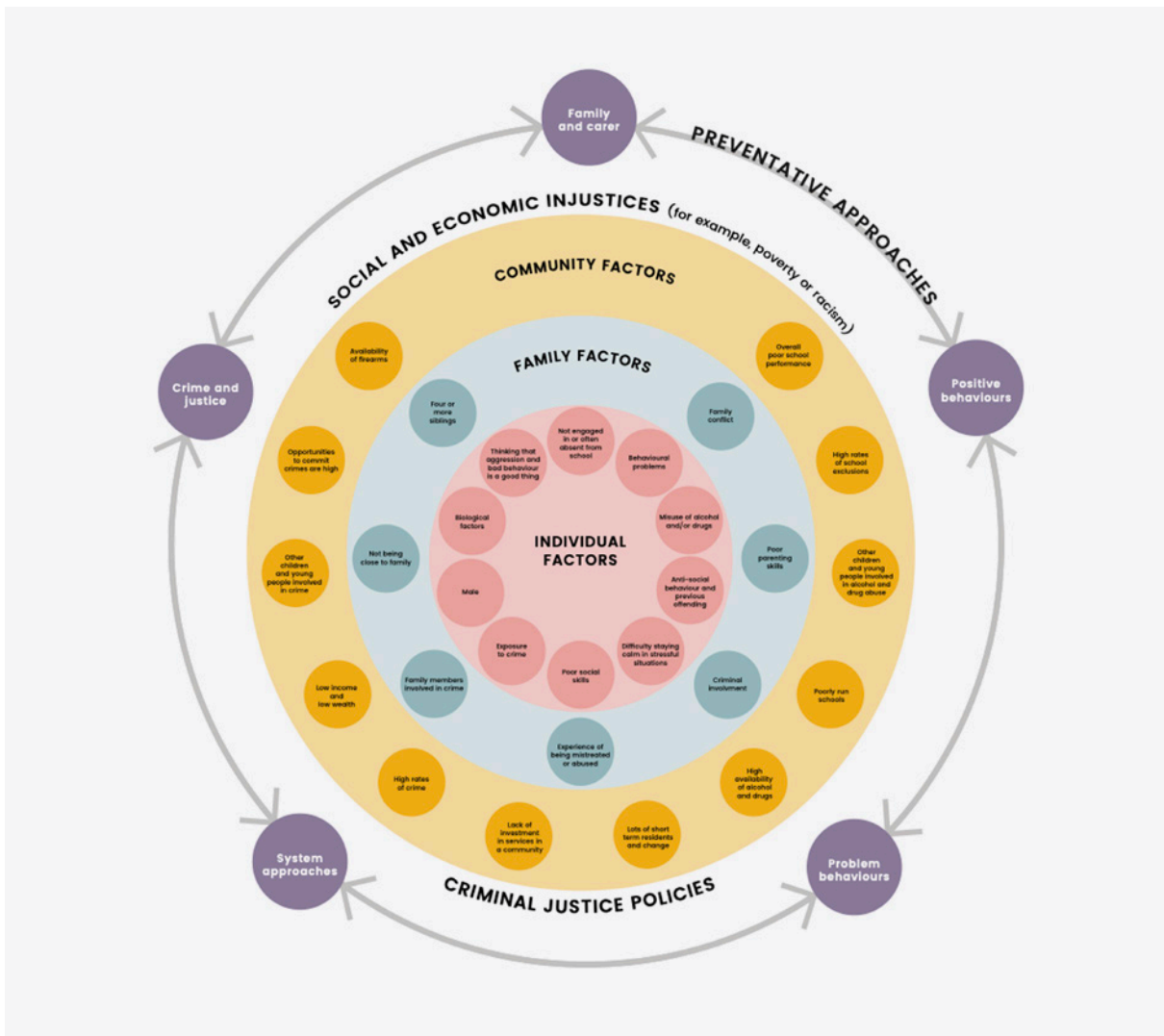
Barriers to listening	Elements	Potential solutions
<p>Attitudes and beliefs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are making bad choices (or some young people are bad when lots of good choices are available) • Young people need discipline and don't understand the consequences of their actions • Adults know best - listening to young people is not worthwhile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging stereotypes and building empathy • Trauma-informed approach • Strengthening listening skills and empathy before engaging young people affected by violence
<p>Personal Concerns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of vicarious trauma and being overwhelmed • Fear of uncomfortable conversations and lack of skills • Fear of undermining hierarchy/ power dynamic • Fear of having to take action safeguarding concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support/supervision for professionals • Valuing empathetic listening beyond its value in problem-solving • Strengthening recruitment and training - upskilling on how to talk and listen to children and young people • Exploring the role of empathy for professionals
<p>Organisational and systems constraints</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time and resources • Focus on targets and short term visible action • Siloed services are not joined up • Listening and empathy not seen as linked to impact • Lack of accountability/ consequences for professionals/ policy makers • Lack of senior buy-in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More research into costs and benefits of listening/ responsiveness • More research into organisational/ systems constraints on responsiveness • Strengthening accountability to young people fund more campaigning and influencing activity

I Barrier to listening for professionals: Attitudes and beliefs

Attitude/belief: Young people are making bad choices (or some young people are bad)

The focus on 'serious youth violence' as distinct from wider violence, abuse and crime can problematise young people and the communities in which they live, and diminish the social, economic and political factors that contribute to violent crime.

The failure to acknowledge these contributing factors can lead to people justifying their prejudices about particular groups of people, communities or geographic areas. It can also lead to a kind of fatalism where professionals think that it is inevitable that 'those young people, those people from x' are no good / will fail.



Framework used by Youth Endowment Foundation which centres individual as opposed to systemic drivers of youth violence.

Attitude/belief: Young people need discipline and to be shown that their actions have consequences.

For some professionals and institutions there is a belief that behaviourist approaches (use of sanctions) is the most effective approach to getting young people to change their behaviour. Within the teaching profession there is a lively debate about the effectiveness and impact of these approaches (e.g. use of isolation booths) on children and young people. Behaviourist approaches can diminish or ignore the impact that traumatic life experiences, systemic inequality and low incomes may have on young people.

The 'deterrent' effect is also key to the criminal justice system. Despite the high reoffending rates of young offenders who have been held in the secure estate (higher than with other young people), action on serious youth violence often involves increasing the penalties for young people involved in violence.

“They don’t understand that the choices we have are bad choices. For people who are involved in crime and gangs, it’s choice between the risk of prison or the risk of being killed if you are asked to do something.”

Attitude/belief: Adults know best and listening to young people is not worthwhile

Adult professionals do not necessarily have, on the whole, more relevant experience than young people who are involved in youth violence. But adults can discount the value of listening and understanding the different lived realities of young people – even though it is crucial for designing effective responses for keeping children and young people safe.

Addressing attitudes and beliefs

Challenging stereotypes and building empathy

Professionals need to have more exposure to young people's realities. Inter-group contact theory provides some ideas about how that can happen without deep listening exercises or face-to-face contact with young people affected by youth violence.

Research shows that attitudes can be shifted through being exposed to other groups realities through media (films, radio, plays), through imagination exercises (role plays, improvisation) and through hearing how people they know (other teachers, police) have pasts, friends or relationships with people in communities that are most affected by violence.

It is important that senior leaders and professional guidance addresses issues of prejudice and stereotyping and makes it clear that it is not acceptable. Professionals need to see that their institution and their senior leaders think that all young people's safety matters and that empathy with all young people who are risk of violence is valued.

Youth-led training from young people with lived experience

Nothing without Young People and the Metropolitan Police

Nothing Without Young People is a movement of young people who have experience of custody and youth violence. This initiative involved youth-led sessions with the Metropolitan Police where young people shared their bad experiences of stop and search and the wider impact of the practice on their attitudes towards the police. This programme was well-received and is being replicated for a larger number of police officers.

Use of Action Learning Sets with professionals and young people

Kent Refugee Action Network

Young refugees and asylum seekers were brought together into an action learning set looking at key issues in their lives. Once the group of young people had bonded and were more confident, they were joined by professionals from the police, council, social services, and further education colleges.

During each session the young people explored an issue with a professional and created a presentation to feed back to the wider group. This brokered new relationships and understanding. The professionals involved had deeper empathy for the challenges that young people were facing and acted as advocates for them within their services.

Developing media projects and products that explain young people's realities

[The Greener Side](#) is a documentary that profiles three young black men who were involved in youth violence and the criminal justice system and who have gone on to be very successful (and not as rappers or footballers).

[Fully Focused Productions](#) is a youth-driven media company that recently developed a series for BBC3 about young people's experience of [pupil referral units](#).

[Sounddelivery media](#) worked with performance poet [Lady Unchained](#) to support her to share her experiences of the criminal justice system and youth violence.

Emphasising the importance of listening, relationship building and empathy as part of the commitment to a trauma-informed approach

Greater Manchester is committed to developing a trauma-informed workforce across the public sector, but it is important that this translates into concrete changes that improve young people's experience of interacting with professionals.

Supporting a trauma-informed approach in Manchester

Listening to young people

The Achieving Change Together (ACT) programme embeds specialist workers into Complex Safeguarding Teams across Greater Manchester. The programme provides intensive support to children and young people who have been exploited and need to access support where they live.

Building skills and understanding of professionals

The Trusted Relationships initiative embeds psychotherapists in Complex Safeguarding Teams. The psychotherapists help other professionals to understand the impact of trauma on a child's development, and children's behaviour in the context of their life events. They also facilitate the design of strategies and interventions that best meet the needs of children who have experienced trauma.

Strengthen professionals' listening skills and understanding of trauma before they work with young people who are affected by youth violence

Young people who are affected by youth violence have low levels of trust in professionals. This lack of trust is understandable - they may have experienced a lack of effective or empathetic response to domestic violence by professionals, a humiliating and unwarranted stop and search or safeguarding interventions that only made their home life more difficult.

If the negative attitudes and beliefs of professionals are not addressed before a listening exercise, an interaction may confirm pre-existing beliefs or prejudices. Therefore, it may make sense to strengthen the listening skills of professionals by engaging with young people who have a lower level of distrust in them, and who are less traumatised by their experiences and previous interactions with professionals.

Using [empathy maps](#) to gauge professionals' understanding of young people's realities and to demonstrate the empathy gap

Empathy maps are used in marketing and user-centred design. They help companies and services to focus on the needs of their users or customers.

An empathy map could be adapted for use with different groups of professionals and could focus on these key questions:

- What do young people want?
- What are they seeing in their everyday lives?
- What are they saying about their everyday lives?
- What are they doing in their everyday lives?
- What do they think and feel about their safety/youth violence?
- What are their fears, frustrations and anxieties?
- What are their wants, needs, hopes and dreams?
- What else might motivate their behaviour?

Bridging the empathy/understanding gap using empathy maps

It would be possible to get professionals to answer these questions and then either get young people to review their answers, or have young people complete the maps in parallel and then share their responses.

An alternative approach could be to adapt [contextual safeguarding tools](#) which involve mapping neighbourhoods for use with professionals and young people - to highlight gaps in knowledge and understanding.

Peer-led or participatory action research

There is scope to develop more projects that use peer-led or participatory action research to provide more information and evidence for professionals - with the research being led by people who are trusted by young people affected by youth violence. An excellent example is the recent Youth Justice Advisors report; [Young Adult Advisors on Criminal Justice: Hearing from Young Adults from Young Adults in the Criminal Justice System](#).

Barrier to listening for professionals:

Personal concerns

Fear of vicarious trauma and of being overwhelmed

It can be traumatic for professionals to listen empathetically to the experiences of young people. In order to avoid feeling powerless and helpless in the face of the young people's reality, professionals may short-cut any listening and unconsciously employ psychological tactics of armouring or dissociating – leaving young people feeling dismissed or ignored.

One study has shown that being a more liberal police officer in a context where people have negative attitudes towards the police can contribute to burnout. In contrast, more authoritarian officers were less affected by negative attitude towards the police, were comfortable with the divide between themselves and the community, and did not want to be in dialogue with the community. The more liberal police officers were more inclined to listen, but also more affected by what they heard. So having an adversarial attitude may help officers cope with public animosity and distrust. This feeds a vicious cycle.

Fear of uncomfortable conversations or lack of skills

Professionals may choose to avoid conversations that could be uncomfortable for them, or where they feel ill-equipped. This may lead to them shutting down conversations in these areas, leaving young people feeling frustrated.

A recent Runnymede Trust report highlighted that many teachers don't feel trained to have conversations that touch on issues of race and racism. The report says, 'By their own admission, many teachers are ill prepared to teach in ways that promote anti-racism, and this can include BME teachers. Racial literacy therefore needs to be placed at the centre of teachers' role and teacher training.'

Fear of undermining hierarchy/power dynamic

Some professionals rely on an element of distance/lack of approachability to maintain their power and authority, and fear that listening empathetically might undermine their authority or confuse young people.

Fear of having to take action on safeguarding concerns that young people disclose

The more a young person trusts a professional the more likely they are to disclose safeguarding issues that the professional will have to take action on. This can be complex to navigate: often, young people do not want to trigger safeguarding action, but the professional is obliged to take action even if this exposes the young person to risk.

“We know that professionals will have to report or taken action on anything we tell them because of safeguarding. So we just don't tell them and they don't ask.”

Addressing professionals personal concerns

Providing/increasing supervision and support for professionals

Greater Manchester has made a commitment to developing a trauma-informed workforce across its public services. It is also important to ensure that there is support for professionals so that they do not feel overwhelmed by what they hear and experience.

Reinforcing the value of listening even if as a professional you can't solve a young person's problem

For young people, being listened to empathetically and building relationships of trust with professionals is valuable, even if that professional cannot solve or resolve the problems that the young person is facing. Professionals need the value of empathetic listening to be reinforced and understood as part of their professional practice.

Studies show that perceived levels of police empathy determine how they are evaluated by the people with whom they interact. Community members have more positive evaluations of the police when officers communicate that they understand the issues that matter to community members. Studies specifically show that the police are more likely to be trusted and considered effective at their jobs when they display empathy with the community's concerns.

Recruitment, training and empathy

There is scope to test listening skills and empathy in recruitment processes, as well as increasing training to help professionals show empathy for the concerns of specific communities and neighbourhoods they work in.

Empathy and recruitment and training

In response to widespread criticism of police practices in the US, especially involving police violence toward Black people, some US cities are now focusing on emotional intelligence and empathy in their police recruitment processes.

To improve the issue of poor listening by doctors, Stanford Medical School designed training to help doctors to resist the impulse to interrupt and rush through conversations. Workshop participants role-play patient interactions.

Structured conversations on the value of empathy

It can be difficult to understand how to create a safe space for professionals to discuss the value of empathy amongst themselves, the challenges they face, and to learn how to structure conversations with young people. Living Room Conversations is an initiative that tries to encourage people to have conversations across divides (politics, age, gender, race, nationality) through providing guidance for how to structure conversations. These cover a range of issues including empathy.

Conversations with young people

There is some guidance available about how to have conversations with young people in a way that puts them at ease. This [best practice guide](#) explains how to use a therapeutic interview framework which can help professionals to understand a young person's reality in as little as 15 minutes.

Margot Sunderland's books [Conversations that Matter](#) and [Bothered: Helping teenagers talk about their feelings](#) provide useful frameworks for empathetic listening and structured conversations with young people.



Barrier to listening for professionals: Organisational or system constraints

Time & resources

Many public (and youth) services are under strain. When services are overstretched the focus is on speed. Listening and understanding is not prioritised.

Listening, understanding, building trust and making young people feel like they matter takes time. Under pressure, professionals can shortcut listening and rely on their assumptions about what young people need and want or what is driving their behaviour.

How long does it really take to listen more effectively? Research about doctors and patients:

Studies show that doctors often interrupt their patients in an attempt to speed up their consultation processes. They fear that if they don't intervene the patients will talk for a long time and derail their tight appointment schedules. However, one [study](#) showed that, if a doctor doesn't interrupt, the average patient finishes talking about their problem within 92 seconds and most will be finished within 2 minutes.

Another [study](#) showed that doctors only found out what patients wanted in just over a third of encounters. They interrupted and came to their own conclusions most of the time – with specialist doctors giving patients less time to explain and then jumping to (the wrong) conclusions quicker.

Focus on targets and visible action

Many public and youth services are driven by quantitative output targets, and their performance is judged on that basis. Police officers, for example, have privately mentioned that the force struggles to act on issues that are not easily quantified and outcome focused (and by contrast, the number of stop and searches and knives seized are easily measured).

In schools, some young people feel that they are treated as though they are a problem that schools have to deal with. Concerns about their behaviour are likely to be met with exclusion or another sanction rather than understanding and support.

When it comes to the police, many young people (especially those of colour) have had negative experiences with stop and search and other actions within their communities. Interventions like stop and search, knife amnesties, and having police in schools provide quantitative metrics or tangible action that the police can use to demonstrate their presence / impact in the community. But these actions often feel, at best, not very effective to many young people at risk of violence and, at worst, are deeply traumatising.

In our focus group discussions with professionals, they highlighted that although they personally might want to engage in a more empathetic way with young people and spend time understanding their realities, this is not seen as a priority by their superiors. The focus is on being *seen* to take action regardless of the long term impact.

In an [newspaper interview](#) shortly after his appointment, the new chief constable of Greater Manchester Police was quoted saying that police officers were at risk of being viewed as jeopardising their impartiality if they displayed empathy for communities by wearing rainbow shoelaces or taking the knee – he stated that, ‘The public are getting a little bit fed up of virtue-signalling police officers when they’d really rather we just locked up burglars.’

This implies that the main barrier to better police performance is brief, small attempts at inclusion. When the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary placed the force into special measures in 2020 it instead cited services to victims being a ‘serious cause for concern’, drifting, poorly-planned investigations and safeguarding failures.

Siloed services that are not joined up

Young people who are affected by youth violence often have contact with, or have had contact with multiple professionals. There is often poor information-sharing and coordination between them.

Navigating different systems of referral and access can be challenging for professionals, and they often find it hard to secure an effective response for the young person they have listened to or are working with.

Listening and empathy are not seen as key to impact

The costs of ineffective responses to youth violence (because of a lack of listening and understanding) are predominantly borne by young people and the communities within which they live, and not by the services or the professionals involved, which have very weak mechanisms of accountability.

Listening and relationship-building skills are not sufficiently valued. Professionals who have these skills often end up in roles that involve more listening (e.g. pastoral roles in schools, community-facing roles in the police). For those who are weak in this area, there is often a lack of focus on staff developing listening skills and empathy.

Empathy and policing

When police show empathy with members of the community, it increases trust and empathy in the police. If young people have greater trust in the police during daily interactions, officers get more cooperation and find it easier to protect themselves and the communities they serve.

Limited accountability when professionals fail young people

Young people are aware that they often have no recourse if they feel that a professional has failed to listen or has acted on the basis of stereotypes, but that they will have to live with the consequences.

At a systems level, levels of serious youth violence are not viewed as systemic failures that prompt reflection and learning amongst professionals. Often, increases in violence are explained away as being driven purely by the poor choices of young people.

Addressing organisational and system constraints

More research into the costs and benefits of not listening/ understanding

The evidence underpinning many interventions on tackling youth violence is weak. The Youth Endowment Foundation is trying to improve this with its [toolkit](#) which assesses evidence and impact. It is particularly important to strengthen evaluation and research around the costs of failing to understand young people's experiences and the contextual drivers of youth violence.

It should also be noted that even where there is reasonable evidence on the effectiveness of interventions this can be regularly ignored in political decision-making. This suggests the need for more greater discussion about whether policy in this area is based on available evidence and how there can be a greater alignment between evidence and action.

Understanding the consequences of not listening

There has been some [research](#) into the consequences of doctors not listening to patients which can lead to incorrect or incomplete diagnoses. Doctors (like professionals engaging with young people at risk of violence) often have very little time to decide a course of action or treatment and may not be able to take full case histories.

More research into the constraints that professionals experience when trying to bridge the empathy gap

As part of this project we have spoken to a range of professionals, but further research - in partnership with key services - into the systemic and organisational constraints on deep listening and empathy could be beneficial. It may be useful to distinguish between the 'caring' professionals and elements of the criminal justice system, as cultural and organisational constraints may operate differently in these contexts.

More efforts to increase the diversity of representation within professionals and policymakers

In the Listening to the Experts process, young people highlighted how different the professionals (with the exception of some youth workers) were from them in terms of their class, ethnicity, level of education, and the way they spoke and expressed themselves. This difference and lack of diversity makes empathy and rapport building harder.

There needs to be greater efforts to recruit from within communities that are affected by violence. It is also important to create cultures that are welcoming and safe for professionals who do have similar backgrounds to young people affected by violence to talk about their connections and experience. Evidence shows that this helps to reduce prejudice, and challenges stereotypes. The challenge for these professionals is that whilst the prejudice endures, they may (rightly) conclude that having lived experience may negatively affect them professionally.

Improving accountability to young people

It could be beneficial to include young people within community safety surveys to understand how safe they feel and how satisfied they are with services like the police. As noted above, many services are geared towards being responsive to quantitative data that is tracked over time and provides a metric for accountability.

In addition to providing support for youth services – funders working in the Manchester area could look to provide financial support to youth campaigning organisations or stand-alone campaigns (like no police in schools) to ensure greater responsiveness to young people's concerns.



Bridging the empathy gap - Conclusions

04

Bridging the empathy gap and finding ways to build trust between young people affected by violence and professionals is key to improving the lives of young people, and making progress on issues that affect society more broadly.

However, the primary challenge is not with individuals' skills or structures for listening, but with a system that makes young people feel like they don't matter and that they are the problem that needs to be fixed.

Priorities when involving young people affected by violence in structured listening approaches or designing responses to youth violence include:

- Ensuring the context is safe for young people.
- Ensuring professionals have the skills and motivation to listen empathetically and manage conflict.
- Respecting young people's wants, needs, hopes, dreams, anxieties, fears and frustrations.
- Designing approaches in a way that enables and supports young people to express themselves.
- Having a clear purpose that will directly benefit young people.

In addition, our research has indicated that efforts will be more effective when:

- Young people are able to frame the discussion in a way that is meaningful for them.
- The focus is on a more positive future (what could change or needs to change) rather than the unsafe and traumatising reality.
- Professionals are willing and able to participate in conversations in an equitable way with young people.

The onus is on professionals, policy-makers and funders to work together to create spaces for direct engagement with young people who are affected by serious youth violence that young people find valuable.

There need to be concrete efforts taken in this area and professionals need to share their experience and learning across professional silos. In a context where resources are constrained it is critical that any action taken is effective and not counterproductive. Professionals must listen to the experts - children and young people - in order to find better ways to keep them safe.

**“Professionals don’t listen
to young people - we are
on the streets. Not them.”**



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Thank you



I am incredibly grateful to all the young people who participated in this project and the Listening to the Experts process.

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Jenny Ross

Collective Discovery