



About us

Unity Gym Project (UGP) was established in 2010. We are a registered charity - based in Broomhall - committed to community development, violence reduction and the promotion of health and wellbeing. We engage with vulnerable young people and adults who often do not have access to mainstream services, our role is to help them make positive life choices through the interventions we offer. Our ethos is to empower young people and families within the community to take ownership of their own development. This is achieved through: open access youth work; Sport and physical activity sessions, one-to-one mentoring, group work, Detach youth work, early intervention and diversionary activities, family engagement; conflict resolution, additional summer holiday youth provisions. Partnership working including safeguarding referrals and signposting; work experience placements; employability support;

UGP is well respected and wide reaching. Across our weekly services, UGP engaged an average of 95 young people per month throughout 2018. Figures for 2019 demonstrate a rise in engagement. We have received highly accredited status from the South Yorkshire Community Foundation (2019) alongside being highlighted by the Home Office EGYV as an example of “good practice of community engagement that directly engages the most affected communities, especially the young people and young adults” Our work is firmly embedded within the community and we have intimate practice knowledge of the issues that young people face. UGP was established by and for the community. Our work is co-produced with young people, needs led, responsive to local unmet need and academically driven.

About the evidence

The evidence presented in this submission is qualitative but it is not anecdotal. It is derived from ten years of listening to, co-producing and working with young people and families who access our services in Broomhall, Sheffield. The evidence presented is organised thematically, and has been gathered using a range of methods including: youth work conversations, focus groups, in-depth one-to-one interviews and broader community consultation activities with over 100 young people (aged 11 - 25), youth workers, parents and residents. Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information.

Headlines

- Experiences of institutional racism are common place for BAME young people accessing our services, particularly within the education system and with the police.
- The structures and practices of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) can shape the distribution of resources in ways that systematically disadvantaged BAME organisations.
- Complex social problems framed as ‘youth issues’ - like the rising incidence of serious violence - should be understood with reference to issues of systemic racism.

Education

Institutional racism is experienced routinely in schools by the young people accessing our services. These experiences take on a number of forms, from subtle everyday micro-aggressions, in-class discrimination to higher rates of permanent exclusion rising from arises from labelling, stigmatisation. Young people of colour have disclosed disproportionately harsher treatments compared to white peers. Treatments include disciplinary sanctions such as behaviour points, isolation and seclusion. These sanctions have a cumulative effect, adding up to referral panels where the decision may be made to move pupils to other schools (for short periods), or permanently exclude pupils.

Challenges have also been expressed around not 'belonging', 'feeling accepted' or accommodated for. Many of our service users do not feel they are given the warmth and support that they need to nurture and succeed in educational settings. Others have described feeling profiled as a 'problematic young person', or being deemed automatically 'guilty by association' because of the background or the colour of their skin.

Of the young people we know who have been permanently excluded from school there appears to be a high proportion of undiagnosed or recognised leaning needs.

Representation is an issue in schools. During our community consultation activities (see Mason et al., 2019) the importance of teaching staff whose diversity reflects the communities that they serve was reflected upon powerfully. We have learned how tailored one-to-one support from mentors with whom students can identify can have transformative effects in schools. There remains a strong need to recruit and develop high quality staff (in teaching, mentoring and pastoral roles) whose diversity reflects the communities that they serve.

Understanding of young people's circumstances and starting points is deemed to be lacking in schools. The young people accessing our services often come from complex and sometimes worrying circumstances. Young people have suggested that personal stressors, related to poverty and/or responsibilities to support with household finances can compromise engagement at school.

"They [teachers] don't know where everyone is at ... People have different mind-sets. Your head could be at the other side of the city. You could be thinking about home and you're still in school and you couldn't really give a damn" (Young person, 16)

Not only are young people who access our services more likely to be excluded from school and to have their abilities, behaviours, and grades undervalued, but they are also unable to access justice should they seek it.

Fostering school-community partnerships

There is an absence of school-community partnerships. Partnerships between VCS organisations and schools could help to build relations between schools and the communities they serve. School facilities like sports halls are astro turf pitches can be and difficult to access and expensive outside of school times. Easier and more affordable access may facilitate positive collaborations and share of resources. The resources are there but they are not easy to access or affordable.

Policing

Young people accessing UGP services have reported experiences of racial profiling and heavy-handed policing. Service users have described being aggressively stopped and searched and sworn at by police. High levels of police surveillance are also a concern amongst young people locally. On multiple occasions, young people and local business owners have disclosed experiences of police officers taking photographs, without consent. We have spoken to young adults whose properties have been aggressively raided by police and families who have been mistakenly raided by police, searching for a different address. Young people of colour in Broomhall often feel 'over policed' and labelled as 'constant suspects'.

It is important to acknowledge that experiences such as these exacerbate feelings of racial discrimination and undermine police-community relations. Trust in the police is low and local studies exploring young people's perceptions of police demonstrate that residents express increasing tension between wishing to see active policing of the local drugs market, but not in the form of punitive and racialized responses (Mason, 2020).

Historically, large-scale drugs operations - like crackdowns - have seemed to offer little in the way of post operation contingency plans, to restore the trust and harms caused by highly disruptive activities. It is also to recognise that residents who have experienced serious violence (including civil war) will have different and potentially traumatic responses to policing, particularly when police present with firearms. We welcome police efforts to inform residents about imminent raids alongside follow on post-operation discussions and communications.

We acknowledge that some attempts to develop positive police-community relations have been made by selected officers. However, too often the responsibility to plan and organise this work is placed on local residents or front line charities like UGP or small community organisations. This work involves managing sometimes generations of difficult experiences, and this needs to be an ongoing commitment and resourced.

Voluntary and Community Sector

The structures and practices of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) can shape the distribution of resources in ways that systematically disadvantaged BAME organisations.

Through our experiences and networks, we have found that community-based organisations often enjoy the most trusting relationships with local BAME groups and, therefore, perform the bulk of localised youth and community development activities. Such organisations routinely operate on very low budgets characterised by short-term, project based grants. They also regularly lack the administrative capacity to prepare larger scale funding proposals in a timely and rigorous manner. Conversely, large-scale city funds tend to be held by bigger youth and community organisations with stronger administrative capabilities, but weaker ties, credibility and trust with BAME communities. This state of affairs creates at least two problems.

1. A relationship of dependency in both directions: Large organisations cannot fulfil their funding requirements without collaborating with community-based organisations. Community-based organisations cannot secure the resources to deliver, without relying on larger organisations within the city.

2. The development and growth of BAME community-based organisations: Project based funds require project outcomes, and this commitment to outcomes limits smaller organisations' opportunities to build their infrastructure and achieve more independent, sustainable goals.

As such, many BAME organisations are often limited by a position of relative dependency and face *significant challenges* to develop their own infrastructure to be more resilient and continue to deliver effective frontline services. Despite often longstanding records of accomplishment, BAME organisations have to assertively chase and compete for resources.

Ongoing discussion within the BAME Public Health Inequalities Group have also revealed a lack of support for capacity building and training for front line workers' professional development. Studies of UK youth work suggest that this is a longstanding concern (Mason, 2015). Community-based BAME initiatives require the professional skills necessary to meet the needs presented by communities in an appropriate and relationship-based way as they are best placed.

Recommendations

Education

- City to work with established BAME education consultants (i.e. MA Education Consultancy) to enhance anti-racist training and policy changes across Sheffield schools.
- City to develop an inclusion strategy with all partners (LA and schools) with the aim of reducing school exclusions. This inclusion strategy should feature a built in scrutiny committee of young people and parents from schools with the highest exclusion rates, to steer and monitor progress.
- We welcome Learn Sheffield's commitment to recruit and develop high quality staff whose diversity reflects the communities that they serve. Sheffield universities should seek to build on existing efforts to support those PGCE/PGDE students who are underrepresented in Sheffield schools, with clear routes to local employment.
- Local secondary and further education to increase opportunities for young people to learn about a variety of employment and work shadowing opportunities and build links between local employers and youth/community organisations.

Policing

- Enhanced financial and professional commitments to the development of holistic and community-based solutions '*beyond policing*' to the problems facing low-income communities populated disproportionately by people of colour
- Enhanced and more accessible mechanisms for reporting complaints of racist policing, in order to improve validity of recorded police complaints data (*we suggest that recorded data significantly underestimates the extent of community concerns*)
- Further opportunities for police training to demonstrate community concerns, frustrations and experiences of racism
- Neighbourhood policing teams to be established within communities on a longer-term basis, to support work towards more longitudinal commitments to dialogue, partnership and relationships of trust

VCS

- Core funding for community-based BAME organisations to build capacity and infrastructure
- Enhanced and subsidised training for the professional development of community-based BAME organisations

- Bid development/business support - located centrally - to be made available to BAME organisations
- Commitment to empower and include representatives, voices of community-based front line BAME organisations within strategic citywide forums, as with the BAME Public Health Inequalities Network
- Clear accountability and transparent processes to be in place for all, but particularly large scale organisations who have historically held large community resources in the VCS
-

References/further sources

Mason, W. (2015) Austerity youth policy: exploring the distinctions between youth work in principle and youth work in practice. *Youth & Policy*, 114, 55-74.

Mason, W. (2020) 'No one learned': Interpreting a drugs crackdown operation and its consequences through the 'lens' of social harm. *British Journal of Criminology*, 60(2), 382-402.

Mason W, Brasab S, Stone B, Soutar J, Mohamed A & Mwale T (2019) *Youth violence, masculinity and mental health: learning from the communities most affected*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/smi/news/let-affected-communities-co-design-strategy-end-youth-violence-sheffield-says-report>

Unity Gym Project (2019) Unity Gym Project: A Short Documentary. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmoWYK9T3Dc&t=137s> (accessed 11.09.20)

