

# Are you saying I'm racist?

## Overview

An evaluation of work to tackle racist violence, in three areas of London.

Racist violence continues to be a serious problem in Britain. In 2010/11 more than 51,187 racist incidents were recorded by the police in England & Wales, of which 9,464 (18%) occurred in London<sup>[1]</sup> and the British Crime Survey estimates that the actual number of such incidents is around 200,000 annually. A recent study by the Institute of Race Relations<sup>[2]</sup> indicates that more than 90% of perpetrators are white, 85% are male, and 60% are perpetrated by children or young adults under 25. The emergence of the English Defence League, and signs that inter-ethnic violence between minority groups may be increasing, both underline that this is an issue that continues to need to be addressed, especially through work with young people.

Focusing on tackling the problem primarily through responding to incidents once they have occurred is too limited an approach. 'Zero tolerance' as a response to racism in work with young people (e.g. by teachers excluding pupils for such behaviour from school) fails to address the underlying causes of their attitudes and behaviour. A more proactive response that draws out the problem and confronts it with the aim of prevention is needed.

Three projects in London have been developing ways of working with young people to prevent them becoming involved in racist violence. The Trust for London initiated and funded this initiative after research had shown that, although young people tend to be the main perpetrators, there was little preventive work being targeted directly at those at risk of such involvement.

The projects developed a variety of innovative approaches, engaging mainly with groups of young people in neighbourhoods and schools. Most of the young people the projects worked with were white, but some were black or from other minority ethnic groups. Some were linked with gangs, but most were not, and the project workers found that racist attitudes were widely held among young people in their areas, and that being 'at risk' of involvement in racist violence was widespread rather than affecting only a special few. Their experience shows that face-to-face work with young people at the local level by skilled practitioners can have a significant impact on racist attitudes and behaviour, thus reducing ethnic tensions and promoting integration among young people with different backgrounds and identities. There is an urgent need, however, to integrate the lessons from this initiative into mainstream policy around youth and community issues, and also into the core training and everyday practice of youth and community workers and staff in schools.

[1] *Home Office Statistics, September 2011*

[2] *Racial Violence: The Buried Issue* by Harmit Athwal, Jenny Bourne and Rebecca Wood. *IRR Briefing Paper NO.6 2010*

**Some of the views expressed by young people at the start:**

*“They shouldn’t come here and act like they own the place”*

*“I’m not being racist but I’m more scared of black people than white people coz they’re the ones that create the trouble.”*

*“They always say we’re being racist about small things. It’s like black people can say something and it’s ok, but if a white person says it, then you’re racist.”*

*“There are loads of fights and stabbings coz there are too many black people in this country, they’re taking over. They’re building new houses just for them.”*

## Background to the initiative

The Trust for London’s *Preventing Racist Violence Special Initiative* was launched in January 2007. The initiative was set up in response to findings from a report by the Runnymede Trust: *Preventing Racist Violence – Work with Actual and Potential Perpetrators (2005)*<sup>[3]</sup>. This report highlighted the fact that, although young people (and especially young men) are predominantly the perpetrators of incidents of racist violence, almost all work in this field over recent decades has concentrated on the **response** to such incidents, and virtually no targeted work has been undertaken with young people specifically on the **prevention** of racist violence.

Given that many young people growing up in London remain at risk of involvement in racist violence, bids were therefore invited by the Trust to carry out projects to develop preventive approaches, and three organisations were selected and funded to carry out projects over a three-year period. These organisations were:

- **Working With Men**, for deployment of an independent youth worker in Greenwich.
- **Leap Confronting Conflict**, for a ‘peer education’ project in Bexley.
- **Searchlight Educational Trust**, for sports-linked work in Barking & Dagenham.

Although the three areas of London where the projects were based were by no means typical of London or of the country as a whole, they were all areas where economic and demographic change has been disturbing established social patterns, resulting in changes in the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations. In such areas, ethnic differences often become more salient and sensitive, and there may be sharply increased support for right wing and other extremist groups, including among the young. These are trends taking place in many parts of Britain, and are likely to become increasingly prominent in coming years. In such areas it is crucial to work with young people whose attitudes and interactions will determine whether or not successful integration of different social groups occurs in the decades ahead. The methods used in the projects to address this challenge should therefore prove relevant across a wide range of geographical areas.

## The projects

**Working With Men** has extensive experience of working directly with young people on personal, conflict-resolution and identity issues, and drew on this in establishing a project for a full-time youth worker to undertake independent work (under the aegis of Greenwich Youth Service) in the Thamesmead area of South East London. WWM implemented this plan with a single experienced youth worker who operated over the three-year period in the Central and West Thamesmead area, engaging with young people either through clubs

or on the street, and building relationships with them to explore issues, challenge attitudes, and bring them into contact with young people from other groups and neighbouring areas. Latterly in the project he extended his activities to work with young people on race and identity issues in the local secondary school and a nearby further education college.

### Outcomes

- Evidence of changing attitudes of young people engaged in the project – for example, groups of young people who had previously been hostile to each other, forming a football team and exchanging mobile numbers.
- Sustaining the interest and involvement of young people in a range of activities related to self-awareness and identity, and giving them skills in anger management, conflict resolution and self-defence.
- Work in schools with young people at risk of exclusion due to their overt racism and challenging behaviour, on issues of conflict resolution and identity resulted in a significant change in attitude and reduced risk of exclusion.

**Leap Confronting Conflict** is an established training and consultancy organisation working with young people, which focuses particularly on empowerment and participation, especially by means of peer education and mentoring programmes. Leap adapted this youth-led approach to working on racial and identity issues, in partnership with the Youth Service in the London Borough of Bexley. Leap developed a successful programme of cooperation with the Youth Service in recruiting and training a Bexley-wide group of young volunteers as peer educators, who have subsequently undertaken a variety of initiatives around racism and identity in their local areas. More recently, Leap has introduced their peer education approach to these issues into a local secondary school, and has also begun working with community outreach staff at a major local football club.

### Outcomes

- A distinctive training approach to addressing issues of racism with young people, which raises awareness and develops personal skills by using the technique of generating ‘dangerous conversations in safe spaces’.
- Creation of a team of young peer educators capable of taking initiatives on racism and identity issues with their peers in a variety of settings around the borough.
- Successfully initiating a racism and identity awareness strategy for pupils at a secondary school to be implemented by pupils themselves in the role of peer educators.

**Searchlight Educational Trust** is the educational arm of the well-established monitoring and campaigning anti-racist organisation Searchlight. SET extended its existing community-based work in the Barking & Dagenham area of East London to focus more directly on working with young people, and especially to prevent their becoming

[3] Sarah Isal, *Preventing Racist Violence – Work with Actual and Potential Perpetrators – Learning from Practice to Policy Change*, Runnymede Trust, London, 2005

### And views after participating in one of the projects:

*"The discussions were good. I feel differently about other people (who I don't know) now"*

*"You've made me want be part of something positive, not something negative"*

*"It did not matter what colour the boys were, we just want to do something with our lives"*

*"When people use violence they have lost the argument"*

*"Try not to judge people by what they look like"*

influenced by or involved with the BNP. SET used sporting activities (including a borough-wide football tournament) as a foundation for educational work around racism with young people and bringing together those from different areas and groups, but SET's development worker also undertook face-to-face work with groups of young people on local estates, as well as working with a local school. Latterly the main focus of SET's work has been on combating the influence of the BNP and political extremism among young people in the run-up to the May 2010 elections.

### Outcomes

- Successful use of football and other sports to engage white youngsters in awareness-raising and anti-racist activities.
- Demonstration that community-based, overtly anti-racist work with young people in established white communities can be viable and can impact attitudes and behavior.
- Demonstration that sharing of personal experience of involvement in right-wing extremism can be a powerful tool for awareness raising and attitude change among young people.

### Key findings and conclusions

- A** The potential for involvement in racist violence, albeit usually in a casual rather than organised manner, was seen by projects as present for most young people in their areas, and not just for the small number who might hold extreme views.
- Most young people explicitly condemned racism, but at the same time would articulate negative attitudes and stereotypes relating to specific groups.
  - The racist attitudes and stereotypes articulated by young people needed to be understood in relation to class, territorial, gender and other factors, as well as in relation to family, community and media influences.
  - Most young people in all three areas had strong territorial attachments and were often unconfident or fearful as regards travelling outside their immediate local area.
- B** Engaging with young people to address sensitive issues such as racism required commitment, skill, patience, sensitivity, and the building up of a relationship of trust over a period of time.
- Exploring issues initially around identity more generally with young people provided a more effective way into discussions on racism, by contrast with a narrow, direct approach.
  - 'Safe spaces' needed to be created to enable 'dangerous conversations' (i.e. on sensitive issues that are likely to arouse strong feelings).
  - Taking young people out of their immediate areas, and providing structured opportunities for them to engage with young people from other areas and social groups, provided valuable opportunities for learning.

- Engaging with young people in sporting, musical and other kinds of activities of interest to them provided a favourable context in which addressing issues around racism and identity could take place.

**C** Local authorities, youth agencies and schools all need to take responsibility for such work.

- Denial, or ‘zero tolerance’ alone, are not the solutions: the problem needs to be opened up, debated and addressed.
- Youth workers and teachers need skills, tools and confidence to tackle the issues effectively.
- Addressing racism and identity issues should be an integral part of youth and school curricula.
- Peer educators can also play a powerful role in influencing racial attitudes and behaviour among young people.

**D** Tackling these issues is crucial for London’s future as a harmonious and cohesive city.

- Approaches need to be tailored to the particular circumstances of local areas across the city.
- A sensitive approach is needed, that does not stigmatise whole groups and areas.
- The experience of the initiative shows that taking action to prevent young people becoming involved in racist violence is not only desirable but also feasible.
- The methods developed and used by the projects should be drawn on and implemented as appropriate across London.

## Key learning points and recommendations

### For practitioners

- Raising awareness around identity issues, and challenging racist attitudes and stereotypes, can help to prevent involvement in racist violence, especially in deprived areas experiencing rapid demographic change.
- Practitioners themselves need awareness and skill to undertake prevention work effectively, and should obtain training and specialist advice where necessary.
- Training young people themselves to act as peer educators around race and identity issues can make a major contribution to preventive work.

### For policy-makers

- Youth policy needs to include a specific and explicit focus on the need to prevent racist violence.
- A multi-agency approach is essential, including the involvement of community groups, and linked to other relevant agendas, such as personal and social development, anti-social behaviour, and community cohesion.

- Youth workers need the support, awareness and skill to address issues around racism and identity in a proactive way. Training and professional guidance need to be provided for this purpose.

## For funders

- There is a need to stimulate further work aimed at preventing racist violence among young people possibly as an explicit sub-theme within broader funded programmes addressing policy areas such as youth work, anti-social behaviour, and community cohesion.
- Initiatives should include provision for multi-agency cooperation, and for ensuring sustainability and mainstreaming subsequently.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions should be an integral part of project and programme design.

## The Projects

- Leap Confronting Conflict [www.leaplinx.com](http://www.leaplinx.com)
- Searchlight Educational Trust [www.setrust.org.uk](http://www.setrust.org.uk)
- Working with Men [www.workingwithmen.org.uk](http://www.workingwithmen.org.uk)

### Trust for London: Tackling Poverty and Inequality

[www.trustforlondon.org.uk](http://www.trustforlondon.org.uk)

Trust for London is the largest independent funder tackling poverty and inequality in the capital. Established in 1891, the Trust makes grants totaling £7 million a year, supporting around 400 voluntary and community organisations in London at any one time. It was formerly known as City Parochial Foundation.

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This is a summary of the full evaluation report by Robin Oakley, Sarah Isal and Aine Woods. You can download the full report and a discussion document for practitioners from [www.trustforlondon.org.uk](http://www.trustforlondon.org.uk) or request copies from the Trust on 020 7606 6145.