



touching **the margins**

*Summary report of a project aimed
at disadvantaged young men aged
18-30 in London*

Supported by City Parochial Foundation and John Lyon's Charity.

Acknowledgements

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The City Parochial Foundation (CPF) is a registered charity. It exists to benefit the poor of London. The 'poor' includes people who, for whatever reason, are socially, culturally, spiritually, environmentally and financially disadvantaged. The area its work covers is the Metropolitan Police District of London including all 32 London Boroughs and the City of London.

John Lyon's Charity is part of the Harrow School Foundation. The charity's policy is to enhance the conditions of life, and improve the life-chances, of young people through education. The area its work covers is Barnet, Brent, Camden, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Harrow, the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and the Cities of London and Westminster.

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This summary report was written by Trefor Lloyd (Working with Men) and David Robins (John Lyon's Charity), and is based on the full project evaluation report written by Helen Barnes of the Policy Studies Institute and Abdul Momen. The full report is available on www.johnlyonscharity.org.uk, www.cityparochial.org.uk and www.workingwithmen.org

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Working With Men (WWM) designed, and were the consultants on, the Touching the Margins project. WWM is a not-for-profit organisation that supports the development of work with young men and boys.

Quotations from participants were extracted from diaries kept as part of the communications course at RASC and interviews carried out and edited by Abdul Momen at BWA.

References and supporting literature are fully detailed in the evaluation report.



Foreword

There is a long history of grant-making charities taking on a pioneering, risk-taking role to bring about social change. Independence unimpeded by bureaucracy combined with financial security can be an ideal base from which to develop ideas, which address areas of concern not covered by Government. Partnerships between independent grant-givers can maximise the potential to effect change.

This is a time when central government is setting the agenda to the voluntary and independent sector as never before, through a plethora of departmental initiatives aimed at the espousal of government-sanctioned and approved policies. But often a credibility gap exists between Government schemes and local needs. Evidence from grassroots, independently-funded programmes can inform big government initiatives of their limitations and unintended consequences. Charities can exert leverage to bring innovative approaches tested in independently-funded projects to the attention of policy makers, grassroots' practitioners and other funders.

It was with these objectives in mind that a three-year initiative was established between our two London charities focusing on the needs of young men in London who are marginalised and disaffected. The trustees of both charities have been firm in their support.

Throughout the life of the project, Nick Stuart, the Chairman of John Lyon's Charity, was actively involved as chairman of the project steering group. We now hope that the lessons learned will be usefully disseminated.

Nick Stuart CB,
Chairman, the Grants Committee, John Lyon's Charity

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Background

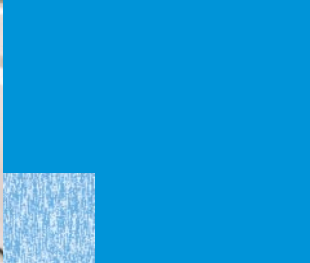
John Lyon's Charity and the City Parochial Foundation funded and developed the Young Men's Initiative over a three-year period, as an innovative response to a range of issues facing minority ethnic men aged 18-30. The initiative was designed as two projects, developed in consultation with local community groups: one was based at the Refugee Advice and Support Centre in Hammersmith and the other at the Bengali Workers' Association centre in Camden.

Introduction - 18-30 but no club or holiday

This initiative focused on a group of people whose needs are often overlooked by government and the voluntary sector. Young men aged 18-30 are prominent among the underqualified and the unskilled, and suffer higher than average levels of unemployment. They are heavily over-represented in the prison population, and among those susceptible to alcoholism, drug abuse, homelessness and mental health problems including suicide and attempted suicide.

The problems facing young men often stem from underachievement at school. Teenage boys are twice as likely as girls to truant, miss homework and misbehave in lessons. In centres for children with learning difficulties, boys outnumber girls 2:1. In special units for children with behavioural problems, there are six boys for every girl.

Problems affecting young men occur across the social spectrum, but in London certain groups - existing at the very margins of society - are under particular pressure. They include refugees and asylum seekers, and the under-educated and underskilled from the Bangladeshi community. These young men, who are predominantly Muslim by background, are increasingly viewed as susceptible to riot, criminality and religious extremism. Their vilification in the tabloid press is based on the fear that young men with nothing to lose can resort to desperate solutions. While mainstream services may meet the needs of as many of 85% of their targets, the groups who took part in this initiative are likely to fall outside.



The combination of male reluctance to receive help, their age, refugee and asylum-seeking status, and the inadequacy of mainstream programmes of support all increase the possibility of being socially excluded. Clearly these are young men that policy makers need to take into account. The aim of our Young Men's Initiative was to target, engage effectively with, and provide support in ways that may help to inform the approach of bigger Government programmes.

Getting the project off the ground: **the process**

The Importance of Being Men

Across the social spectrum and regardless of ethnic background, the once universally accepted steps to manhood and adulthood have become more remote. Although by no means a Golden Age, the 1950s did provide most young men with a straightforward route into adult male life. By their early 20s the majority would be married, have children, and be settled in secure employment, remunerative enough to raise a family.

The world is different now. Instead of the majority of young men leaving school before the age of 16, it is now 18; leaving home is now nearer 24 (rather than 18); and marriage/cohabitation now takes place aged 27 instead of 21. Workplace changes have driven many of the other differences:

- a high proportion of jobs lost in recent decades are 'men's jobs' (full time manual or skilled labour with wages high enough to keep a family);
- young men are becoming less prominent as family breadwinners; and
- many lack the skills and attitudes to make the most of reduced opportunities.



Unemployed young men are more likely to be 'job-unready'. Social exclusion is a major component of the psychological isolation of unemployed men. The absence of work often means the absence of social networks. Ethnicity compounds the problem. The unemployment rate for white men is 8%, compared to African-Caribbean and African men at 21% and Pakistani and Bangladeshi men at 18%.

What often confound all efforts at amelioration are men's difficulties in asking for help. A core component of 'growing up male' is a reluctance to ask for help even when it is desperately needed.

Talking to Young Men

We started by consulting the young men themselves, using workers with a special expertise of working with them. From these consultations two projects were designed, each of which broadly aimed to address the development of skills and attitudes, and help the participants to get the most out of their lives. The

projects prioritised different issues, but a common theme was the tensions that arise when young men try to maintain traditional perceptions of being male in a changing world.

Among the refugees and asylum seekers, traditional male roles were strong, while for some Bangladeshi men who are born in the UK, there is a tension between what it means to be a man within their community, and the opportunities to fulfil this role outside of it.



- YMI
- ESOL
 - Buddy Sys
 - Communication
 - Confidence B
 - Workshops
 - Visits
 - Chatting up



The Young Men's Initiative Part One: **the Refugee Advice and Support Centre (RASC) in Hammersmith, West London** - Overview

Who took part?

All of the participants at the project based at RASC were refugees or asylum seekers. Individual needs often varied according to the stage they had reached in the immigration process. Some were homeless, either sleeping rough or staying illicitly with friends in hostels from which they had been evicted, or living in overcrowded accommodation with friends.



Over half of the participants had basic English, and only a third had intermediate language skills. Many recent arrivals spoke no English at all, and although some had studied English in their countries of origin, few had much practice or confidence in using spoken English. However, there was a wide range of ability even among this group, since some were fluent in several languages and found it relatively easy to

acquire another, while others had only a few years of formal education or were not literate in their first language.

The majority of the young men were extremely isolated before starting the course, typically living in hostels, sharing rooms with people they did not know, who might be from very different backgrounds, and with whom they did not always share a common language. Some had a few friends from their own country, and this was often how they had found out about the project. Even those who had been in the UK for over a year reported circumstances of extreme isolation. This was not only due to language problems. Many simply felt too



nervous to venture far or to talk to strangers. Participants often lacked awareness of how to behave in social situations, or were excessively withdrawn, nervous, passive or shy in interactions with others. Some were very reluctant to make eye contact, and would venture few answers beyond 'yes' or 'no', even when it was obvious that they could understand what was being said. Misunderstandings could arise as a result of limited social skills or cultural awareness. The programme helped them to build up their social confidence, by providing them with opportunities to practice social interactions.

Young men attending the RASC project described a range of physical health problems including stomach pains, dental

problems, and pain from injuries sustained during armed conflict, torture or imprisonment. Several were admitted to hospital within a few months of arrival, mostly with stomach or kidney complaints. Many participants were obviously not eating an adequate or nutritionally appropriate diet. Food served in hostels tended to be of poor quality and was served at fixed times, so that young men who were absent for any reason missed their main meal of the day. No account was taken of fasting periods and other religious dietary requirements.

Many of the young men at RASC, exhibited symptoms of mental distress, including anxiety, insomnia, depression, poor concentration, poor appetite, and forgetfulness. Many were on antidepressant medication. Typical comments were:



'Sometimes you lose your confidence, you feel you have nobody', 'I think about my family, I have dreams about the past'. The project was established before the Government's dispersal policy became fully operative, and this had a significant impact on course membership. While 245 men have attended the course, 103 left before their fourth month, and only 39 in total attended for over 6 months. These young men were acutely anxious about the possibility of being dispersed to another area, where similar support services would not be available, and where there were well-founded fears of racist attack.

What went on?

The programme at RASC highlighted communication and language, social networks and help-seeking as critical areas for virtually all of the men taking part. The aim was to impact significantly on their language and communication skills; provide temporary social networks; build on men's knowledge and experience of both social and institutional Britain, as well as develop their confidence and help-seeking skills.





There was also some recognition of broader psychological issues affecting young men, for example, issues of fatherhood and parental responsibility, and of masculine and gay identities, although these areas proved more difficult to engage with.

The core of the project was communication. There was a strong emphasis on improving spoken English. Participants were paired with 'buddies' - volunteers from the host community who spent time with them, practising their English and

meeting informally with them on a one-to-one basis.

The project leader co-ordinated help with practical activities such as registering with a local library, shopping at a local market, or obtaining condoms from a family planning clinic.

There were workshops on issues such as relaxation, sexual health and relationships. Visits to museums, football in local parks and film nights at the centre were also organised.

What were the successes?

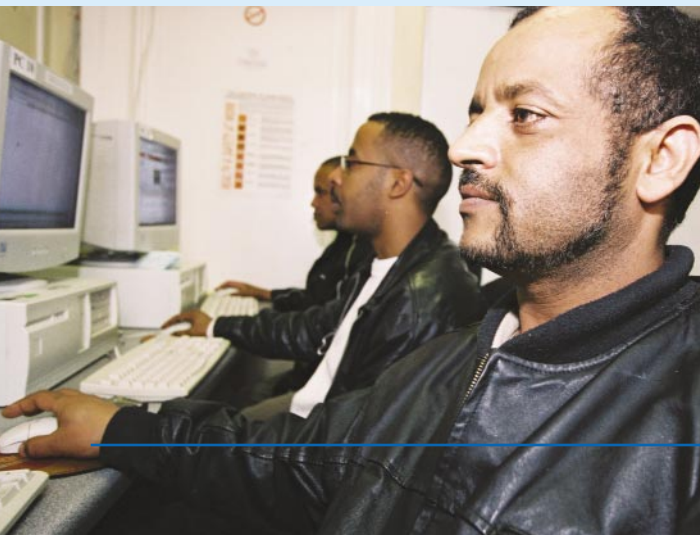
The project has clearly met its aim of improving English and communication skills. All participants, even those who were only able to attend for a few weeks, showed improvements in their spoken and written English, in their confidence in speaking English and in their ability to communicate by gesture. Those who were able to attend for a longer period have shown marked improvements in language proficiency, no longer needing to rely on interpreters, and a substantial proportion of these longer-term participants have obtained a qualification in English.

The course has also been important in helping young men to develop a more nuanced style of communicating, and an understanding of how their self-presentation affects people's reactions to them.



The 'buddying' scheme has been an important element of improving spoken English, and for many participants, this was the only time they spoke English outside the communication class itself. It proved hard for participants to practice English outside RASC, since their attempts to engage people in conversation were often rebuffed. Because buddying was a role intended to offer English practice and social contact, rather than being explicitly concerned with the role modelling which is a feature of a mentoring relationship, it could take a number of forms. Some buddies had teaching intentions and spent time doing equations or grammar, while others acted more as benefactors, for instance by making sure that the participant got a good meal on the days they met. In other cases, the relationship was a friendship, but one with an element of structured learning: for instance encouraging the participant to be the one to order food in a café, or to decide on an outing and plan transport, and introducing them to other people. All of the buddies stressed how much they gained from the relationship, emphasising the reciprocity involved.

The RASC project also supported men in their claims with the Home Office and stayed in touch if they were dispersed. The project worker monitored their physical and mental health and helped them register with GPs. The project enabled participants to make use of health and leisure services and further education opportunities. Those with severe language needs continued to rely on the centre for help in dealing with written documentation, or when contacting call centres, for instance to make a claim for benefit.





This assistance enabled most of the participants to move on from the project to college, job-seeking or work, although many paid occasional visits to keep in touch. While a number of other projects address the practical short-term needs of refugees and asylum seekers this one also addressed longer-term needs such as building relationships, and developing career paths.

What were the challenges and difficulties?

Changing Government policy towards refugees and asylum seekers and the resulting dispersal policy made it impossible to carry out long-term work with participants. With the advent of the dispersal policy, RASC found its core target group increasingly living out of London and at one point the project looked as though it may have to close as a result.



Instead, a large group of refugees were identified following the closure of Sangatte refugee camp in France, and work also commenced within the local prison. The venue may have changed, but the core elements of the programme remained.

Although the communication classes were successful overall, it was hard to meet all the language needs of participants. Those who were not literate in their first language required help beyond the scope of the course, as did those who needed to obtain an advanced level of competence in English for the purposes of employment. Almost all of the participants retained some problem areas of communication such as understanding regional accents or using the phone.

What was the impact of the project?

The contact with other young men, and the caring approach of project staff, were often described by participants as 'things which makes me feel better'. One young man said 'when I come to RASC I feel all the weight lift from my shoulders' and another, who had been describing his feelings of anxiety, said 'when it happens like this, I come here and [the project worker] is like a friend, he gives me advice'. Some of the younger participants appeared to relate to the project worker almost as a substitute parent. This was in stark contrast to the long evenings

and weekends spent alone in hostel rooms, when their distress could become acute.





The Young Men's Initiative Part Two:
**the Surma Centre of the Bengali
Workers Association,
South Camden**
- Overview



Who took part?

There were two distinct groups of Bangladeshi young men. The first group were those born and brought up in the UK, who usually spoke fluent English, but had underachieved at school, had low work expectations and tended to stay within the local community. The second group were recent arrivals to the UK whose English was a second language, and who were finding work within the Bengali community, mainly in restaurants.

The majority of the British Bangladeshis came from the high-rise public housing estate next to the BWA Centre, where over 80 per cent of residents are Bangladeshi by background and where there are high rates of poverty.

Many lived with their large extended families in cramped conditions with little room to express any personal autonomy. There were clear tensions about their conflicting lifestyles, at home and on the street. There was much talk of two lifestyles, one lived within families and the local community, the other 'outside', on the inner city street, or within the wider community. For some, however, this arrangement was seen as a happy compromise, even as a positive dimension to their lives. For others, one of the main reasons they attended the project was because they wanted help to move out and find a place of their own.



All of the young men shared a concern about drug use and dealing within their community and expressed fears for the 12-15 year old boys who were getting into trouble, and not following a 'good path'.

Work expectations were extremely limited. Most had left school with few qualifications and had worked in a succession of part-time retail and service sector jobs interspersed with sometimes prolonged periods of unemployment.

Many restricted their work horizons to what was available through friends and family, or in the local area. While it might be assumed that employment services are already provided by Government programmes like Connexions and the New Deal, it was clear that these were not being used effectively by these British Bangladeshi participants. Some were outside the age range for a service, others chose not to use them, for a range of reasons - including a perception that they were not being treated with respect (which was not articulated as an issue of racism, but one of 'attitude'), and the location of agencies (and job opportunities) outside the local area.



Services provided by the Bangladeshi community were equally mistrusted. There was a belief that those services could not offer confidentiality, and that the elders who managed them showed little respect towards them. The widespread concern about the community's response to drug use touched upon these issues of confidentiality and

respect. There was a fear that asking for help about drugs and sex within the community would lead to "everyone knowing your business". This fear may have been unfounded but, nevertheless, it put off many from seeking help. Some families in neighbouring communities had responded to drug problems by sending their sons back to Bangladesh, often for religious education, but this was not seen as an appropriate solution by most of the young men.



Similar attitudes emerged around the issue of sex education and sexually transmitted diseases. Most of the young men felt that 'outsiders' best offered these services.

Above all, these young men were of the view that they had to find ways of helping themselves, because others in the community did not have high enough expectations of them.

For the recent arrivals from Bangladesh, communication was a significant barrier.

Many of these men have families, where they need to earn a living, but they have few opportunities to attend training, often working long hours in low-paid restaurant work with little time to pursue alternative careers. Many had acute communication needs.

What went on?

The programme in South Camden aimed to:

- encourage young men to have higher expectations of themselves, especially in terms of training and career opportunities;
- provide them with a significant role in the Bangladeshi community, through their efforts to mentor and support younger men;
- ensure access to advice and information about sexual health and drugs; and
- encourage a more flexible attitude towards being a man.

Other areas covered included help with debt, and support for social and recreational needs.



The project worker also got involved in local gang rivalries when they impacted on his work. Peer group pressure and negative experiences of life skills' classes at school often meant that one-to-one support and guidance with issues such as telephone manner, CV writing, and job application and interview techniques were more productive than group sessions. But the project also offered career-focused workshops and open days, including presentations by key local employers including the Police and Fire Services and the NHS. Several participants were provided with training in the car industry through the Modern Apprenticeship Scheme. There were workshops on drug use and assertiveness training. An ESOL class was also provided, initially based at the BWA centre, and later at a local college.

What were the main project successes?

To date 139 young men have taken part in the initiative, 43 of them recently arrived from Bangladesh and 96 brought up in the UK. For the recent arrivals, the project has been an important source of information and advice, and has enabled them to become independent, and engage more with local services.

For the British Bangladeshis, the project improved attitudes and motivation, which the project worker addressed head-on. Around 60 per cent succeeded in obtaining employment, while 29 (1 in 5) have started apprenticeships, training or university courses. Employment for public bodies (such as the police or the local council) which was seen as permanent and offering a solid career structure, and skilled work such as plumbing or work in the motor industry, were particularly valued. The project broadened horizons not only in terms of the type of work sought, but in terms of where it could be found - many young men were initially reluctant to travel outside Camden.

Parents and centre workers also noted changes in the young men's behaviour, describing them as being more confident, more caring and considerate of others and more mature and responsible.

What were the challenges and difficulties?

The project took place against a history of intermittent violence between Bangladeshi men from neighbouring areas. This sometimes required the project worker to operate across sites, rather than bring all of the young men into a single building.

The mentoring scheme for 'troublesome' younger men was not implemented, due to a lack of volunteers from the community. Some of the participants were unsuited for the role, since they were themselves involved in drug use, while those prominent in the community for their involvement in illegal drug use and dealing tended not to engage with the project. Those who could have offered themselves as role models often tended to have extensive work and family commitments which limited their free time.

The project was intended to have benefits to the wider community, by diverting younger men away from criminal activity. Success here was limited. Nevertheless parents of participants did feel that it has had some impact in reducing involvement in crime by assisting young men to become more responsible, both within the workplace and at home.

Conclusions

What are the lessons for mainstream services?

1. Gender is hugely significant

Young men should be of huge concern for policy makers. In the UK and elsewhere, there is a history of well-intentioned and well-funded Government programmes foundering on the negative and destructive behaviours of groups of marginalised and disaffected young men. Yet a gendered approach to designing social programmes is rare. For example, a recent Social Exclusion Unit report stated that 90 per cent of rough sleepers were male, but made no further mention of this fact.



The Sure Start and Teenage Pregnancy Units seek to increase the involvement of fathers and young men, but the approaches of the programmes designed to address these issues have not been adapted to work more effectively with males.

In contrast, the success of the Young Men's Initiative was based on the assumption that gender is always significant.



2. Growing up male is complex

Too often issues related to young men are reduced to simplistic notions and solutions. A recent set of primary school statistics on writing was reduced by the media to “boys have difficulties with writing because learning isn't seen as cool”. In fact, boys' underachievement involves a

number of complex factors including a lack of clarity about the value of exam results in their envisaged careers and some teachers' inability to deal with young men's expectations of 'respect'. Growing up male is complex, and unless this is acknowledged, simplistic policy ideas will be tried and too often fail.

3. Mainstream services need to plan for the future

Mainstream services are often too tightly age-restricted, and are unable to adapt to the dramatic social changes that impact on young people's lives. While the projects described here have targeted 18-30 year old men, many of the issues that were addressed are similar to those presented by teenage young men. Increasingly, particular groups of young men will arrive at adult status later, and services will need to respond to this.



4. Everything is in the detail

Mainstream services need to be flexible. Both of the projects described above found that small changes in focus could significantly benefit participants. For example, RASC offered broad-based communication courses, rather than narrow traditional ESOL classes. BWA preferred to address motivation head-on, ensuring that the worker was able to assess need more accurately, resulting in young men being more likely to move into appropriate work areas and college courses.

5. The asylum system has an impact

Many of the current asylum system procedures impact negatively on young men's physical and mental health, inhibit their personal development and isolate

them from mainstream society. A change in procedures and the development of more targeted services could have a significant impact on these young men's lives. A dispersal policy will not work unless it is accompanied by the development of appropriate support services on the ground. Unless we deal with social exclusion within these communities there will always be reasons or excuses for a drift towards the radical agenda.





6. Specialist agencies need to be learned from

Mainstream services need to learn to target specific groups effectively - a skill well-developed in specialist projects. In both projects there was a strong coherence between the consultations, the project design and the delivery with both designed around the strongest needs, which led to more effective delivery. Young men in particular too often look for reasons not to access and engage, so mainstream services will have to target more precisely and accurately.

7. Development takes time

While both projects had difficult first years, by year two, workers had understood and experimented with the project design and become confident in delivering the programme. Too often mainstream funding is only for one year. Developmental projects require longer to get established and to deliver effectively.



8. A context for radicalism

While there was no direct link between the young men in these projects and the espousal of a radical agenda, unless we address the social exclusion of young men in these communities there will be those that will use this as a reason or an excuse for radical responses. While Government has been keen to address the political dimensions, the question of how to engage these young men in ways that will have a significant impact on their lives remains.



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