



## **BUILDING BRIDGES PROJECT**

**Empowering young people through human rights values: Fighting the knife culture**

**RACE ON THE AGENDA**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In March 2006, the Home Affairs Committee – House of Commons announced their intention to inquire into the relationship between young black people and the criminal justice system. This is the first sustained inquiry into the overrepresentation of young black people in the criminal justice system in more than a quarter of a century – the latest being that of Lord Scarman in 1981. In May 2007, the Committee announced its findings. Paragraph 211 of its recommendations states: “In drawing up a strategy on young black people’s overrepresentation, the Government should ensure young people themselves are consulted, and that local and national organisations ensure young people’s views are systematically taken into account in forming and evaluating policy”.

The Building Bridges Project was set up to show how young people can be involved in designing, forming and delivering policy. It was also introduced as a pilot whereby young people (16-25) from various racial, cultural and economic backgrounds would be given the chance to interact and learn from each other and through human rights education find out what unites them rather than what divides them in a society where materialism, lack of respect for each other’s dignity and rights, exclusion, fear and isolation thrive.

In particular, in June 2006, Race on the Agenda (ROTA) started a research and policy project to engage young people from various ethnic backgrounds to:

- increase their awareness of human rights and ethical values with a view to address their biases and build bridges between them;
- collect evidence relating to the knife and gun culture that is rooted in the capital with a view to affect policymaking.

ROTA is a social policy think-tank that has been active since 1986. ROTA works with London’s Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities towards achieving social justice by the elimination of discrimination and promotion of human rights, diversity and equality of opportunity. ROTA achieves these aims by informing London’s strategic decision-makers about the issues affecting the BAME voluntary and community sector (VCS) and the communities it serves and by making government policy more accessible to London’s BAME organisations.

The Building Bridges Project is broken down to ten Phases. With this report, Phase 1 is concluded. The findings were collected through desk research and fieldwork with key stakeholders and practitioners from the criminal justice field. Key conclusions and recommendations include:

- **Culture vs. crime:** The issue of gangs, guns and knives goes beyond what the criminal justice system understands as “crime”. It involves a culture that has gradually developed particularly in deprived areas both in rural and urban areas. This is particularly true for London. To understand and fight this culture there needs to be an acknowledgement of its complexity and multifaceted

nature. This culture grows within an environment of social exclusion and inequality; scientific evidence (Hosking and Walsh 2005) has shown that when exposed to inequality at an early age children are unable to develop feelings of empathy, an emotion that the culture in question lacks. Furthermore, it is near impossible to separate this culture from overarching cultures held by wider society and across other excluded groups. To an extent, the culture in question is itself a sub-culture of wider societal cultures; despite attempts by others to stress its exclusivity from the rest of British society. The use, possession and symbolic identity of weapons are informed by this culture. Furthermore within this culture violence becomes normalised and desensitised. We contend that there are a number of sub-cultures that feed into this culture. This can result in a wide range of people accepting, embracing and partaking within the weapons culture and exiting the culture from different standpoints. These sub-cultures can affect young people of varying social groups in different ways.

- **Gaps in Policy and practice:** This report recommends the following:
  - Greater involvement of young people in the formation of policies that affect them – this includes the gang, gun and knife culture as well as wider criminal justice matters such as hate crime, drugs and violence.
  - Stronger partnership between community-based projects and statutory criminal justice agencies. Case studies identified in this report seem to be unknown to mainstream organisations, and they tend to work in isolation, in the shadow of the law and without sustainable and long-term funding. Where partnership works has developed, the results are encouraging.
  - The role of respect in the design of policy is paramount in creating an inclusive and tolerant society of citizens that respect each other.
  - Human Rights Education has an important role in creating hope and broadening the minds of young people. As the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is about to open its doors, it is recommended that methods are explored to promote Human Rights Education through the three levels identified in this report. The Safer London Foundation has also noted the potential role that education can play in changing the lifestyles of young people which involve criminal behaviour.
  - The role of the Voluntary and Community Sector should not be underestimated in the fight against the gang, gun and knife culture. The sector has direct links with the communities it was set up to serve and this is particularly true for BAME groups which have traditionally been discriminated against.
  - Community cohesion and integration does not mean absorption of different cultures. The recommendation of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion on Single Group funding suggests that discrimination is an old phenomenon and that groups should no longer be funded on the basis of the communities they aim to serve but on the integration they aim to promote. This is not encouraging when put in

the context of inequality facing London's BAME communities. Funding not only needs to continue for specialised BAME groups working on the gun/gangs/knife culture but also be strengthened.

- The complexities of the culture and context of issues should be addressed in the formation of policy; it is insufficient to target knife and gun crime, without due consideration and understanding of the cultures within which they persist. Furthermore, that these cultures are considered within the context of the wider societal cultures rather than seen as distinct from them.
  - A Home Office report on Gun Crime published in December 2006 states clearly the complexity of a 'gun culture' and that 'it is imperative that those working on crime reduction in communities affected by gun crime engage with young peoples' decision making processes'(Hales 2006). By being youth led the BBP is untangling the culture in question by following just that recommendation and as young people we aim to illustrate through the BBP the causes, and solutions, to a culture within which gang, gun and knife crime persists.
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- **Youth Empowerment and volunteering:** Numerous studies have repeatedly pointed out the detrimental effects of excluding young people when developing policies that affect them, while they emphasised the positive impact that voluntary activities can have especially when empowering them to regain self-respect. In light of the recent recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee Inquiry, the BBP aims to serve as a paradigm for future projects that aim to put this recommendation in practice. The GLA Guns, Gangs and Weapons Practitioners' Forum have also acknowledged the importance of empowering young people to lead discussions in this field; at their recent seminar, the Forum allowed us to co-lead two workshops to consider the benefits/barriers/solutions of youth led work. Stakeholders' awareness of this key issue was reflected in the fact that over 100 people attended our workshop over the course of the day. Findings, from the BBP, so far show that by empowering young people and by giving them voice to explore what affects them and their families they regain the respect and control they are lacking and most often seek to find in the gang, gun and knife culture.