

# **School Meets Street: Exploring the Links between low achievement, school exclusion and youth crime among African-Caribbean boys in London**

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## **Non-technical summary**

In this paper we explore the 'problem' of African-Caribbean boys and young men suffering disproportionately from low academic achievement, exclusion from school, and involvement in crime. Concern about the link between school exclusion and crime began to be voiced in the 1990s when it became clear that only 15% of those permanently excluded returned to mainstream education and many excludees went on to commit crimes. A more recent reminder came in the aftermath of the UK riots in 2011 when it was discovered that a high percentage of those arrested for taking part were black and mixed race young people who had experienced school exclusion and who had special educational needs

The qualitative study reported here involved in-depth interviews with pupils and teachers at a pioneering secondary school in London and also with African-Caribbean young men who had dropped out of or been excluded from other schools in the area. Our findings map the process of getting into trouble at school and how this can be linked to getting into trouble on the 'street'. For example, difficulties at school are usually academic or behavioural but these problems are often interconnected and a cycle of frustration and de-motivation can start. Disenchanted students may decide to play truant or drop out of the education system altogether. Alternatively, the school itself may exclude them for disruptive or violent behaviour. Although schools are responsible for arranging alternative provision, in practice, once out of mainstream education, students are unlikely to gain academic qualifications and the problem of low achievement is exacerbated. They are then at a disadvantage in the labour market, and their perceived lack of legitimate opportunities for making money may lead them to engage in crime.

A complex interplay of factors appears to influence this low achievement – school exclusion – crime sequence, including the young person's family background, their neighbourhood, and the culture in which they are embedded. For example, a chaotic or violent home environment can mean that young men receive little support for their academic work and may take their anger and frustration into school, becoming disruptive and risking exclusion. Families may also be a source of criminal contacts, providing a ready-made entrée into illegal activities. In deprived neighbourhoods that lack facilities, young men who have been excluded from school may turn to crime simply out of boredom, and, in communities with high levels of crime, it is easy to become involved in criminal networks or be recruited to run illegal errands. An emphasis on material goods in the wider culture can fuel young people's aspirations, but their lack of qualifications and disadvantage in the job market make these difficult to attain by legal means. Finally, street culture also plays its part, by dismissing the relevance of education – school is not 'cool', and by equating success with obvious symbols of wealth – gold chains, fast cars, designer label clothes, and expensive liquor, the archetypal trappings of a 'gangsta' lifestyle.

Comparing the views and experiences of students who had benefitted from school interventions and those of the young men who had received no support, our findings suggest that, by adopting an inclusive rather than exclusive policy, schools can help students cope with frustration and anger, motivate them to achieve their potential, help them gain qualifications that improve their chances in the job market, provide them with alternative role models and give them aspirations beyond a flashy lifestyle. Perhaps, most important of all, schools can buy time, retaining vulnerable young men within the educational system, keeping their options open until they have a chance to mature, rather than leaving them to the uncertainty of 'the street'.

# **School meets street: exploring the links between low achievement, school exclusion and crime among African-Caribbean boys in London**

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**Keywords:** low achievement, school exclusion, youth crime, gangs, school interventions

**JEL classification:**

**Abstract:** This paper explores the *process* that links low achievement, school exclusion and involvement in crime among African-Caribbean boys and young men. Based on qualitative interviews with pupils and teachers at a pioneering secondary school in London and also with African-Caribbean young men who had dropped out of or been excluded from other schools in the area, we identify key aspects of 'trouble at school' and ways in which this can lead to 'trouble on the street'. When students experience academic or behavioural problems they may drop out of or be formally excluded from school. Although schools are responsible for arranging alternative provision, in practice, once out of mainstream education, students are unlikely to gain academic qualifications and the problem of low achievement is exacerbated. They are then at a disadvantage in the job market, and their perceived lack of legitimate opportunities for making money may lead them to engage in crime. A complex interplay of factors appears to influence this low achievement – school exclusion – crime sequence, including the young person's family background, their neighbourhood, and the culture in which they are embedded. According to the students who took part in school interventions the main benefits of participation were seen as: being part of a community of support; improved motivation; higher academic achievement; the ability to express emotions constructively; and a greater sense of responsibility and self-worth. Our research suggests that by adopting an inclusive rather than exclusive policy, schools can buy time, retaining vulnerable young men within the educational system, keeping their options open until they have a chance to mature, rather than leaving them to the uncertainty of 'the street'.

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# 1. Background and Aims

*School? School just didn't appeal to me. Let me break it down for you as simply as I can. That cat with the Porsche was my fucking education. How many people in my ends make it through school? Fuck all is how many. All I saw was guys with their cars, their clothes... that ain't gonna come out of exam grades. Least, that wasn't how I saw it. (Heale, 2009: 50)*

In this paper we explore the 'problem' identified in the literature of African-Caribbean boys and young men suffering disproportionately from low academic performance, exclusion from school, and involvement in crime. Concern about the link between school exclusion and crime began to be voiced in the 1990s when it became clear that only 15% of those permanently excluded returned to mainstream education, many excludees went on to commit crimes, and a high percentage of the UK prison population had experienced exclusion from school at some point in their educational career (Charlton, Panteng and Wills, 2004). The Audit Commission report *Misspent Youth*, published in 1996, showed that three quarters of those excluded from school offended, compared with a third of those not excluded. Parkes (2012) provides a contemporary critique, flagging up the high percentage of black and mixed race young people who had experienced school exclusion and who had special educational needs among those arrested for taking part in the UK riots of 2011.

*The interim report into the riots which took place in various UK urban centres in August 2011, by a committee chaired by Darra Singh, referred to Ministry of Justice statistics on those who were brought before the courts. This revealed that 46% were black (including mixed race), 42% were white, 7% Asian, and 5% of "other" ethnicity. 26% of those who appeared before the courts were aged between 10 and 17 years of age. Of this age group, one third had been excluded from school for at least one fixed term period in the year 2009/2010, a percentage six times higher than the national average. Two thirds of this group had SEN, which is three times higher than for the population as a whole. (Parkes, 2012: 12).*

Before setting out the aims of the research reported here and presenting our main findings, we give an overview of current government figures for low achievement, school exclusion and youth crime, discuss the relevance of youth gangs, review alternative theoretical perspectives and discuss a range of proposed interventions for addressing the problem.

## 1.1 Low achievement, school exclusion and youth crime

### Low achievement

Taking GCSE results<sup>1</sup> as a general gauge of academic attainment, the Department for Education figures for GCSE passes in England for 2010-2011 show 41.7% of young people did not achieve the five A\* - C grades (or equivalent), including English and mathematics, that are often taken as an indicator of academic achievement (DfE

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<sup>1</sup> GCSEs are General Certificates of Secondary Education, generally taken in a number of different subjects and awarded at the age of 16, at the end of compulsory education. GCSEs affect students' later educational choices and employment opportunities.

2012). However, pass rates varied considerably according to students' learning difficulties, and by economic deprivation, ethnicity and gender.

### *Learning difficulties*

As might well be expected, the DfE figures show that those with learning difficulties are more likely to experience low academic achievement compared with the school population as a whole, but the extent of the disparity is striking. Among pupils with special educational needs (SEN) – with or without statements – 77.9% did not achieve five or more A\* - C grades including English and mathematics, compared to 30.5% of those without any identified SEN, a gap of 47.4 percentage points. Moreover, 91.8% of pupils *with an SEN statement* did not attain these grades<sup>2</sup>.

### *Economic deprivation, ethnicity and gender*

In the case of deprivation, using eligibility for free school meals as an indicator, the figures show that 65.4% of pupils entitled to free school meals failed to gain five or more A\* - C grades including English and mathematics, with a corresponding figure of 38% for all other pupils, a percentage point gap of 27.4. According to the DfE classification of ethnicity, 42% of pupils from any white background did not attain five or more A\* - C grades including English and mathematics, roughly in line with the national average, whereas 51.4% of Black Caribbean and 50.9% of White and Black Caribbean (mixed race) pupils failed to gain these passes. If we look at the results by ethnicity and gender, the discrepancy is more pronounced with 57.7% of Black Caribbean and 55.5% of White and Black Caribbean boys not attaining the five or more A\* - C grades, whereas the corresponding figures for girls from these backgrounds are 41.2% and 46.7%. However, taking ethnicity, gender and economic deprivation into account, we see that Black Caribbean and White and Black Caribbean boys eligible for free school meals are particularly vulnerable to underachievement, with more than two thirds not gaining five A\* - C passes including English and mathematics.

### **School exclusion**

Under the Education Act 2002 and the Education and Inspections Act 2006, a school may permanently exclude a pupil if he or she has seriously broken school behaviour policy and / or when allowing the pupil to remain would seriously harm the welfare of others in the school. However, the Local Authority must provide alternative education from the sixth day of the exclusion. With fixed term exclusions, pupils may not be barred from school for more than a total of forty-five days within any single school year and, again, the educational authority is obliged to make alternative provision if the fixed period exceeds five days (Parkes, 2012).

Recent figures for school exclusions, released by the Department for Education, relate to the academic year 2011-2012. (DfE, 2013). Across both primary and secondary schools in England, 5170 pupils were permanently excluded from school, representing 0.07% of the school population, and 162,400 pupils accounted for 304,370 fixed period exclusions, at 2.16%. Overall exclusion rates at primary school are relatively small and account for less than 15% of all cases, with most exclusions occurring at age 13 to 14, when pupils are in year 9 or 10. For example, of all permanent exclusions, 52% occurred at this stage in the school career.

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<sup>2</sup> Pupils with an SEN statement are those whose needs have been identified as requiring additional support over and above what a school can provide from within its main resources

**Figure 1: Reasons for exclusions in state-funded secondary schools 2011/12, adapted from DfE (2013)**

Exclusion reason	State-funded secondary schools: permanent exclusions		State-funded secondary schools: fixed period exclusions	
	No. of permanent exclusions	% of permanent exclusions	No. of fixed period exclusions	% of fixed period exclusions
Bullying	30	0.8	3,820	1.5
Damage to school or property of school community	70	1.6	5,020	2.0
Drug and alcohol related	330	7.5	7,360	2.9
Persistent disruptive behaviour	1,460	33.2	60,720	24.1
Physical assault against an adult	320	7.2	5,060	2.0
Physical assault against a pupil	730	16.7	46,710	18.5
Racist abuse	30	0.8	3,590	1.4
Sexual misconduct	70	1.5	2,440	1.0
Theft	50	1.1	4,990	2.0
Verbal abuse / threatening behaviour against an adult	410	9.3	54,150	21.5
Verbal abuse / threatening behaviour against a pupil	210	4.7	10,020	4.0
Other	700	15.9	48,350	19.2
Total	4,390	100.00	252,210	100.00

**Figure 2: Reasons for exclusion, adapted from the DfE (2013)**

Exclusion reason	Description
Bullying	Verbal, physical, homophobic
Damage to school or property of school community	Arson, graffiti, vandalism
Drug and alcohol related	Alcohol abuse, drug dealing, inappropriate use of prescribed drugs, possession of illegal drugs, smoking, substance abuse
Persistent disruptive behaviour	Challenging behaviour, disobedience, persistent violation of school rules
Physical assault against an adult	Obstruction and jostling, violent behaviour, wounding
Physical assault against a pupil	Fighting, obstruction and jostling, violent behaviour, wounding
Racist abuse	Derogatory racist statements, racist bullying, racist graffiti, racist taunting and harassment, swearing that can be attributed to racist characteristics
Sexual misconduct	Lewd behaviour, sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual bullying, sexual graffiti, sexual harassment
Theft	Selling and dealing in stolen property, stealing from local shops on a school outing, stealing personal property (from adult or pupil), stealing school property
Verbal abuse / threatening behaviour against an adult	Aggressive behaviour, carrying an offensive weapon, homophobic abuse and harassment, swearing, threatened violence, verbal intimidation
Verbal abuse / threatening behaviour against a pupil	Aggressive behaviour, carrying an offensive weapon, homophobic abuse and harassment, swearing, threatened violence, verbal intimidation

Many different reasons for expulsion are given by schools, and Figure 1 shows the breakdown for permanent and fixed period exclusions from secondary school. For both types of exclusion, persistent disruptive behaviour is the most commonly given reason, accounting for a 33.2% of permanent and 24.1% of fixed period exclusions. For permanent exclusions, the second major reason is physical assault against a pupil, whereas for fixed period exclusions both verbal abuse against an adult and physical assault against a pupil are frequently cited. However, the large number of reasons allocated to 'other' means that we have no information about the kind of incidents that triggered 15.9% of permanent exclusions and 19.2% of fixed period exclusions. In addition to this, the description of reasons provided by DfE (see Figure 2) shows considerable overlap between categories, and several 'reasons' could be considered aspects of a wider class of behavioural problems. Again we explore variations by learning difficulties, economic deprivation, ethnicity and gender

### *Learning difficulties*

Pupils with special educational needs are not only more likely to experience low academic achievement, they are also more likely to be excluded from school. For example, those without an SEN statement are eleven times more likely to be permanently excluded from mainstream schools and five times more likely to receive a fixed period exclusion than those without special educational needs. Statemented pupils are eight times more likely to be permanently excluded and six times more likely to receive a fixed period exclusion. This pattern is not new; see for example an analysis of the 2009 – 2010 DfE figures (Parkes, 2012).

### *Economic deprivation, ethnicity and gender*

The latest DfE figures show that pupils eligible for free school meals are four times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion than those not eligible. In the case of fixed period exclusion the rate for pupils eligible for free school meals is around three times higher than the rate for those not eligible. In the case of gender differences, three times more boys than girls were permanently excluded from school: 3990 as compared with 1180. As a percentage of the school population these figures represent 0.12% for boys and 0.04% for girls. Similar figures apply to fixed term exclusions, with 120,210 boys and 43,200 girls receiving one or more exclusion.

Turning to ethnicity, although the majority of pupils excluded were white, when we look at the rate of permanent exclusion in relation to percentage of the school population, we discover – again using the DfE classification of ethnicity – that Black Caribbean, and White and Black Caribbean pupils are three times more likely to be excluded than the population as a whole. Boys from these communities are five times more likely to be excluded, a rate of 0.38%. Of course, the ethnic distribution of pupils throughout England varies a great deal and the rate of exclusion in some Local Authority areas can reach as high as 0.45% and even 0.70%, though the actual number of exclusions in the latter case is relatively small. In terms of fixed period exclusions, more than twice as many of these expulsions are given to Black Caribbean and White and Black Caribbean boys than to pupils from white backgrounds. The exception to this are pupils from traveller, gypsy and Roma backgrounds, classified as 'white' in the DfE statistics, who have the highest rate of both types of exclusion, though the overall numbers are small.

Of course, the underachievement of African-Caribbean boys at secondary school has been recognised for many years and was highlighted as particularly problematic a decade ago. For example, in 2003, the percentage of African-Caribbean boys

gaining no GCSE passes at all was 8.5% compared to 6.4% for White British boys (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). In London, 70% of African-Caribbean boys left school with fewer than 5 A-C grades at GCSE (Education Commission, 2004). But it is, perhaps, the changes that take place between Key Stage 2 (at the end of primary school) and Key Stage 4 (GCSE) that have been flagged up as causing particular concern when the descent into lower achievement is especially marked for African-Caribbean boys.

## **Young people and crime**

Ascertaining an accurate overall level of offending is difficult as there is always a discrepancy between official crime statistics and the volume of crime identified in self-report studies. For example, the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2013, in which a representative sample of approximately 50,000 people over the age of 16 report crime against households, estimates 8.6 million offences in England and Wales for the year ending March 2013, whereas the number of offences recorded by the police was 3.7 million. (ONS, 2013). In each case, however, the figures show an overall decrease in crime levels compared to the early 2000s.

In terms of youth crime, constructing an accurate picture of trends is especially tricky due to a lack of long term self-report studies and changes in legislation that affect the number of young people entering the criminal justice system (Halsey and White, 2008). Some self-report studies show that between 25% and 27% of young people admit to having committed an offence (Wilson et al, 2006). Official statistics released in 2013, indicate that of 1,360,451 arrests made in 2010/11, 201,660 were of people aged 10-17. This represents 15.5% of all arrests whereas people in this age group made up only 10.7% of the population of England and Wales. (Youth Justice Board / Ministry of Justice Statistics Bulletin, 2013). However, of those sentenced rather than just arrested, people aged 10-17 represented only 5% of all cases in 2010/11. Despite this, public perceptions are that most crime, especially violent crime, is committed by young people. Halsey and White (2008) argue that public misperceptions are fuelled by media reports that focus on sensational offences even though these do not make up the majority of youth court hearings.

## *Gender and ethnicity*

According to published crime figures, an overwhelming majority of youth crime is committed by boys and young men. For example, 82% of proven offences are by males and 94% of those aged 10 - 17 held in custody are male (Youth Justice Board / Ministry of Justice Statistics Bulletin, 2013). In terms of ethnicity, there is no question that black people, especially black men, are overrepresented in crime statistics as a whole. For example, in 2009, black people made up 2.7% of the population of England and Wales yet they were the subject of 14.8% of police stop and search incidents, 8% of arrests and comprised 13.7% of the prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2009 / 10 – quoted in Wikipedia posting). Offender Management Statistics indicate that 14.5% of the prison population under 25 was black in 2010. In 2009-2010, 54% of males accused of street crimes (including mugging, assault with intent to rob and snatching property) were black. The figures for robbery and gun crimes were 59% and 67% respectively. (Sunday Telegraph, July 2010). An analysis of over one million court records showed that black offenders were 44% more likely to be given a prison sentence for driving offences, 38% more likely for public order offences and 27% more likely than for possession of drugs than white (Stopwatch,



2012). Of those with proven offences who were referred to Youth Offending Teams for support and supervision in 2011/12, 80% were white, 8% were black, 4% were Asian and 5% were mixed race. However, of those held in custody, 62% were white and 16% were black. (Youth Justice Board/Ministry of Justice Statistics Bulletin, 2013)

## **1.2 The 'problem' of gangs**

A particular concern among some authors is the role of gangs in youth crime, and the impact of membership on criminal behaviour. Pitts (2008) argues that, despite an overall decline in adult and youth crime, street life has changed and life has become more dangerous for children and young people because of violent youth gangs.

*Whereas in 2003, young people under 20 constituted 16% of all 'black-on-black' street gun crime, investigated by Operation Trident, by 2006 this had risen to 31%..... In London in 2007, 28 young people under the age of 20 were killed in 'gang-related' murders. Moreover, between April and November 1237 young people were injured in gun and knife attacks. (Pitts, 2008: 4)*

An alternative view holds that gangs are neither new nor proliferating and that youth crime and disorder are '*persistent, if somewhat intermittent features of the social landscape*' (Pearson, 2011:20). For example, in the late Victorian era there were hooligans and pistol gangs in London, 'scuttlers' in Manchester and Salford, 'peaky blinders' in Birmingham and the 'high rip' gangs in Liverpool (Davies, 2011). Gangs are part of historically embedded street violence and the idea of 'Gangland Britain' is a product of sensational media reporting (Hallsworth, 2011).

### **The scale of the problem**

Whichever position one adopts there is no doubt that estimating the size of the 'gang problem' and determining whether or not it is becoming more serious, is fraught with difficulty. In the first place there is the question of what constitutes a gang. Many authors adopt the following Eurogang definition

*A street gang (or problematic youth group) is any durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity (Van Gemert, Lien and Peterson, 2008: 3)*

However, not all youth groups described as gangs fit this definition and many different types of gang or problematic youth group have been identified. For example, Klein, (2001) developed a five-point typology of gangs, including:

the traditional gang (large with wide age range and sub groups, long standing, with claims to a territory)

the neo-traditional gang (large with narrower age range but sub groups, shorter period of existence, with claims to a territory)

the compressed gang (smaller – fewer than 50 members, no sub groups, in existence for only a few years)

the collective gang (similar to the compressed gang but bigger with a wider age range but no subgroups – a shapeless mass)

the speciality gang (smaller – fewer than 50 members, narrow age range, in existence for less than ten years, with a focus on crime rather than sociability; its territory is either residential or based on opportunities for crime)

Because of the problem of definition, it is difficult to estimate gang membership accurately. Self-reports of gang membership use different definitions, or allow respondents to use their own, making comparisons difficult. Hallsworth and Young (2008) argue that there is no convincing evidence that gangs are proliferating.

*Whatever the definition used, however, what these surveys on membership show is that while gangs exist, they are relatively rare. A recent Home Office funded survey examining the extent of gang membership among young people in England and Wales (Sharp et al., 2006) estimated that no more than 6 per cent of the total sampled (5331) could be classified as 'delinquent youth groups.' The Communities that Care self-report survey of 11,400 young people aged 11–15 living in six gang hotspot areas in London found that about 4 per cent of the sample were gang members. .... of the 2725 people surveyed as part of the New English & Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Programme (NEW-ADAM) examined by Bennett and Holloway, 15 per cent of arrestees had experience of gang life. Of this figure, however, only 4 per cent claimed to be current members of a gang (Bennett and Holloway, 2004). Leaving aside the methodological implications of using different definitions, the results of this empirical trawl suggest that gang membership in the UK is no more than 3–7 per cent of the youthful population. (Hallsworth and Young, 2008: 178)*

## Gangs and crime

Evidence for the link between gang membership and crime is not clear cut. For example, Bennett and Holloway (2004) claim that a low percentage of arrestees are gang members but that the profile of offences is different, with more robbery, theft and carrying of weapons among gang members. Gordon et al (2004) suggest that boys who join gangs are already more delinquent than non joiners before joining, but drug use, selling drugs and violence increase after joining. Klein and Maxson (2006) cite three different models in the literature: *selection* (high offenders are attracted to gangs); *social facilitation* (being part of a gang elevates criminal behaviour); and *enhancement* (a combination of the selection and facilitation models).

The idea that gang membership is linked to *organised* or *violent* crime has been challenged. For example, Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) maintain that there is no single gun culture, life on the road is chaotic rather than organised and that 'repping your ends' is about showing off wealth from robbery and impressing girls. Young men exaggerate their behaviour as a deterrent, for their own protection (Howell, 2007) and talk up their lives as more dangerous and exciting than they actually are.

*Everyday life can be mundane and dull. To avoid boredom, young people circumvent it by reconstructing their street worlds in dramatic ways: to be in a world that is rich in excitement and danger. They talk big, they dress hard and walk the gangster walk. Mundane estates become sovereign territories that must be protected and defended. Visits to other neighbourhoods become incursions into strange dangerous space. But, and this is the point, this imaginary reconstruction does not entail that the problem derives from the fact that young people congregate collectively. It remains a creative adaptation to the mundane reality of street life (Hallsworth and Young, 2008 :12)*

These authors are not denying the existence or seriousness of youth crime, but calling for a more measured assessment.

*This of course does not mean that the reality does not involve acts of vandalism, graffiti and violence - individual and collective. But again it is important to keep a sense of proportion. Fights occur because conflict is inevitable in street life given the cleavages and compressions that characterise it. (Hallsworth and Young, 2008:12)*

### **1.3 Accounting for patterns: some alternative theoretical positions**

#### **The 'risk factor' approach**

In addition to literacy problems or learning difficulties, economic deprivation, gender, and coming from an African-Caribbean background, a number of other factors have been associated with underachievement, school exclusion and youth crime. For example, in the case of under achievement, early childhood aggression has been identified as a risk factor (Totten and Quigley, 2003 ), as well as living in a lone parent family, low teacher expectations and the under-performance of the school itself (Buchmann et al, 2008; Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Christle, Jolivet and Nelson, 2005). Higher than average school exclusion rates have been linked to behavioural problems, lone parent families, families with low parental supervision and low parental involvement in school (McAry, 2004).

Many different risk factors have also been identified in the literature as positively correlated with youth crime. O'Mahony (2009), for example, gives a fairly comprehensive list:

- neighbourhood and community factors (social disorganisation; high geographical mobility; high proportions of social or rented housing, lone parents, and young people)
- socio-economic deprivation (low income; unemployed parents; poor housing; lone parents)
- family background and parenting (poor skills; erratic discipline; lack of supervision; parental conflict; large family size; family breakdown; alcoholism; criminal behaviour among other family members)
- individual factors (hyperactive and impulsive tendencies; aggression; low IQ; low self-esteem; mental or physical health problems)
- academic / school factors (low performance in primary school; disruptive behaviour; lack of concentration; poor attendance; lack of discipline in school; early school leaving (exclusion or drop out))

Finally, risk factors for gang membership appear to be very similar to those identified for youth crime. Regan (2010) lists lack of male role models, violent backgrounds, anger and frustration, limited aspirations and trouble at school. Klein and Maxson (2006) cite evidence from several studies which claim a link between gang membership and delinquent peers, behaviour problems such as anger and aggression; experience of negative life events; lack of parental supervision; the view that delinquent behaviour is not serious; and living in a deprived neighbourhood.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that a number of risk factors have been repeatedly identified as statistically related to all three outcomes: low achievement, school exclusion and crime. As figure 3 shows, these aggression and anger, learning

difficulties, low teacher expectations, family background, economic deprivation, ethnicity and gender. Some authors also point to the way in which factors may be interlinked, for example, Law and Sivyer (2003) argue that pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, which make them vulnerable to school exclusion, tend to have *literacy and communication problems as well*.

**Figure 3: Risk factors associated with low achievement, school exclusion and crime**

Risk factors for low achievement	Risk factors for school exclusion	Risk factors for youth crime	Risk factors for gang membership
Childhood aggression	Behavioural problems	Hyperactive, impulsive tendencies / aggression Mental or physical health problems, low self-esteem	Anger, aggression, frustration
Learning difficulties	Learning difficulties	Low performance at school, low IQ	Low IQ
Low teacher expectations		Poor attendance Early leaving / exclusion	
Lone parent family	Lone parent family Low levels of parental supervision	Family background (large family size, parental conflict, family break-down, erratic discipline, low parental discipline)	Lack of male role models
Economic deprivation	Economic deprivation	Neighbourhood factors (eg high geographical mobility / high levels of social or rented housing)	Economic deprivation / marginalisation
Black ethnicity	Black ethnicity	Black ethnicity	Racial exclusion
Gender (male)	Gender (male)	Gender (male)	Gender (male)

### Risk factor critiques

However, several writers are critical of studies that adopt a risk factor approach. O'Mahony (2009), for example, argues that correlates are sometimes confused with causes, and certain variables, such as problem behaviours, are outcomes as well as risk factors. The process or mechanism behind the risk is not well understood. Take the case of large family size which, alone, cannot account for delinquency – is it an issue of lack of parental supervision or lack of material resources? Risk factors are not deterministic causes and may be 'cancelled out': Christle, Jolivette and Nelson

(2005) found that, although low achievement is linked to poverty, it is still possible for schools in deprived areas to perform well. In their own study, high-achieving schools in poor neighbourhoods differed from low-achieving ones in their low exclusion rates, low drop out rates, high teacher expectations of pupils, and a high level of family involvement in the school.

Case and Haines (2008) also criticise risk factor research for assuming that statistical correlations represent causal relationships. They go on to argue that this kind of research is reductionist, over-simplifying complex circumstances and experiences, focusing on psycho-social factors at the expense of socio-structural and political influences, as well as deterministic, treating young people as passive victims of risk rather than able to make choices. Others also censure the micro-level of analysis, but in this case their objections are aimed at

*a subtext that causation lies in the deficiencies and deviance of the individual child..... A survey of the literature, however, suggests a complex interplay between social institutions and individuals. A unit of analysis is required that transcends levels of micro- and macro-analysis. (Sellman et al, 2002: 891)*

Perhaps one of the most outspoken critics of risk factor research is Jock Young.

*Its actors inhabit a world where they are driven to crime by social or psychological deficits, or make opportunistic choices in the criminal marketplace. They are either miserable or mundane. They are, furthermore, digital creatures of quantity, they obey probabilistic laws of deviancy – they can be represented by the statistical symbolism of lambda, chi, and sigma, their behaviour can be captured by the intricacies of regression analysis and equation. (Young, 2004: 13)*

## **Understanding complex socio-cultural processes**

Rather than focusing on risk factors, some researchers attempt to explain patterns of low achievement, school exclusion and crime – particularly the overrepresentation of African-Caribbean males – in terms of a range of *social, economic and cultural* processes. For example, low achievement and school exclusion have been attributed to an anti-educational culture among African-Caribbean boys, in which educational qualifications are perceived as not worth the effort in an unfair job market (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). Osler, Watling and Busher (2001) suggest that the overrepresentation of black pupils in exclusion statistics may be partly attributable to a cultural gap between white teachers and black pupils, whereby white teachers misinterpret the behaviour of black pupils who are more likely than their white counterparts to challenge teachers' judgements. The DfES Priority Review *Getting it. Getting it right* (2006) concluded that rather different profiles emerge for black and white pupils with the former more likely to be excluded for behaviour, whereas white pupils tend to be low achievers from low socio-economic backgrounds. The authors argued that the high rate of exclusion of black pupils might be attributable to negative stereotyping of their behaviour as threatening and to over-harsh disciplining of black pupils, suggesting that

*For black communities, exclusions are to education what stop and search is to criminal justice. (DfES 2006: 14)*

Negative stereotyping has also been put forward as a possible explanation for the 'apparent' high rate of offending in the black population. The argument suggests that the higher level is not 'real' but the outcome of a social construction of ethnicity, a

myth created by racist stereotypes and a product of discriminatory practices within the justice system (Gilroy, 1982; Hall et al, 2013).

Others explain patterns of youth crime in terms of a complex *interplay* of social, cultural and economic pressures. For example, Pitts (2008) maintains that gangs are proliferating because of economic deprivation, racial exclusion and cultural estrangement. In a similar vein, Van Gemert and Decker (2008) propose the theory of neighbourhood marginalization whereby the isolation of migrant groups – because of different ethnicity, language and culture – makes integration difficult. Lea and Young (1993) argue that a high level of criminal involvement among the black community is the result of relative deprivation, marginalisation, economic exclusion, a media focus on consumerism which makes material goals unattainable through legal means, and the development of deviant subcultures. Young (1999) further elaborates the impact of economic deprivation and the gentrification of neighbourhoods whereby the structurally unemployed are not only excluded from job prospects but they live only streets away from the affluent middle class. This economic exclusion together with a crisis in masculine identity leads to the development of a separate subculture which elevates toughness or hyper-masculinity.

When attempting to account for the *overall link* between low achievement, school exclusion and crime, some researchers have looked at academic failure and exclusionary school discipline as key *stages* in a process sometimes referred to as the 'school to prison pipeline' (Wald and Losen, 2003; Christle and Yell, 2008). Based on a meta analysis of literature in this field, Maguin and Loeber (1996) suggest that school exclusions perpetuate the failure cycle and are not effective in reducing behaviour problems. This position is also held by Duncan and McCrystal (2002), who claim that exclusion exacerbates the problem because pupils lose contact with the positive socialising aspect of school and they fall behind in their studies. The longer the period of exclusion, the harder it is for them to reintegrate. In this way low achievement, in the sense of learning difficulties, is a precursor to exclusion but also an outcome, and low achievement, in terms of a 'qualifications deficit', makes it harder for young people to gain employment and more likely that they will turn to crime.

## **1.4 Responses and proposed 'solutions'**

### **Focusing on youth crime**

One approach to the problem of low achievement, school exclusion and youth crime has been to focus on *crime* as the most serious social ill and to concentrate interventions on crime reduction. Because they believe that the proliferation of gangs lies at the heart of youth crime, some argue that initiatives should be directed at curbing gangs and reducing membership (Pitts, 2008). Different kinds of intervention have been attempted, depending on the perceived causes of gang formation: for example individual failings, such as bad parenting and a deficit in control, or structural conditions, such as economic disadvantage. Some interventions have involved gang suppression and a crackdown on known leaders, but this approach has been criticised as ineffective because it is based on the assumption that suppression sends a message of deterrence whereas gangs become more cohesive in the face of such clampdowns and new leaders emerge, replacing those that have been removed (Klein and Maxson, 2006; Densley, 2011). Other approaches have been based on prevention, working with 'at risk' young people in school, helping them develop life skills or strengthening their family relationships, with the aim of

lessening the appeal of gang membership. However, these approaches have also been criticised, in this case for taking too broad a definition of risk, and because there is no way of knowing whether or not the young people would have joined gangs without the intervention. A combined approach of prevention, deterrence and rehabilitation, with co-ordination between different agencies, has been suggested as the way forward (Densley, 2011).

Others suggest that targeting gangs is ill-advised. This view is based on assertions that most 'gangs' are youth groups with loose, short-lived friendship networks that rarely become organised (Ayling, 2011); that a loose amorphous structure with a high turnover is more common than the stereotype of a well organized criminal hierarchy of 'elders' and 'youngers' (Klein and Maxson, 2006); and even that the language of 'elders' and 'youngers' is part of the narrative constructed by hyper-masculine young men (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). These authors argue that it is important to distinguish between core and peripheral gang members, rather than targeting gangs per se or stigmatizing those on the periphery. Labelling neighbourhoods as gang areas can lead to restricted mobility and low aspirations among local young people who are not gang members, making their transition to adulthood more difficult (Ralphs, Medina and Aldridge, 2009). Identifying different youth cultures and distinguishing them from professional criminals and violent subgroups is the preferred approach, focusing on problem criminal behaviour, rather than 'gangs' (Bullock and Tilley, 2008; Hallsworth and Young, 2004).

### **An alternative approach: reducing low achievement and school exclusion**

A very different approach focuses on trying to break the link between low achievement, school exclusion and crime, by concentrating on the role of schools. Support for this approach comes from the work of Sabates (2008). Using Local Educational Authority statistics for three cohorts of pupils, Sabates showed that an increase in academic achievement was positively correlated with a reduction in conviction rates for crimes such as theft, burglary and vandalism, but not for violent crime, however.

In recent years, a number of schools have launched special initiatives to try and improve academic performance (thereby enhancing employment prospects), reduce exclusion, boost self confidence and offer alternative role models to those in evidence on the street. One such example is the Anderlecht initiative in Holland, which involved working in schools, with families and in the local community, and providing special programmes for excluded students. Case and Haines (2006) describe a Promoting Positive Behaviour initiative in Swansea that aimed to reduce school exclusion and involved mentoring by adult volunteers in the school and community, family conferencing, anger management, alternative school provision and life skills. Charlton, Panting and Willis (2004) outline another exclusion-reducing initiative in Gloucestershire that offered an alternative curriculum with more vocational qualifications, provided learning support workers and external work placements. More than a decade ago, an evaluation study by Hallam and Castle (2001) concluded that single-stranded initiatives were rarely successful – for example anger management or counselling alone, and that a multi-stranded approach involving parents as well as students and a strong commitment among all staff within the school was required.

## 1.4 Aims of our project

In our own study, we were keen to look at the link between low achievement, school exclusion and crime as a multifaceted process and to focus, in particular, on the role of schools. We were drawn to the approach of Bronfenbrenner (1989) on the interdependence of a variety of social contexts and their influence in shaping human lives, and to the reformulation of Bronfenbrenner's 'onion rings' by Cole (1996) who suggests that '*culture can be represented as a weaving together of layers of context*' (Sellman et al, 2002: 891). Similarly, the work of Kirk (2009) has been helpful in terms of the interdependence of neighbourhoods, schools and families in the process of social control and their influence on youth development, particularly delinquent behaviour outcomes.

Consequently, we set out to examine the relationship between low achievement, school exclusion and crime in more detail by exploring the *process* of 'getting into trouble' at school, and ways in which this might be linked to the *process* of 'getting into trouble' on the street. In particular, our project focused on experiences at secondary school, since it is between key stage 2 (the end of primary school) and key stage 4 (GCSEs) that a decline in achievement is most noticeable for certain groups of pupil. We also chose to concentrate on African-Caribbean boys and young men, since they suffer from low rates of academic achievement, higher levels of school exclusion, and an overrepresentation in crime statistics, as well as being potentially vulnerable to black youth culture with its emphasis on hyper-masculinity.

More specifically, the research set out to

- examine the process linking low achievement, school exclusion and engagement in crime as *perceived* by African-Caribbean boys and young men (both in and out of school) and by teachers
- explore the way in which these boys and young men encounter difficulties at school and how they deal with them
- investigate how difficulties at school can make them vulnerable to street culture and to engagement in crime
- identify ways in which they deal with the challenges of school and street
- evaluate the role of schools in helping students address these challenges

The study was supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, as part of the research programme at the Research Centre on Micro-Social Change at the University of Essex (award no. RES-518-28-001).



## 2. The Study

### 2.1 Research design

#### Overall research strategy

In order to understand more fully the *process* of getting into trouble at school and getting into trouble on the street we adopted an exploratory qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were chosen for this research in order to capture the boy's stories, perceptions and language and understand how they make sense of their experiences.

Linked to our qualitative approach we adopted a 'u-shaped' relationship to theory (Ormston, Spencer, Snape and Barnard, 2013). By this we mean that theory, in the sense of a body of knowledge, informed the framing of our research puzzle and aims, influenced the selection of our sample, and was implicitly reflected in the topics included in the interview guides. However, at the data generation stage, we followed up emergent leads not contained in the guide and captured additional contextual detail. At the early analysis stage we were careful to stay close to the data and examine these in full, rather than selectively focusing on theory-relevant material. Later in our analytic and reporting journey, however, we reviewed our findings in relation to key themes within the literature.

#### Project design and sample

A two-part design was adopted, allowing us to compare and contrast different ways of dealing with school and 'street'. The first part involved talking with African-Caribbean male pupils taking part in school initiatives to keep them engaged and motivated; the second part focused on African-Caribbean young men who had been excluded from or dropped out of school and were involved in a range of criminal activities.

##### *Part One: The School Study*

For the first part of the study, a North London school, which we will call Gaskell Academy, was identified and approached because of the initiatives and interventions being implemented, including

- **a transition scheme (from primary to secondary school)**
  - all year 7 students had some classes based on the primary school model (one teacher, a dedicated classroom) and other classes on a secondary school model (different teachers and different classrooms)
  - pupils identified as at risk of entry problems into secondary school (because of behaviour issues, literacy and numeracy problems) were initially placed in a special class to ease their transition, and then integrated into other year 7 classes after the first term
- **a mentoring scheme**
  - a group session was set up for bright year 10 and year 11 African-Caribbean boys at risk of underachieving at GCSE (because of a

- fear of failure, students sometimes put in little effort as a face-saving device)
  - a group session was organised for year 10 and 11 African-Caribbean boys whose disruptive behaviour might put them at risk of disciplinary action, including exclusion
- **a re-engagement scheme**
  - a special programme was developed for students excluded from other schools in the borough that was not part of the mainstream provision but specially tailored to help students achieve GCSE passes in 5 set subjects
- **a respite scheme**
  - a short programme was offered to students excluded from other schools, providing a breather in the hope that they could then be re-integrated into mainstream education
- **a learning support centre**
  - an ongoing service was set for more challenging students or those at risk of exclusion, whereby they spent part of their school day in the centre, continuing their education in a contained and carefully monitored environment

To ensure that African-Caribbean boys from a range of schemes were included, we devised an initial purposive sample, intending to interview 15 pupils twice. We also planned to interview teachers responsible for the schemes (see Figure 4). Parental consent for pupils to take part was required by the school and so consent forms were drawn up for eligible pupils, and their parents, and distributed by the school (an example of the information provided and the consent form are included in Appendix 1).

**Figure 4: Sample Design**

	<b>1<sup>st</sup> interview</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> interview</b>
Year 7	5	5
Year 10 / 11 Mentoring scheme	5	5
Year 10 / 11 RE-engagement scheme / respite	5	5
Support teachers and mentors	2-4	

In total, 23 pupils were recruited, but it was only possible to conduct second interviews with 3 mentoring scheme participants and 2 re-engagement participants, either because they had left the school and attempts to contact them failed or, in the case of one student, because he had been excluded on the day scheduled for the interview and subsequently arrested and detained in a youth offending institution. We decided not to conduct follow-up interviews with the transition scheme pupils because they were just at the beginning of their secondary school career and our interviews with year 10 and year 11 students suggested that problems began to arise

for them in their second or third rather than first year at school. Consequently, we changed the sample design and included interviews with 5 students in the Learning Support Centre, drawn from year 8 and 9. Overall, we carried out 32 interviews between May 2010 and April 2011. Figure 5 gives a breakdown between the different schemes.

**Figure 5: The School Interviews**

transition interviews with year 7 pupils	10
mentoring scheme interviews with year 10 and year 11 pupils	5
follow-up mentoring interviews	3
re-engagement interviews with year 10 and year 11 pupils	3
follow-up re-engagement interviews	2
respite interview with year 10 pupil	1
Learning Support Centre interviews with year 8 and 9 pupils	5
interviews with heads of mentoring, re-engagement and respite, and the Learning Support Centre	3

### *Part Two: The Community Study*

In the second part of the study we interviewed African-Caribbean boys and young men who were involved in a range of criminal activities and who had experienced difficulties at school. An initial strategy, working through youth offending teams, was considered but then rejected. Although this would have given us access to people engaged in risky activities, we were advised by teachers and community contacts that these young people would be very wary about taking part, or would treat the discussion as a 'police interview' and not speak candidly to the researchers. We were also concerned that by focussing on young people already in the youth offending system we might well exclude others operating beneath the radar. Consequently, we used snowball sampling to reach participants for the community study, recruiting them informally through 'Lance', an inmate of one of her majesty's prisons, who assured potential participants that it was safe and 'cool' to take part. Before his incarceration, we had hoped to include Lance as a consultant to the research team, but delays over ethics approval and CRB checks meant that the project started later than anticipated and, in the interim, he was arrested and convicted of attempted robbery.

In all, we were able to recruit 12 boys and young men. Participants were treated as capable of making their own choices and informed but oral consent was obtained from the young people themselves, but not from their parents (Wiles et al, 2005). An incentive of £30 in shop or mobile top-up vouchers was offered and was a big factor in encouraging people to take part. Figure 6 gives a profile of the sample, giving their age and circumstances.

**Figure 6: The community Interviews**

Age	Circumstances	
14	Officially back at school after fixed period exclusion(s), but 'bunking off' several days each week	2
16 - 21	Permanently excluded from school in year 10 or 11 (aged 14 or 15), now unemployed	6
16 - 21	Dropped out of school at 15 after fixed period exclusions, now unemployed	4

## **2.2 Data generation**

Interview guides were developed in consultation with teachers at the school and explored the following topics. Copies of all the guides can be found in Appendix 2.

### *Student interviews*

- interests and activities outside school
- likes and dislikes about school life
- moving from primary to secondary school
- difficulties or 'trouble' at school (including exclusion)
- experience of the scheme and whether or not it was helpful
- balancing demands of school work and leisure time
- future plans

### *Staff interviews*

- own background
- their post and responsibilities
- pressures faced by students
- how the school can help
- details of the scheme and its purpose

### *Community interviews*

- home life
- neighbourhood
- school history and current status
- likes and dislikes about school life
- difficulties or 'trouble' at school (including exclusion)
- out of school interests and activities
- description of 'your people'
- involvement in criminal behaviour

Because the student interviews were conducted during the school day, we were constrained by the school timetable and by the time it took for students to come across the campus to the interview room and be able to return in time for their next class. Consequently, student interviews had to be limited to approximately 45 minutes. However, we are extremely grateful to staff and students for giving their time and agreeing to take part in the study.

The young people in the community study were interviewed at an arts centre but participants did not always come at the agreed time and had to be contacted on their mobile phones and sometimes collected and ferried to the venue by car. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the willingness and concentration of the interviewee. Some were not very forthcoming and it took considerable skill and patience to cover the guide. A contact person, known to Lance, was present, in addition to the researcher, in order to reassure participants about confidentiality.

All interviews from both parts of the study were recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

## ***2.3 Analysis and reporting***

Thematic analysis was carried out on all the interviews, following the Braun and Clark (2006) argument that thematic analysis is an approach in its own right, not just a generic 'coding' process. Our version of this approach involves a data management exercise, followed by a more reflective abstraction and interpretation phase. During the data management stage, an initial set of themes and subthemes was identified and developed into a thematic framework for indexing the data, using MaxQda. A copy of the thematic framework is included in Appendix 3. Once the data had been labelled, they were sorted by theme and then summarised and entered into thematic charts or matrices, using Framework, a data management tool developed by Jane Ritchie and Liz Spencer at the National Centre for Social Research (Spencer et al, 2013). At the abstraction and interpretation stage, the data for each sub-theme were reviewed and descriptive categories developed, identifying the range of views, experiences and behaviours described by the participants. Patterns of linkage were also identified.

This report constitutes a full account of the views and experiences of those interviewed. Numerous lengthy quotes have been included in a deliberate attempt to convey the way young people talk about life at school and on the street, and to give voice to their stories. None of the names used are those of the individuals who took part in the study but have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

The findings have been organised around a number of themes and arranged in three key sections: 'trouble' at school; what school can do; and dealing with the street. References to the literature have been discussed in the opening section on background and aims, and are referred to again in the conclusions, but are not included in the three findings sections in order not to detract from the young men's accounts. This document is designed to provide an overall resource but further, briefer publications are in progress, focusing on school and street separately, and a more strategic paper is planned, teasing out the policy implications of this research.

### **3. 'Trouble' at school**

In the first of three sections setting out our main findings, we describe a range of different perceptions and experiences of secondary school. It is important to note, however, that all the students interviewed as part of this study had difficulties of one sort or another at school, including literacy or numeracy problems, behaviour issues, or underachievement, sometimes through lack of effort, and this was why they were selected to take part. Those still in school had been identified as needing additional support, hence their involvement in one of the school interventions. Those interviewed as part of the community study, however, had not been offered any sustained assistance to deal with their problems. We compare and contrast their different accounts of school life and, in the following section, discuss the value of timely intervention.

Despite their problems, however, it is important to stress that students described many aspects of their school experience as positive and enjoyable. The social side and the pleasure of friendship were mentioned as very important. Indeed, as will become evident when we discuss students' experiences of exclusion, contact with friends was something sorely missed when not at school. Gaskell Academy pupils appreciated the dedication and expertise of some of their teachers, the range of extra-curricular activities available, and the after school youth club. Some of these students also valued the way pupils were given responsibilities and were able to contribute to the school community, for example the student voice system, being a prefect, the opportunity of being a mentor to younger pupils, and helping with the youth club. In contrast, the community interviewees were much more ambivalent about school and some even confessed to having 'hated' it. Reasons for their disaffection are discussed below.

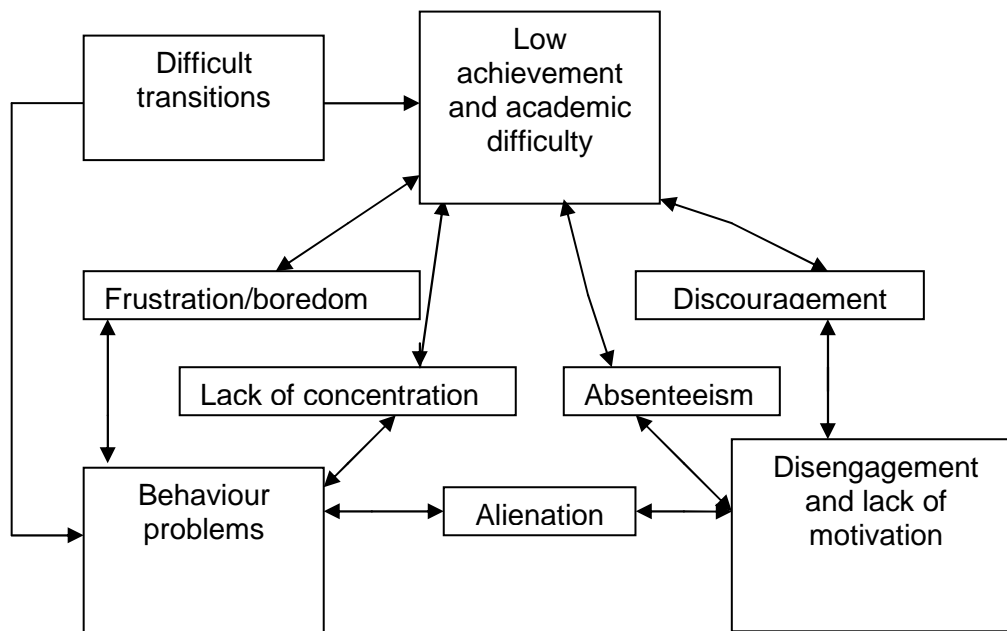
The kinds of trouble students experienced are discussed under four main headings: difficult transitions, low achievement, behaviour problems and disengagement or lack of motivation. However, in the accounts described below, it seems that there was often an interaction between these different issues, as Figure 7 shows. For example, difficult transitions were linked to both academic difficulties and to behaviour problems; academic difficulties and behaviour problems were linked because students were frustrated or could not concentrate, and these in turn were linked to disengagement because students felt discouraged or alienated. Disengagement meant students were tempted to bunk off and could then fall even further behind with their studies.

#### ***3.1 Making transitions***

##### **From primary to secondary school**

Some of the difficulties students experienced were linked to the transitions they had to make at certain stages in their career, one such transition being the move from primary to secondary school. The year 7 pupils interviewed as part of this study had, with one exception, enjoyed primary school and felt sad about leaving, especially if most of their friends had gone to different secondary schools. They were nostalgic for familiar aspects of primary school life

**Figure 7: Trouble at school**



*when I was in primary school I wanted to come to secondary school so bad but now I miss it, so I want to go back ..... I miss everything. I miss my teachers, my staff. I miss the playground the most because the football pitch, it was nice and comfortable when I played football. Whenever I played football on that pitch I always played my best. (Carl, year 7, in special transition class)*

Although some had been excited about moving up, the main feeling was one of apprehension. A particular concern was that they might be bullied by older students but when they had a relative higher up the school they found that this offered them some protection. For example, one pupil reported that a cousin took care of him when he was threatened for money at the school youth club.

The regime at secondary school was seen as much stricter and pupils complained that it was easy to get in trouble. What might have been passed over with an informal ticking off at primary school could lead to more serious trouble at secondary school, with different levels of formal warning

*Level 1 is like talking and being silly. Level 2 is like bigger and like picking on somebody or yelling out or shouting out or something like that. And level 3 is being racist or anything like that or fighting or spitting on somebody or bullying anybody, that's Level 3.....They're kind of fair but some of them you get in trouble way too easily basically, like when you're doing a lesson, like you don't understand what do to and, if you talk to your friend which, if the teacher doesn't say you're able to talk to your friend, you can get in trouble, just for asking for help. (Jacob, year 7, in special transition class)*

Finding their way around a much larger campus was confusing at first, and several year 7 pupils had got lost and been given detentions for being late, a punishment they viewed as unnecessarily harsh.

Organising homework was also seen as more difficult. At primary school, work often had to be submitted the following day, which meant that pupils knew they had to complete it the evening it was set. At secondary school it might be a week or two before the work was due and this meant that there was a danger of it being forgotten and then rushed at the last minute. If they got behind with their homework, pupils sometimes then struggled to cope with their workload or with particular subjects.

For some of those who were excluded or who dropped out of the education system – the community interviewees – primary school was seen as representing an era of innocence, before they ran into difficulties later in their school career

*I'll say in primary school I was good as gold, good as gold in primary school. Like I used to sing and that. I used to love singing. I used to love playing my trumpet and I had things going for me, you know what I mean? I had a lot of talent that I didn't even know that I had ... I was in the choir, I went to the Albert Hall to go sing and that. Even with my trumpet I used to go round, do little shows and that. And then when I hit secondary school, I don't know, don't know, there was no more playing trumpet, no more singing. (Aldane, aged 17, permanently excluded in year 10, unemployed)*

## **Moving into the sixth form**

Another tricky transition, identified by mentoring students in their follow-up interviews, was from year 11 into the sixth form. With fewer scheduled classes and many more free periods, they were sometimes bored and found it difficult to stay motivated. They had to be much more disciplined than before about working on their own. Alvin, a year 11 member of a mentoring group, described how easy it was to fall behind.

*You see that, it's adjusting to the transition, nobody really was expecting such a dramatic change. I mean we was told it was a big jump, a huge jump then you come into it and at the start you don't really realise it. But before you know it you're far behind and you realise that you could have been on top of everything. Then you look back at all the free lessons you had and what you spent doing in them – standing outside, talking to friends, yeah, socialising..... And then you actually put in some work on your free time and you see you're on top. ... So basically the moment you slack off you're behind, that's how it works. And the moment you stop paying attention in class you're behind. It's literally slide off the slide, recover something, bam! you miss it, you've missed it, that's it. .... But I always say take the positive out of something, so obviously it's been a wake-up call.*

## **3.2 Low achievement and academic difficulties**

### **Struggling with certain subjects**

Whether or not students were interested in or enjoyed subjects was hugely important aspect of their school experience. Certain subjects seemed particularly popular, often practical ones such as drama, PE, IT and DT, but more academic subjects were also mentioned. A key component of their enjoyment of a subject was that students felt



they were 'good at it' and had a sense of achievement. Even the young men who had dropped out of school or had been excluded mentioned certain subjects that they liked and were good at.

However, a common theme among those interviewed was that of struggling with certain subjects, such as maths, science and English. Sometimes they could not understand what was being covered in a particular lesson, other times it was the subject itself that they found very difficult.

## **The teachers' response**

When students encountered difficulties the response of teachers was considered extremely important and our interviewees reported very different experiences. On the positive side, Gaskell Academy pupils recounted occasions when teachers had taken great care to explain things clearly and tried to ensure that anyone who was falling behind received extra help. For example, Javel, in year 11, and a member of the 'bright boys' mentoring group, described the important role played by his maths teachers.

*Between Year 3 to about Year 9, I never used to really understand it [maths]. It's only since getting to the Key Stage 4 level that I've understood it and so I've really started to enjoy maths. .... Well I had a really good teacher from Years 7 to 9, actually I had two. My Head of Year .. was really kind of supportive - I mean I could ask her any question. And then I had done a test, my teacher said that we had a half term test and I done really well in the test so I moved up to the top set maths group, where I found that even though I'd excelled in maths I was still finding it hard. And then I had another teacher who really went into detail when explaining things, so that if you didn't understand it one way you'd understand it another way. And I think that just kind of really boosted my confidence in maths and I just shot up through the ranks so to speak.*

Not all those interviewed, however, had received this kind of encouragement. Re-engagement pupils, for example, contrasted the support they received at Gaskell Academy with experiences of being ignored or dismissed at their previous schools

*Teachers didn't really like, they didn't care about the students and that. They just wanted to do the job and that's it. Like, they go in, they teach, and they just say 'go away'. (Aakil, year 10, on respite scheme)*

The most damning criticisms, however, came from the community study participants, who resented the way they felt they had been treated and made to feel foolish if they needed extra assistance with their studies. Often, they were unwilling to ask for help, as they did not want to show weakness, but when they did ask and were then made to feel stupid, they were particularly angry.

*I just couldn't do it. It was a waste of time. I just couldn't do it like. And when I asked for help it was like the teachers just wanted to piss me off some more, like tell me how much dumber I was, like not help me, like show me I was even more dumb. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

They recounted how pressured they felt at being judged all the time, and the loss of face involved if they were placed in the bottom set for a subject. Omar, aged 21, permanently excluded from school in year 10, vividly recalled how demoralised he felt and the impact of this on his motivation and willingness to attend class.

*Take English and that, like, I know, like, I can read and write fine it's just I, I struggled a bit more, do you know what I mean? Now I don't get someone looking over my shoulder saying, 'Do this, do that,' know what I mean, like, so when I'm reading I'll be comfortable into myself now. But back then you have a lot of pressures. And to make it worse they used to put you in like these sets, like where you're in the shit set right, and then there's the middle set and the middle set's alright, and then they've got this amazing group of people that should be like mental or something, in the top set. And then everybody knows you're in the shit group so you don't want to do as well anyway, do you know what I mean? ..... So I didn't bother going. When they put us into sets I just didn't bother going to any of the lessons. Made me feel like shit, like I was a dumb little brat.*

The frustration of failure and of perceived humiliation not only affected students' motivation, but could also lead to behaviour problems, as we discuss below.

### **3.3 'Bad' behaviour and its triggers**

#### **Disruption and pranks**

When pupils were bored or struggled with a subject, they found it difficult to concentrate and were tempted to chat with friends or classmates. Alternatively, they might get drawn into a conversation by friends who were bored.

*When you're trying to concentrate the other kids or your friends they come and talk to you and it's like it's kind of very rude if you just ignore your friends like that. So then I laugh or I respond to them and then the teacher sees me talking or laughing then I get in trouble for that. (Cain, year 7, in special transition class)*

Boredom also led some to 'fool around' and disrupt the lesson, for example, telling jokes, making phone calls on their mobiles, throwing paper balls, stink bombs or paint balls around the classroom. Although this behaviour may have started as an antidote to boredom, if students then got a reputation for being a 'bit of a comedian', they felt they had to play this role

*To be perfectly honest I think I kind of set myself up to be the person who does it, because from the very beginning I... thought, yeah, I wanna be funny. So before anyone told me anything I'd just crack a joke or say something. It's all a matter of comedy ... Once I'd done it the first time people expect me to do it. I just set up that, people expect me to do it, that's what it is (Alvin, year 11, member of mentoring group).*

#### **Shouting and answering back**

A recurrent theme throughout the interviews was that students could be on a very short fuse, swearing and shouting if they felt threatened or disrespected. If this happened with other students, the main triggers appeared to be personal insults or insults to a member of the student's family. Some name-calling, however, was tolerated and even considered amusing, for example one pupil found it funny when a friend referred to an older male relative as a paedophile. However, in other cases, the 'cussing' touched a sensitive nerve and went too far.

*There's this girl and she's cussing me but last time I made her cry 'cos she got too lippy like. She thinks she's hard but she's not. She tried to cuss me but then I*

*cussed her so bad, yeah, I called her hairy legs. (Shaquille, year 7, in special transition class)*

Where the anger was directed at teachers, there could be several triggers at work. For example, if students felt ignored, they shouted to get the teacher's attention

*Yeah, sometimes I shout, because last time I put my hands up for like too long and she looks, she picks, my teacher, she picks other people but she never see my hands. And then she goes on to the next part and then she told me to put my hand down 'cos she had to explain it. But I put my hand up because of the before thing and then that's, and then I can't give my idea out. And it's like, when we're told not to shout out but lots of people are shouting out and I put my hand up but she says, 'yeah, that's the answer' to the person who was shouting out but, when I shouted, then she said, 'Stop shouting out'. (Odane, year 7, in special transition class)*

Some students became rude or angry because they resented teachers' authority and the unequal power relationship. They did not like being told what to do as it was too much like home

*I didn't like anyone who belittled me or tried to patronise me or anyone who just thought they were bigger ..... My thoughts were 'no, man, eff this teacher. My mum can't even tell me to do that so why the f... am I gonna listen to her?' (Alvin, year 11, member of mentoring group)*

*I didn't like the whole facilities man, just teachers telling you what to do and stuff like that really. I just didn't get on with it. Started arguing a lot with teachers when they try and tell me all this. They're not my parents, you know what I mean, so I told them. (Carlton, aged 18, permanently excluded in year 11, unemployed)*

In particular, they found it hard to cope with being reprimanded in front of other students, and being shouted at by teachers made it difficult for them to control their anger.

*I've always had a mind of my own, always, always. Like back then I was intolerant in school as well. Like if a teacher shouted at me or something I wouldn't like it at all. Apart from my parents shouting at me because they're my parents like. But when teachers shout at me like it's just – I did not like it at all and I shouted back. (Ibrahim, year 10, member of mentoring group)*

*Like when I got older I wouldn't really want a teacher in my face, shouting at me. I wouldn't get scared of a teacher, like right now I wouldn't get scared of a teacher if she was shouting in my face. I know if I was on the street, yeah, and a man was shouting in my face I wouldn't have it. So if it was a teacher and she's shouting in my face – I know that I can't really do nothing – know what I'm saying? You can't hit a teacher. But I would get hot, so they'd have to move away from me before I do hit them. So I'm telling them to get out of my face and stuff like that. I used to get in trouble for all that, init. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

## **Violent behaviour**

From time to time, however, their anger just boiled over and students became more violent. Several incidents were described, involving throwing and breaking things, largely as a result of anger at teachers, for being shouted at or receiving what they perceived to be undeserved blame.

*If they're upsetting me and they have like a negative vibe towards me, it's a bit mad, weird, but if teachers do something to me like shout at me and swear at me I just get angry and I just flip ...it's not a pretty sight. I shout. If I'm really angry I'll just dash a chair. (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

*Like I hate it when people blame stuff on me what I didn't do and stuff, and I just get angry. And like one time I was talking to my friend in class and the other guy said, 'why you talking about me?' But I wasn't talking about him. So I got angry and the teacher said, 'Oh you've got detention after school and then you're referred, you're gonna have to go to the cooler.' Like it was the referral room, and then I was angry and I flipped the table over and I just ran out and I like punched the wall, closed the door and stuff and just ran off. (Ashton, year 8, in Learning Support Centre)*

When pupils 'flipped' at their peers, for insults or rivalries, this could lead to physical fights. Minor scuffles might be contained and not necessarily lead to serious punishment, such as exclusion. Unfortunately, however, it was not always possible to limit such outbursts. In some cases, students admitted that they simply did not know how to deal with their anger without 'going over the top'

*I wouldn't settle for, 'Oh I'm gonna hit you and then that's it', I'd settle for, 'I'm gonna hit you until I know that you're hurting and I know that I've hurt something on your person'. I mean it's not the right way to behave and I've never condoned that behaviour, but I didn't know how to express myself enough to be able to articulate what I'm thinking. (Javel, year 11, member of mentoring group)*

Situations could also escalate because pupils got a reputation for being tough that others then wanted to be part of. Alternatively, a cycle of retaliation was set up.

*Yeah, I had trouble with the teachers, arguing, fighting. They called it bullying, but, I'm not a bully. .... 'Cos they think, like, if you beat up someone, yeah, say you beat them up like three times, they called it bullying. They think you're just bullying them, but you're not, because when you beat them up once they're going to come back for you, like I say there's not one time you can do something and they ain't coming back for you. If you don't finish them off they're going to come back for you. So it goes on and on. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

*I mean if somebody said something I didn't like I was very like, I confronted them about it and then the situation would get heated and then it would turn into a fight. And it seemed that days that I had the fight you'd have other kids looking at me and thinking, I don't know what they were thinking to be honest, but it's like they thought that they had to challenge me somehow to gain the respect of everyone else. (Javel, year 11, member of mentoring group)*

A similar range of problems was reported by those involved in school initiatives and those who had dropped out of or been permanently excluded from school, but one key difference to emerge from this study was that some of the latter claimed to have embraced violence as a good thing, rather than feeling caught up in something beyond their control.

*I watched all these fighting films when I was young, yeah, I saw fighting as a good thing, if you can understand what I'm saying. I saw it like I'm doing something good. I don't know where my head was at man - mad. 'Cos from young I've been a 'bad breed' (naughty child). I don't even want to say it 'cos I feel mad and I've never spoke about my past like this. Obviously when I was young I used to like fighting a lot. Like, when I say fighting I would be up for a fight like anytime, anywhere. Like I'd want a reason for a fight, so if one of my mates said, 'I've got*

*a problem.' I'd be like, 'What? Where is he?' I'll see the brare (boy) and try knock him out for my mate, stuff like that. Know what I mean? (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

They enjoyed being seen as tough, someone who was not vulnerable or a victim, and actively sought to maintain their reputation.

*And then you start liking the fact that people know who you are, people are scared of you and stuff. And then you just end up trying to keep it and then it becomes normal, trying to keep your end up....It's just how it is 'cos of how you've trained your body to, trained your mind, to keep that reputation. (Leopold, aged 19, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

*'We were just doing stuff and no one wanted to do nothing to us in our year. That was about it really, yeah, just all a bunch of brares (boys) got together, everyday we was with each other.....yeah we were on top, man..... We just kept doing the same stuff every year, just the same stuff we was doing. [Which was what? What sort of stuff?] Gambling and selling stuff at the school. Smoking, all that stuff. Beating up people, doing that for five years. Just kept us alright, yeah'. (Carlton, aged 18, permanently excluded in year 11, unemployed)*

### **3.4 Disengagement**

#### **Relative priorities**

Whether or not they enjoyed studying or found it difficult, some Gaskell Academy students had nevertheless come to realise the importance of 'sticking at it'. For those lower down the school, in years 7, 8 and 9 it was a case of doing well enough to be able to choose subjects for GCSE, rather than being put on a more narrowly prescribed pathway. For those in years 10 and 11 the priority was to do well enough at GCSE to be able to follow their plans or aspirations, be it getting a job, going to college, or taking A Levels and applying to university.

*I want to do well, like mostly I want B and over....It's very important because without education you can't get a job. And without a job you don't get money. And without money you can't eat. And without eating you'll die. (Carl, year 7, in special transition class).*

*At the end of the day, no matter what I do outside school, it is qualifications, this printed sheet of paper, that's gonna get me somewhere in life..... I want an A\* in English Lit, an A in English Language, double A\* in Science, I think I'll get that, a B in Maths minimum, and then – basically it's one B, the only B I'm allowing myself to get is Maths. The rest of that As and A\*s. I just need to jump this final hurdle. This one final big hurdle, just need to jump it. (Alvin, year 11, member of the mentoring group)*

*Ideally I'd like to attend Cambridge or any of the Russell Group universities. .. to study finance. .... I had a period where I wanted to go into chemical engineering because I enjoyed science, but I thought to myself, why not think about what motivates me, what drives me, what am I trying to achieve. And the first thing that popped into my mind was money. (Javel, year 11, member of the mentoring group)*

Others, however, found it much harder to apply themselves if they were bored, found a subject too difficult or the pace too slow. Concentration was a particular problem, as Clarence – now 18 but who dropped out of school at 15 after several exclusions – explained

*I can learn anything. My learning capacity is sick (excellent). I can read a book, do a test and pass it by the end of the lesson. I think I can teach myself. It's just that I have to be interested though. If I'm not interested – yeah, that's what the problem was with me at school. And I figured that out, yeah. I would learn too quick. So when we were going over something, yeah, I was getting bored and thinking, why are we doing this? I get it. Let's move on, kind of thing. And I didn't learn anything, 'cos Algebra, yeah, I couldn't get my head around that. I don't know what was wrong with me, but my attention span wasn't that good. But if I was interested I would learn quick. But if I'm not interested my attention span is somewhere else. .*

They resented being made to study subjects they did not enjoy: *'I shouldn't have to be forced to have to learn stuff I'm not interested in. Really and truly no one should be made to do that'.*

Attitudes to homework were indicative of the importance students attached to doing well at school. Rarely did a student claim to enjoy homework, but some were more disciplined than others. Even though they lapsed from time to time they tried to stay focused on their goals.

*Honestly my – my revision always waivers every now and again, innit? But no matter how my revision waivers, no matter how far I turn my head, I can always see the target there in my peripheral vision. I can just see it there. I think to myself, 'no, I need to snap back' and I just snap back. It's not easy .. it's bloody hard ... Who likes to know that they could be doing something else but instead they're sitting there – it makes me think, 'what am I doing man?' But obviously because of the reasons for doing it I can justify it because of what I'll get off it.... So obviously even though I sit there at times and I look at the time and I think 'I've revised' and I can feel the sweat on my palm and just like think, 'oh, I've been here for ages', and I look at the time and it's been 20 minutes. And I'm like, 'no man, I can't do this man'. I'm sweating and it's only been 20 minutes and I can't do this. And that's when I lose it, I just put my pencil down, put my pen down, put the highlighters away and I'm just sitting on the bed and I'm like, 'I'm going out'. And I just put on my coat, get dressed and that and I'll come back later, just leave and go out and come back a couple of hours later and then carry on. (Alvin year 11, member of mentoring group)*

*No, it's not easy because in my home I'm just sort of lazy. Like when I go home, if I have homework, I have to do it straightaway because, if I leave it, I will not do it. That's a problem with me. .. See if I go home and start watching TV I won't do my homework, I'll just say, 'Ah, I'll do it tomorrow'. (Aaron, year 10, on re-engagement scheme)*

For others, however, the distractions of meeting up with friends, doing household chores, babysitting younger siblings, watching television, playing computer games, or simply getting on Facebook proved too much and they fell behind with their work. Re-engagement and community interviewees had been particularly reluctant to do any school work at home. They resented the intrusion into what they saw as *'my time, not the school's'*. Some admitted that they had simply refused to do it, despite encouragement from parents or other family members. One young man used to lie to his mother,

*Yeah, I used to tell her I'd done it, init like, I'll show her a piece of work that I brought back from school and I'd say, 'yeah I've done my homework', but I didn't really do it. But when the letter used to come in I used to get in trouble with my mum and that. It got to that point when I had to tell my mum 'I'm not doing my homework, do you know what I'm saying, that's pointless. I go to school every*

*day to do work'. And then she was like, 'well I can't force you do to homework, I can't make you sit down and make you write to do your homework, init, so it's up to you'. She spoke to my teachers and tried to encourage me to do it but I just didn't want to. (Dion, aged 17, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

In some cases, young people simply could not see the relevance of school and their priorities lay elsewhere. For example, some had set their sights on a career that did not require academic qualifications, such as professional footballer, kick boxer or stuntman. Others were just impatient to earn money and found the prospect of several more years of education too daunting. Some of those who had dropped out of school or been excluded had been particularly critical of the value of education, because they believed that the important things in their life were happening outside of school – on the street.

*School didn't feel like the place for me like. I'll have to think about this one... When I was in school it seemed like everything was outside school, but now I'm outside it seems like everything is inside university to get anywhere, if you understand what I'm saying. But at the time I was on the streets, doing everything I could do. Everything and anything, that was the plan ... Like doing a lot of stuff, init. Smoking. Might have gone out to do a robbery. Might be selling drugs. That's it, init.... From A class to C class innit. Use your imagination. The whole works init. (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

Some community interviewees, like this young man, regretted that they had not worked harder and claimed that, if they could have their time again, they would be good students. They now advised younger members of their family

*'Stay at school'. Because he bunks sometimes innit. I give it to him. I tell him, 'What are you doing? Don't do that. You can't keep bunking school. It will get you nowhere. Don't fuck around' (Curtis, aged 18, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

Others, however, particularly those who had struggled with their academic work or been in trouble because of their behaviour, were completely alienated from the school system and were adamant that they would never have considered going back. Indeed, they claimed they might have dropped out and become involved in crime even earlier. In their view, academic achievement did not pay, as they knew people who had passed their GCSEs but were still *'into the same stuff, not doing anything really, just getting into debt'*.

## **Absenteeism**

When students disliked certain lessons or found them boring, there was a temptation to play truant and some Gaskell Academy pupils admitted that they had occasionally 'bunked' off particular lessons or for particular parts of the day, but they had always been careful to attend registration. The community interviewees, however, had been persistent truants throughout the latter part of their secondary school careers. In addition to being bored by or disaffected with particular subjects, these young men had a generally unfavourable attitude to school. In this context, additional or unexpected disappointments could alienate these young men further and trigger an episode of absenteeism.

*Do you know what stopped my interest in school.? I got kicked off the football team innit, and that's when I just like turned my back on school. The way I got*

*kicked off there was so deep, 'cos the PE teacher there was my form tutor, and I was in the team Year 7, 8, 9. In Year 10 I went on a trip to France. When I come back he told me I'd missed trials and I'm not going to get anywhere 'cos I need to start behaving. So they basically tried to use football to make me be good in class and make me get all As on a report card. .... I wanted to be a footballer when I was young as well. And that's what made me start smoking innit, and like you can't really smoke in school. I kind of got drawn to the road, (street lifestyle) like little bits of me got taken apart. (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

Like this young man, others admitted they had developed bad habits or got in with a 'bad breed' and preferred to spend the day with friends rather than attend school. For example, from the age of fourteen one young man would sign in for the morning and then spend most of the school day smoking 'weed' with friends. Another would wake up late in the morning after smoking with friends the previous evening and decide there was no point in going to school. In some cases, the young men had become involved in criminal activities – mainly robbery – and this was a higher priority than going to school.

*Some people got on good at school. Passed and everything, and went to school full time. Some didn't and they were on the roads innit, making their money. 'Cos obviously if you ain't going to be in school you ain't going to get your four GCSEs, you ain't going to get a good job. You're going to get obviously minimum wage and stuff. So that's why I didn't really go to school. School was a waste of time. For me, if I made money I wouldn't go to school; the day I didn't make money I would go to school. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

In one case, a young man had missed so much school that he was 'kicked out' of most of the GCSE classes and took one exam in sport and a certificate in personal effectiveness (CoPE). Another young man had dropped out of school altogether at the age of fifteen when his mother died and he was taken into care. He 'could not be arsed with school' after that as he had always been in trouble anyway

Some of the community interviewees were still technically at school, but they were following a similar pattern, bunking off several days a week. However, because their parents would be held responsible for persistent absenteeism the pupils were careful to attend registration every few days make sure no fines were incurred.

### **3.5 School responses to trouble: inclusion or exclusion**

When students got into trouble at school – for misbehaving in class when they were bored, de-motivated or could not concentrate, or for disruptive or violent behaviour when they could not control their frustration and anger – they reported a range of different responses from their school. When dealing with problems, schools either opted for an inclusive strategy, putting in place various supportive interventions such as mentoring, extra tuition, counselling or anger management, or they took a more punitive approach, giving students a fixed period or permanent exclusion. Experience of exclusion was common among the community interviewees but some Gaskell Academy students had also been excluded in the past for short fixed periods, or been threatened with exclusion. Overall, the kinds of trouble that led to exclusion were ostensibly similar between the two groups, but the incidents and the longer term consequences were more serious among the community study participants (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8: Trouble and its consequences**

Trouble at school		Consequences	
School interviews	Community interviews	School interviews	Community interviews
‘Fooling about’ in class	‘Fooling about’ in class	Short term exclusion and reinstatement served as deterrent against future bad behaviour	Multiple short terms exclusions which then escalated to permanent exclusion and transfer to a Pupil Referral Unit (from which students dropped out)
Rudeness to teachers	Swearing at teachers		
Racist remarks			
Delinquency: throwing fireworks, jumping on a car	Robbery, repeated arrests, time in young offenders’ institution	Short term exclusion followed by school intervention (transition if from primary school, mentoring if secondary)	
Fighting with other students	Fighting with other students		
	Carrying a weapon (bringing a knife into school)	Permanent exclusion from other schools but referral to reengagement or respite initiatives at school	
Altercation involving a teacher	Assault on a teacher		

Some Gaskell Academy pupils in the mentoring scheme had been threatened with exclusion or had experienced short term exclusion for disruptive behaviour and rudeness to teachers. Those who had been excluded found the experience very salutary: though at first they had thought it 'cool' to be out of school, after a few days they became lonely and missed their friends. Fortunately for them, they had been reinstated and encouraged and supported by staff to change their ways and concentrate on their education.

*I'm not gonna lie, I got referred a couple of times from Year 9. I got excluded maybe one or two times but it were much better than Year 8 and 7. And people just started to notice, like I started to notice the respect I was getting from everyone. It was a mutual respect that I had of everyone they had of me and it was like it was nice to see that. My teachers were like, 'It's nice to see you're finally starting to get your head down', and I'm grateful that I did it at that time, because obviously SATs were still around back then and I managed to change two or three months before my SATs started. (Alvin, year 11, member of the mentoring group)*

Other pupils had been permanently excluded from their previous schools for rudeness to teachers or fighting but, rather than dropping out of mainstream education, they had been referred to Gaskell Academy where they were able to continue studying for their GCSEs.

Among the community interviewees, some had initially experienced multiple periods of short term exclusion for disruptive behaviour and swearing at teachers. However,

the situation had escalated and they had been permanently excluded when they got into even more serious trouble, for example fighting, carrying a weapon, or assaulting a teacher.

*I got excluded for basically punching – I had a fight with the teacher – but this led to me grabbing a chair and smacking it in his face (Zidane, aged 14, still at school after several fixed period exclusions, but bunking off several days a week)*

*I walked into my friend's class, to get a calculator but I didn't like ask or anything, I just done it. Then as I come out like the teacher grabbed me by my rucksack and like tried to pin me to the wall. And then like obviously I got angry and that and I flipped a script on him and twisted his arm and put his head on the window and stuff. Then like from that I got excluded. One time I grabbed two teachers 'cos they said, 'Oh if that's how you act I'm gonna get you excluded for long and you will never come back to this school.' And then I got angry and grabbed them and got excluded for that. (Leopold, aged 19, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

In some cases, the young men had been excluded because of their involvement in criminal behaviour, such as robbery, or they had missed school because of spending time in a young offenders' institution.

*I basically went to school Year 7, Year 8, but Year 9, year 10 they throw me out. Then, Year 11, I went for like two months and I went to jail and so I never really went to school after Year 8 (Cadman, aged 16, dropped out of school at 15 when went to jail, unemployed)*

Several of the young men had been sent to Pupil Referral Units after their exclusion but were extremely critical of this provision and had dropped out. They complained that pupils just 'mucked about' and did not study, or that it was like primary school and the teaching was much too basic, or that it was only possible to study for NVQs or, even where it was possible to study for GCSEs, there was inadequate support and encouragement from staff.

Reactions among this group to their exclusion from mainstream education were extremely varied. Some had never enjoyed school, and were happy to give up studying. Others, however, were disappointed that they would not get a chance to gain any qualifications. For example, Leopold who was permanently excluded from school in year 10, was initially happy not be at school but then wanted to return because he was concerned about the long term impact on his prospects

*When you're young it's like you don't know what you're doing, you're not at school. And some people, even me, I'm not gonna lie, I saw it as a treat to be off school. I thought, started feeling, I felt more mature and stuff, like do other things and then end up smoking and stuff, doing wrong stuff. I dunno, then I wanted to go back cos I thought, when you're young the way they make you believe that it's all over if you get excluded, you need school, you need this. I thought it was over, thought everything was over so I just thought, well I'll do what I have to do really.*

The way in which young men who had been excluded from school became involved in 'wrong stuff' is explored in a later section. In the next section, however, we consider inclusive school responses to trouble and examine the interventions introduced at Gaskell Academy.

## **4. What school can do – the role of positive intervention**

### **4.1 The teachers' perspective**

#### **Challenges to be addressed**

Much of the 'trouble' described above was recognised by the teachers interviewed in this study, who were very aware of the problems faced by pupils in their care. For example, they acknowledged that the transition from primary to secondary school required pupils to develop organisational skills and confidence to navigate their way around a large campus for different lessons, to take responsibility for bringing the right things in their school bag and to schedule their homework – '*they are expected to be little adults within six weeks*'.

Street culture meant that some boys thought they had to make a choice between 'the street' and education and that it was not cool to take school seriously. A challenge for school was therefore to convince pupils that it was possible to have positive relationships with their peers but also complete their studies. The need to show that '*you are not a victim*' could lead to a reverse culture in which truanting, being rude to teachers and fighting were ways to gain respect. Being loud and brash was also part of street culture but could be misconstrued as symptomatic of an attitude problem. Youth culture with its focus on certain material goods meant that students might have very expensive items at school in terms of mobile phones and trainers and this, combined with an attitude that '*nicking things is OK*' meant that intimidation and robbery were not unknown.

When students had trouble with their academic work this was often compounded by their unwillingness to admit they were struggling. Fear this might be seen as a weakness could lead students, particularly boys, not to ask for help or clarification from teachers and to give up too easily. Adopting street language, with its restricted vocabulary, was a way for some young men to hide their literacy or communication problems.

In the teachers' opinion, many students who got into trouble at school were in difficult situations at home. These ranged from lack of support through to witnessing domestic violence, or being abused themselves, and students often brought their frustration and anger into school. Pupils sometimes looked to peers as family when they lacked a caring home environment. Boys growing up without a father in their life were used to playing 'the man' and resented being told what to do by teachers as this undermined their sense of identity and made them feel like a child.

#### **The Gaskell Academy philosophy**

Teachers admitted that, in the past, Gaskell Academy used to have a reputation as a rough school in which fights were commonplace. A change of head and a new philosophy had subsequently 'turned things around' and the school had recently been awarded Outstanding School status. Essentially the new philosophy was described as pupil-focussed, so that staff attempted to understand why students encountered difficulties and put special measures in place.

*We hold on to them and we work with them. We play to their strengths and make sure they leave here with something.* (Director of the Learning Support Centre)

Essentially the school adopted a proactive approach, aimed at early intervention in order to keep students engaged, avoid any permanent exclusions, and prevent them *'slipping through the net'*. Dealing with challenging students was seen as a priority in order to avoid other students' education being disrupted. Weekly referral meetings were held at which teachers could flag up any problems occurring within their classes, either students who were struggling with subjects or incidents of disruptive behaviour. The school's response was then to put support in place rather than simply label students as unintelligent or troublesome, or meet out punishment under a 'one strike and you are out' policy. Pupils might be given learning support, or an individual mentor, or referred to one of the mentoring groups, and mentors even went into the classroom to help pupils resolve difficult issues.

The aim of the school to keep students within the educational system and help them achieve some formal qualifications had also led to the establishment of special schemes for those permanently excluded from other schools in the area. The re-engagement scheme took pupils in year 10 and 11 and provided intensive tuition and support to ensure that they achieved 5 GCSE passes, including English and maths. The respite scheme, on the other hand, gave short term support to excluded pupils, in the hope that they could be re-integrated into mainstream education.

Helping students accept and operate within clear boundaries was considered a very important aspect of the school's approach. Teachers also worked to try and overcome the rejection of educational achievement so redolent within street culture

*So it really shows me that however much, however sort of seductive street culture is, if you can balance it out and if you can offer the kids boundaries, if you can offer them a chance of success in a positive way they will take that. The problem is when they don't have those boundaries, when they don't have that recognition and that offer of a future within a positive environment, then they will seek it in a negative environment. (Director of the Learning Support Centre)*

As part of helping students develop a more positive outlook and build their confidence, they were given a range of different responsibilities, for example as prefects or working in the school youth club.

*And you've got students with a range of backgrounds and some of the real difficult students didn't really get those kind of opportunities. But what I was able to do was build a relationship with them through the mentoring. And then also that started to break down their behaviour. Then they had responsibilities in the youth club after school where they are students that a lot of people within the school, other students have a lot of respect for. And that sort of like gave them a sort of sense of identity, you know, a sense of worth. (Head of Mentoring)*

Because of the importance of the home environment, teachers involved in student support also engaged in outreach work with parents. Building a bridge meant that teachers could be kept informed about developments outside school and ensure that any progress accomplished during the week at school was not then undone at home. Teachers were aware that their qualifications and professional status could set them apart from parents

*They [parents] see the formality of teachers, you've gone to school, you've had a successful schooling, you've gone, have got a degree and they see that there's a barrier with us, you know. However, breaking down those barriers is by going into the community and meeting them within the community. And then, as you can see, we have a weekly parents group, a parents' forum. It becomes a little bit of a mothers' meeting to be honest and we're trying to get more fathers in there. But*

*it is, it's integral, you know, they tell us what's going on in the street.* (Head of Alternative Provision)

When constructive relations with parents could not be established, the school sometimes made exceptional provision. The school had once paid for a student to stay in bed and breakfast accommodation during GCSEs because the situation at home was so chaotic, and there was talk of trying to establish some kind of short term residential unit for students during exams. Outreach work had also been carried out on estates when territorial rivalries threatened to disrupt school life.

The teachers interviewed maintained that this pupil-focussed proactive approach required an exceptional degree of engagement and commitment from staff.

*It's tough, it's challenging. You have to be here for the kids, you have to genuinely want to work with and want to help and want to get the best out of the students. If you don't, the students pick up on it immediately. And we had an incident with a teacher who came in who wasn't committed to teaching and was just doing it to get some experience before going off and getting another job. And the kids picked up on it immediately and it was just, it was so telling that essentially her heart wasn't in it. And I think your heart has to be in it to work here.* (Director of the Learning Support Centre)

*'You have to show a bit of yourself with the kids, your human side. You're not, you can't be the kind of teacher that just stands up at the front. ....It's about being involved, and it's also, for my part, it's maternal, you know, 'cos you are, we are in loco parentis when parents are not here so, you know, I would want to treat these children as if they were my own. So how would I want my own to be treated in school?' (Head of Alternative Provision)*

In addition to dedicated teaching staff, the school also employed a range of other specialists, including a school nurse, a psychotherapist and a police officer. The role of the latter was to help pupils understand the consequences of antisocial or criminal behaviour, to act as a mediator and supporter in cases where they 'had a brush with the law' and attempt to counter some of the negative stereotypes of the police as 'the enemy' that permeated street culture. One teacher described an incident when the police officer accompanied a young man to the police station and arranged to take him back to school to sit an exam before returning him to the station for further questioning. Close relationships were also maintained between the school and professionals from other agencies such as social workers, educational psychologists, youth offending teams and the youth inclusion support unit.

## **4.2 The pupils' perspectives**

### **Mentoring schemes**

#### *The bright boys' group*

Students interviewed from the 'bright boys' mentoring group were very enthusiastic and positive about their experience. They admitted that anger issues and laziness had sometimes got in the way of their academic work and that they had tended to set their sights too low, comparing themselves with classmates who were doing less well than they were rather than aiming to perform to the best of their abilities.

Before being referred to the group they used to bottle up their emotions; however, meeting once a week, discussing events, sharing problems and giving each other advice meant that these young men discovered they were not alone. They also valued the way they were spoken to and treated like adults by the mentor, and this had persuaded them that teachers were genuinely interested in their welfare. Further encouragement, such as visits from an ex-pupil who had been accepted by Cambridge University, or trips to the theatre, was much appreciated. Nevertheless, more rewards and positive incentives, particularly ones of a physical nature like rock climbing or paintballing, would be welcomed.

Both young men passed all their GCSEs at grades A to C and were able to study the subjects of their choice for A Level. In the follow-up interviews, however, they were slightly ambivalent about their results. They wished they had achieved all As and Bs, without any passes at grade C, but acknowledged that these aspirations were a result of being part of the mentoring scheme. Both missed the scheme and found adjustment to life in the sixth form difficult.

### *The behaviour group*

Although some students had been wary of the group initially, wondering why they had been referred, they were very appreciative of this intervention once they had joined. Again, the opportunity to talk about issues with others was welcomed and some wished they had been part of such a group earlier in their school career.

The main benefits described by these students were that they learned how to deal with difficult situations, whether this was developing the confidence to ask teachers for help if they did not understand something, resisting the temptation to 'fool about' in class, shout or argue back, being prepared to apologise for their behaviour, or simply thinking through the consequences of their actions. As one student commented – *'We're not bad kids we just do dumb things'*

The young men had developed a strong bond with their mentor and could relate to him as a role model. They repaid his support by trying not to let him down and, in some cases, by entrusting him with secrets no one else knew.

*Before the mentoring group I was much worse than I am now, much worse...Like just behaviour-wise, like behaviour in lessons, outside lessons, like behaviour around the school. Like what I would have done before the mentoring group, I wouldn't do it now. Because I know that if I do that then Michael would be really upset with us because he's set expectations for us to be at, so....They're quite important to all of us because we don't wanna let him down. Because he's like our second father in school. Like if we have problems or something the first person I go to is him. That's the first person that we'd all go to. Because we know that, of course other teachers will give us support, but it's like Michael can relate to us. Yeah, Michael can relate to us highly because he's a black male as well so we can just relate to each other. (Everton, year 10, member of mentoring group)*

Some students believed that their school work had improved as a result of their greater concentration and additional effort. Others, however, thought the main benefit was that their reformed behaviour meant they were no longer labelled as *'bad kids who don't want to work'* and so teachers had a more positive attitude towards them.

## Re-engagement and respite

Students in the re-engagement scheme had been permanently excluded from their previous schools and were generally critical of the way they had been treated. They felt that teachers had offered little support and been too quick to punish and label them. Once on the Gaskell Academy scheme, however, they were extremely impressed by their new teachers.

One thing that surprised them was that the *'teachers actually care'*, providing support, phoning the students on their mobiles, persuading them to come in if they bunked off school. The scheme manager was also street wise, and this gained their respect. She knew if the students were high and was prepared to challenge them about their habits.

In terms of the education they received, participants were very enthusiastic about the quality of the teaching– *'we've got top teachers from the school coming down and teaching us'*. Staff explained things clearly and this gave students confidence and encouraged them to work hard in a way they had never done before. For some, it was the first time they felt they were learning anything, doing *'proper work'*, not just filling out work sheets at a referral unit, or receiving a few hours of home tuition. They were grateful for a second chance.

*Without re-engagement I would have been probably now with no school, like my friends making the money on the street. Because I was out of school for a year. And re-engagement, they said, 'Look, you need to come with us. You haven't been to school for a year.' I was being home schooled two days a week, which is shit. So when I came here I saw – I just thought it was a fresh start and I'll fix that and do all I can. (Aaron, year 10, on re-engagement scheme)*

Over and above the quality of the academic teaching provided, the re-engagement scheme was seen as helping participants develop their life-skills. At the start of each day, there was a period of reflection, when students watched a programme or a documentary and then discussed the implications of this for their own lives. In particular, students appreciated the way they were treated as sensible, mature young people.

*For me I get quite a lot because re-engagement, it doesn't only teach you education, it sort of prepares you for life. That's my opinion. I think it's everyone else's, because re-engagement like they give us a certain responsibility, and when you're given that certain responsibility you have to uphold it like. You can't mess around. You just feel mature. Because people are taking you more maturely, you actually mature for real. (Aaron, year 10, on re-engagement scheme)*

Set against the largely positive response from students, however, a few niggles were mentioned. For example, some regretted that there was no choice of subjects for GCSE. They also wished there was more opportunity for physical activity and PE, and found it claustrophobic being stuck in a small room all day. One young man would have preferred a later start in the morning and complained that staff were too strict about time – *'you can't even be two minutes late'*.

All these students gained 5 GCSEs, something they were unlikely to have achieved without the re-engagement scheme. Not all got the grades they had hoped for but admitted that they still slacked off and could have worked harder. None went into sixth form education, but two were at college and one had applied for a job as a chef.

Just one young man was interviewed from the respite scheme. He was very impressed by the way teachers cared, as this had not been his experience in other secondary schools, and he was hoping to be able to rejoin mainstream education at Gaskell Academy rather than return to his former school. However, he was keen to move on from the respite scheme as soon as possible because he found the unit very noisy, which made it difficult for him to concentrate. The level of academic work was low and he was concerned that he would fall behind in his studies.

## **Learning Support**

Students interviewed in the Learning Support Centre were from years 8 and 9. Some claimed they had been referred because of difficulties with their academic work. They commented that the high staff to pupil ratio, the extra support provided, and the lack of distractions were all helping them gain confidence and start to catch up with their studies. They also enjoyed the way students in the unit helped each other with their work.

Other students were aware that they had been referred for behavioural issues, for which they had been at risk of exclusion. Anger management, mentoring and counselling were provided, so that pupils could talk about problems away from the pressure of everyday school life. Some found that the structured, safe and supportive environment in the centre had helped them improve their behaviour, and control their frustration. Flexible re-entry back into their class was also valued and some spent part of the day in the centre and part of the day in their regular lessons. Others liked the way they could come up to the centre as a safe haven if they were in danger of getting into trouble. Report cards for achievement and behaviour were very popular and students were keen to be awarded the top mark. However, there were also students who felt that they no longer needed the extra support provided by the centre and who were impatient to be reintegrated into the mainstream.

## **Transition schemes**

Rather more mixed views were expressed by pupils in year 7 about initiatives Gaskell Academy had introduced to ease transition between primary and secondary school. On a positive note, there was general agreement that the half day induction – Head Start – had been very useful in helping them find their way around the school without all the older pupils present.

The Opening minds programme, in which some subjects were covered within projects and in the same classroom – primary school style – was appreciated by some because they found the mix of subjects both stimulating and fun. Others however, were disappointed because they had been looking forward to the challenge of separate lessons and negotiating their way around the campus. Opening Minds was also criticised by some as confusing and students found they could not remember the key subject-related components from one session to another. These students found single subject lessons easier to follow.

Special classes set up for literacy and numeracy seemed to be valued; pupils felt that their work was going well and that they had the confidence to ask for clarification if they did not understand a lesson. They liked the structure provided by targets and the applause when these were met. By contrast, classes set up for those with behavioural problems were less popular. Some students were resentful, and claimed



they did not need this kind of support. One pupil was suspicious that a 'hated' teacher from primary school was responsible for him being referred to the class

*This teacher was bullying me, and I got angry 'cos she kept saying I'm talking when I'm not talking. And for the whole year, and the last year she was on at me and then I said, , 'Shut up or I'll smack you,' because she was rude, she was bullying me. So I got excluded..... I'm in 7i because they think I need help but I don't need help with nothing. I think that teacher put me there on purpose. Because the teachers, my primary school teachers, have to like choose what class I'd be. The lady who I hate was choosing my class, she put me in 7i. (Cain, year 7, in special transition class)*

Students disliked the fact that their friends were in different classes and the reputation of theirs as the class for pupils who had been 'bad at primary school'.

### **4.3 Slipping through the net**

The young men interviewed as part of the community study had not received coordinated, school-wide support of the kind provided at Gaskell Academy. In some cases, they admitted that individual teachers had offered to help them, trying to 'talk sense' into them, persuading them to study, or to accept some anger management counselling, but they had not listened or had not considered that they needed any extra help. In one case, a teacher had sent the young man GCSE revision papers to study at home after he had been excluded, but he was unable to focus on academic work without the support and structure of a school environment.

Others, however, claimed that schools had not offered any support or guidance. One young man had been the victim of a stabbing and felt he had been given no help when he tried to resume his studies.

*I come back in the school and tried to like get on with it. Then I stopped going in. I told them I couldn't do it, innit. But then I started having memory loss as well. I couldn't remember nothing. They teach it to me and I remember it, and then the next day I don't remember it. They don't understand what I'm saying. I'm telling them that I don't remember it and they think I'm taking the piss again. Know what I'm saying? They're not taking me seriously. They think I'm taking the piss. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

It seemed that the schools had been only too ready to exclude them.

*They just called my mum one day and said they need to speak to her, need to have a meeting and then they just told me they were permanently excluding me. (Leopold, aged 19, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

### **4.4 The value of early intervention**

From the accounts of the Gaskell Academy students themselves, it seems that the interventions put in place by the school were largely considered to have been helpful. Only transition students in the year 7 class for those with behaviour problems resented the intervention and considered they did not need it. Overall, the main benefits of participation in the schemes were seen as: providing a community of support; promoting achievement; improving motivation; enabling the constructive

expression of emotions; encouraging responsibility; and furnishing a sense of self-worth. Figure 9 summaries students' perceptions under each benefit.

**Figure 9: The perceived benefits of interventions**

<b>A community of support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- discovering you are not alone (mentoring and Learning Support Centre)</li> <li>- having others to share with and exchange advice (mentoring and Learning Support Centre)</li> </ul>
<b>Academic achievement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- developing confidence to ask for help (all interventions)</li> <li>- gaining a sense of achievement (all interventions)</li> <li>- responding to the quality of teaching (re-engagement, Learning Support Centre)</li> <li>- attaining better grades than would have been the case without the intervention (mentoring and re-engagement)</li> </ul>
<b>Motivation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- setting sights higher (mentoring)</li> <li>- overcoming fear of failure (mentoring)</li> </ul>
<b>Expressing emotions and managing behaviour</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- learning to voice emotions rather than bottling them up (mentoring and Learning Support Centre)</li> <li>- finding constructive ways of handling frustration and anger (mentoring and Learning Support Centre)</li> <li>- being prepared to apologise to defuse a situation (mentoring)</li> </ul>
<b>Willingness to take responsibility for behaviour</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- responding to being treated like an adult (mentoring and re-engagement)</li> <li>- becoming aware of consequences of actions (mentoring)</li> <li>- not wanting to let others down (mentoring)</li> </ul>
<b>Sense of worth</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- appreciating being entrusted with particular duties (mentoring)</li> <li>- realising someone cares about your wellbeing (mentoring, re-engagement, respite and Learning Support Centre)</li> </ul>

## **5. Dealing with the street.**

In this section we discuss young people's experiences of life outside school, and the way in which they dealt with the temptations and trials of the street. In particular we describe how some became involved in crime while others managed to stay out of trouble.

### ***5.1 Family background***

Although we did not probe much about family life, as we sensed a reluctance on the young people's part to say anything negative out of a sense of loyalty, we were nevertheless able to glean some information about their backgrounds, simply from their answers to other questions. For example, in answer to an enquiry about who was in their household it became clear that a wide range of family situations were represented in our Gaskell Academy sample. Although there were boys and young men who lived with both their parents, this was something of a rarity; more common were lone parent households. Some interviewees came from big families, involving siblings from a number of different partnerships, living with different parents. One young man was in foster care and his parents were not allowed contact with him or any of his siblings because they had inflicted burns on his sister. In another case, a boy in the year 7 transition class had been placed there after the school decided he needed extra support because his mother had a history of violence. As will become clear later in this section, when we discuss how young people got involved in crime, some of our interviewees came from families where the father, brothers or cousins had spent time in prison.

Further information was gleaned when we asked about homework and whether or not a parent provided supervision or encouragement. Although some students reported regular checks and support, and one even claimed his father complained there was not enough homework, a more common pattern was for parents not to enquire or to feel powerless to insist that homework was done. As discussed earlier, some students freely admitted they lied to a parent, saying they had no assignments even when some had been set.

On the other hand, the teachers who took part in this study maintained that many of the students who got into trouble at school were also experiencing difficulties at home. Problems identified by teachers included lack of care and support, domestic violence between parents, and personal experience of abuse.

### ***5.2 A challenging neighbourhood***

#### **'Nothing to do'**

For the most part, the young people interviewed in this study lived in estates near to Gaskell Academy. They were almost uniformly disparaging about their neighbourhood. One complaint focussed on the lack of amenities in their area which could have negative consequences on the kind of activities in which young people engaged.

*Honestly usually just there's nothing really positive to do around where I live, so, basically, usually everyone I hang around with is up to no good and this and that... You know, crime, doing stuff, stealing things from different people, just doing bad things really, nothing positive. Nothing like being at home studying or stuff that you could be doing which would contribute to your future. Yeah. (Farouk, year 11, on re-engagement scheme)*

*It's a shit hole, mate, it really is. Just the area, the area is rubbish man. Everyday I come out man, just the same stuff, nothing to do, no youth clubs, like we just come out every day we just stand around, when the police come we just get chased. Got run like the whole day, that's it, basically man and just go home. A rubbish area, man. (Carlton, aged 18, permanently excluded in year 11, unemployed)*

In addition to a lack of amenities, and possibly linked to it, was a sense of limited aspirations among young people in the area, apart from a desire to have the trappings of a certain material lifestyle.

*It's a shit hole. Some parts are nice, rich man's houses. But apart from that it's a shit hole innit?. Yeah, and it's just like no one's got any ambition over that side, know what I mean? No one wants to be nothing. Everyone wants to do the same thing. Everyone wants to have a gold chain and a big watch and the car, and end up going to jail, know what I mean. (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

## **Crime and violence**

Some of the younger pupils aged eleven and twelve were unaware of any trouble in their neighbourhood: a few teenagers 'hung around' the estate but did not do any harm, and the presence of families in the local park meant it was usually quite peaceful. A very different picture, however, was painted by older pupils and by the community interviewees, who acknowledged that their neighbourhoods were very rough. In particular, they described high levels of robbery, prostitution, drug addiction, drug dealing, fights and fatalities, and a corresponding heavy police presence.

*There's always like fights. It's madness. The police are always around, patrolling. Pure madness (Zidane, aged 14, still at school after several fixed period exclusions, but bunking off several days per week)*

While some were so used to the criminal nature of their environment and considered it part of everyday life, they also recognised that others would find the neighbourhood off-putting and dangerous.

*I've seen everything that estate life brings, obviously, so it's just normal really. To other people living outside it would probably be, I don't know, you wouldn't want live there. Cos, I don't know, there's just loads of things that shouldn't be happening that happens. There's drama all the time, you can't, like neighbours and stuff making noise and all that, you can't really, dunno, it's just not a nice place. It's not peaceful - fights, arguments, police always come to the estate, sometimes you hear the gunshots and stuff. (Leopold, aged 19, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

*They're scared to come inside innit. People from different areas don't really come into my area, 'cos they know if they get caught slipping (off their guard), like if you get caught on the road, if you're by yourself, don't go into the estate on your own..... because of people getting knifed and stuff... Shouting- like people selling drugs, weed, white (coke/crack), anything you can get your hands on. Just sell it*

*to make money. That's it basically.* (Tyler, aged 14, permanently excluded from first school, now at second school after several fixed period exclusions, but bunking off several days per week)

Although Gaskell Academy students had limited personal experience of crime and violence, because crime was 'all around', some of the older ones knew people who had been victims of violence, for example, who had been beaten up or stabbed, or who had committed violent acts themselves.

*Yeah I know loads, 'cos I've got so many people I know. So yeah. they go round, like fighting. You know like areas, they fight a lot. So last time, a couple of days ago, in Harrow Road, one of my people like bottled someone, cut their face* (Keneil, year 8, in Learning Support Centre).

The community interviewees, on the other hand, had much more direct involvement. They described how they had to be vigilant all the time about potential threats to their safety, attempting to strike a balance between maintaining their self respect and keeping out of trouble.

*I've been stabbed twice. Once in the back and once in my heart. I've had knives go for me nearly every day. I've seen someone pull a gun out at least once a week. [And how often has it been the other way round?] At least three times a day. Yeah. Because I think like this, if I'm arguing with someone and they say to me, just like today – it happened to me today – I was having an argument with someone- I was walking down the road and he's looking at me, that's all it takes to get the eye contact. To catch eye contact with someone full on that are walking over to you – 'What are you looking at?' Know what I'm saying? I'm walking. I thought I didn't catch eye contact with them. I weren't sure if they were watching me or not, but then I clocked that they're watching me. So obviously if he's looking at me you have to watch him. You can't try and look away because then they know you're shook (scared) and they're definitely going to come over to you. They're definitely going to walk over to you. They're going to have their energy up and say, 'yeah this guy's shook I can stick it on him quick.'* (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)

*I was in a club, yeah. These guys, they owned the club innit. I'm feeling myself, innit, like just dancing and that, you know girls are feelin me (showing interest) and that. Then someone threw an ice cube on my head innit, so I switched and I said, 'Who threw that ice cube on my head?' No one said nothing. So I just thought, oh fuck it, innit. I'm a big boy. Leave it out innit. I went outside to smoke a cigarette and I see two big brares (men), 'You trying to chat shit in my club now yeah- you trying to chat shit in my club' I said, 'What? you threw the ice cube at my head, but you're talking about chattin' shit bruv. You're like being a little child. And then two twos (before I knew it) the guy's like, 'Yeah? Alright - watch,' and got on the phone. I'm not thinking nothing two twos I looked to my left, vroom got run over, just like that. The guy run me over. He called somebody to run me over. Yeah, run me over on the pavement. I was in a coma. I had broken ribs, a broken pelvis. Everything was broken. I had a broken jaw. A cracked skull. They thought I had brain damage. They thought my brain is never going to be the same. And I'm not the same.....It made me think, like. Because of that little argument – if I'd just left it – it was only an ice cube. It didn't hurt. Because there was girls I just wanted to be the play the man innit. Not the bigger man, but the big man. But really I should have been the bigger man and just left it. But I didn't, and I've got the consequences of that, innit?.' (Curtis, aged 18, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

## The role of gangs

Rather different views were expressed among the young men we interviewed about the link between the crime and violence they described and the presence of 'gangs' in their neighbourhood. On the one hand, some clearly associated these problems with gangs and gang rivalries, particularly over territory.

*In my area there's a gang, like all the boys are together, and they have huge feuds with other gangs from other areas. So, where I live, we don't like – our area doesn't like Ladbroke Grove. That's an example. [And what sort of happens in these feuds then?] Anything. Fights, people robbing other people, and stuff like that. (Aaron, year 10, on re-engagement scheme)*

*It's rough. Basically, like people killing people from other ends (areas), stabbing them up, shooting them, anything. If someone from a different end is in our ends then we just get onto them. (Tyler, aged 14, permanently excluded from first school, now at second school after several fixed period exclusions, but bunking off several days per week)*

Some claimed they had friends who belonged to well-known local gangs, mainly for protection and a sense of belonging to a family. They were aware of local gangs with a hierarchical structure, from 'olders' who ran criminal enterprises down to 'youngers' who actually sold drugs, committed robberies, carried weapons and perpetrated most of the violence.

*The real bad mans, they want to make money, but they're the ones that pay [someone else] to do whatever. So when you make money you don't even have to be bad. You can afford not to be bad 'cos you can afford to pass that weight on your shoulders to be bad to someone else. You just pay that one. (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

However, the idea of a well organised hierarchy was questioned by others. They believed that things were changing and becoming more volatile, with youngers no longer respecting olders but hungry to have more power and money themselves. Also, when they spoke about gangs, it was not necessarily in terms of a single or united group dominating a particular area, but of a looser structure of groups within groups. When disputes or rivalries erupted, members had to decide where their loyalties lay.

*Within the gang it's war innit, and people get stabbed and injured, and it's a big area innit so there's more than one group now like. Usually, it used to be one big group, but there's more than one group now. So if these guys are closer to this guy, and he had a madness [an altercation] with someone, he's going to be like, 'Why are you chilling with him still?' (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

Some even questioned the idea that 'gangs', a term they claimed was mainly used by others, such as people in the media, were responsible for the high level of crime in their area. In their experience, it was more a case of a group of friends 'sticking together' and watching each other's backs. They might smoke weed together, commit a robbery together, sell drugs but, most crucially, they would defend each other or retaliate if one of the group was threatened. Territory was important and going out of your territory was dangerous, but mainly because these groups of friends were trying to protect lucrative criminal activities. If others came into their area selling drugs, for example, the local young men thought they should be getting the money. If outsiders came into their area to commit robberies and the police became

involved, then local groups would get the blame. However, some admitted that they had used the term 'gang' when they were younger in order to get a tough reputation

*Well, yeah, back in day I could say a gang when we was like fourteen or fifteen. I could say a gang, 'cos that's when we was around trying to get our names up and, you know what I'm saying? But now, like now I'm 18 I don't class it as a gang, I just class it as a proper, like proper friendship, you know what I'm saying?* (Aldane, aged 17, permanently excluded in year 10, unemployed)

Rather than gangs of twenty to thirty members, as featured in the popular stereotype, these groups of friends tended to be smaller, perhaps numbering six or eight. With bigger groups, most members would run away at the first sign of trouble, so only a smaller group could be counted on for support. When referring to their own circle, our interviewees sometimes talked about '*my people*', and distinguished between different types of friend, using the analogy of a second family for those closest to them.

*They're like family. The same love I feel for my cousin I'd have for them. If they was about to get shot you'd try your hardest to not let them get shot and probably take the bullet for them.* (Leopold, aged 19, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)

*It's family innit ?. So I'd do anything for them. We're just open to each other. It's like having a brother that you like, or a sister that you like being with. Because you know you get brothers and sisters that just annoy you, but my friends are like brothers, but you like them..... obviously there's negatives, but I don't know what to say about the bad things. Say if one of them gets into a fight you'll have to back him, so that's a bit of a letdown.* (Curtis, aged 18, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)

Less close than the family-like ties was a second tier of friends or associates. Although they might hang around together, these associates could not be trusted and might double cross each other – '*sometimes they snake you cos they're jealous of how much you're making*'. They certainly could not be relied on in situations of personal danger.

The teachers interviewed in this study also maintained that close friendship groups could act like family and that '*like attracts like*' so that those going through similar problems at home would find comfort in each other's company. In this context, media hype about gangs was counterproductive.

*Once upon a time if you saw half a dozen boys walking down the street, they're 'friends'. Now you see half a dozen boys walking down the street they're a 'gang', so they're going to cause a problem.* (Head of Mentoring)

They argued that '*kids*' were influenced by gangster culture in the USA and thought it was cool to say they were in a gang. What was needed was more media emphasis on young men who do well, pass their exams and go to university rather than on those involved in delinquency and crime.

### **5.3 Engagement in criminal activities**

As well as living in very high crime neighbourhoods, some of the young people interviewed also had personal experience of engaging in crime.

## Past misdemeanours

Among the Gaskell Academy pupils were those who admitted that they had been involved in antisocial behaviour when they were younger. This ranged from spraying paint on boats in the canal or throwing fireworks in lifts, to fights, none of which had been very violent. However, some young men had been pressured by friends to steal mobile phones. Whatever the activity, these pupils had become worried about the possible consequences of their actions. They were frightened about being arrested, and they did not want to 'end up' like people they knew who had been sent to jail or become victims of extreme violence.

Just one of the community interviewees had made crime a thing of the past. He used to do street robberies, mainly taking mobile phones and selling them at £30 a piece. But once he enrolled in college on a course he enjoyed, he decided he wanted to pursue a legitimate career as a plumber. He also felt he should act as 'the man of the house' and set a good example to his younger brother.

## Crime as a way of life

Apart from this one young man, however, all the other community interviewees were routinely engaged in criminal activities. Indeed, they were recruited into the study for this reason. None were in legitimate paid employment and so were keen to find different ways of saving or making money. One young man preferred shoplifting and fare dodging as an alternative to more serious robbery or selling drugs

*One thing I do now is I steal food from Sainsburys, this is on a daily basis like. Yeah, and I jump trains everyday. I need some kind of fund raising so I ain't gotta live life in vile ways.* (Winston, aged 19, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)

However, the same young man had also beaten up a taxi driver, just to get his cab fare back.

Street robbery was a common source of income. This was basically an opportunistic crime but the young men found that threats or actual violence were routinely effective in securing cash and mobile phones.

*Like if I'm desperate for money I'll go out and I'll rob someone. I won't care. If they've got anything nice, anything that I like, or if they just look rich. I don't care if it's on the road, I don't care if anyone sees me. I'll run to them, punch them, take their thing and then go... It's quick.* (Zidane, aged 14, still at school after several fixed period exclusions, but bunking off several days per week)

Some had begun their thieving career as early as primary school, taking bicycles and selling them on. Others had started at secondary school, stealing money and phones from blazers in the changing room or using intimidation to get what they wanted.

*To rob them I'd just go up to them and say, 'Where are you from?' If they say something stupid, like from an end I don't like I'm, 'Right. Give me your phone and your money.' And they'll just hand it over, like purely from fear* (Tyler, aged 14, permanently excluded from first school, now at second school after several fixed period exclusions, but bunking off several days per week).

More lucrative, though more dangerous, than stealing from members of the public was robbing drug dealers or others who were known to have made a big haul. One young man claimed to be making, on average, £3000 per day from all his activities



but, at seventeen, he had to be careful not to flash it around, for fear of being robbed himself.

*I stash it in people's houses. You can't have more than a grand in your house, you can't have more than five bills (five hundred) in your pocket. You can't leave it just lying around.. But really you shouldn't keep it in your house. Like I said, what I do, I rob about six people a day. Obviously if you've got money people will try to rob you as well, won't it. So you can't leave it hanging around. People get kidnapped. It's not a joke. They kidnap you and ask you where your money is. People do stuff. They hurt you. The stuff you see in the movies, it's not a joke, they actually do it, the hammers to the feet, everything, they do it. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

Other forms of stealing included 'doing an AC', illegally transferring money from people's accounts, or cloning bank cards.

*I did an AC a couple of weeks ago, no was it a couple of weeks ago? Yeah about a month and a half ago, got four grand out of it. I'm still like kind of living off that, do you know what I mean? ... It's like a, it's like me taking money out of your account but I don't do it, some other geezer does it. We find a bank account for him to put it into like, say, I know someone that wants a bit of money, that would do anything for a bit of money that's got a bank account, we'll put, that person will put money into their account. Like that's how you do it with all those gadgets and that. But I take my cut out of it 'cos I found the person that's got the account and the person who put the money would take a cut out of it. Yeah, another way of doing it, so, there's a woman in, there's a Chinese restaurant whenever you give your card we'll take the strip from the back and take the back, the strip off the back of it. Like say you give your card, I wanna pay for this, she'll scan whatever you pay for and then she'll scan the strip for herself and keep it and then give it to us. We'll put a new strip, put that strip onto a new, another card and just take out as much as we want. (Omar, aged 21, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

Big hauls could also be made by raiding cash boxes. .

*You know them boxes? The boxes that they carry to banks and that? If we see them, and there's a couple of us, we'll just snatch it out of them and run. Bring it back to the estate, pop it in the right way so the ink don't drip on the money. [How did you learn how to do that?] Just from the older lot.... [And how much can you make doing that then? How much is in that normally?] Over ten grand (Zidane, aged 14, still at school after several fixed period exclusions, but bunking off several days per week)*

Selling drugs was another source of income but the young men varied in the type of drugs they supplied. Some found it safer to stick to weed

*I don't shot (sell) white (coke). I shot weed. White is more of a big boys' game.... White is more money than weed, innit?. So if I started shottin' white on someone else's territory I'm pissed 'cos I'm messing with that boy's money. [And what would happen as a result of that?] Anyone that shots white must have a strap (gun) innit, so I'll probably get shot up or shanked (stabbed). (Tyler, aged 14, permanently excluded from first school, now at second school after several fixed period exclusions, but bunking off several days per week).*

Others, however, were selling all kinds of drugs, 'white' (coke) and 'brown' (heroin) - , *'it's hit the strip innit, like selling, selling food (drugs) that's it. Dark and light, fucking white and b innit?'*

Finally, some of the community interviewees had been involved in violent assaults, having been shot or stabbed. They claimed they routinely carried a weapon, either a

knife or a gun, and had to be prepared to use it, for their own safety or that of their family.

*You have to have protection from whoever you're having trouble with. Obviously they're trying to kill you, so obviously you've got to try to kill them before they kill you... If you're on your own, boy, you best go cock your gun, or a knife. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

*If I got jumped I wouldn't jump someone back, I'd shoot them. Like, I wouldn't fight someone back if I know that they're gonna still be alive because they know where I live at the end of the day, everyone knows where my mum lives ... So if someone jumped me I wouldn't jump them back I'll do something, I'll take their life away so they won't do something so they all know it's me, because something would happen to my mum. (Winston, aged 19, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

In some instances, the young men had become caught up in a violent encounter when protecting their friends

*..... Like obviously like I said, yeah, I'm part of a group innit so just there like a couple of boys tried to chase my mates so obviously I come down, stabbed a youth and obviously they sent me jail for it, innit? (Cadman, aged 16, dropped out of school at 15 when went to jail, unemployed)*

## **5.4 Routes into crime**

Many different and often interlinked routes into crime were described by the people in our study, including the need to alleviate boredom, the influence of social contacts, a lack of alternative opportunities, the desire for material goods, and the attraction of gaining a 'bad' reputation.

### **An antidote to boredom**

Boredom was a factor in some young men's journey into crime. This had been a particular problem when they had been excluded from school. With time on their hands and missing their friends, they started hanging out on the street, getting into trouble

*So it was just, yeah, so like when I got excluded I felt, 'cos I was at home I thought, I wanna go back to school now man, this is all lonely, like my mum's got work, my brother's going to school, I'm in the house by myself doing nothing. So, yeah, when I got kicked out, that's when I was just at home with nothing to do. So, like, I started getting in trouble with the police and that when I weren't going school and that, just on the streets really yeah. (Aldane, aged 17, permanently excluded in year 10, unemployed)*

Some admitted that they actually got a thrill from engaging in crime, but in this instance they were talking exclusively about street robbery. One aspect of the buzz was the spontaneous, opportunistic nature of the encounter, the snap decision to target a particular person. Linked to this was the element of uncertainty involved – *'It's like a little adrenalin rush, innit, because you don't know what you're going to get'*. The excitement could even become addictive so that street robberies were difficult to give up.

## Social contacts

One of the consequences of school exclusion – being bored and lonely, was that these young men started to mix with others who were also not at school and, consequently, socially available during the day. Gradually a delinquent peer group was formed, as described by Leopold, aged 19, who was unemployed after being excluded from school in year 10

*After about a month I wanted to go back to school, I was missing that. I was bored. Then when you're bored you only get up to mischief, you find friends, how can I say it? You find people like you 'cos they're not at school because they've been excluded. So like some of my closest friends today I know because I got excluded, but I wouldn't've known them otherwise.*

Sometimes people became involved in crime through peer pressure. A group of friends would be on the street and someone in the group would spot an opportunity to commit a robbery and persuade others to join in. Or friends would get caught in a fight if one of their crowd was threatened. Group loyalty and acceptance were considered very important

*... At the end of the day you're with him, you're with them, and they take you as they're your mate. They ... [unclear phrase] ... you can't say no, you can't just say no, you have to say yes. Because if you say no, you might feel guilty or they might not like you. (Aaron, year 10, on re-engagement scheme)*

Family contacts were another key route into crime. In some cases, the young men reported that members of their family were already involved in illegal activities, of whom some had served time in jail, and they wanted to be have the money and goods they saw their siblings or cousins enjoying

*Well, well I've got like four older brothers, yeah, yeah, but they don't live with me any more. They're all older. But they used to bring a lot of havoc to my mum's house and stuff. So like I can say like the havoc that they used to bring to my mum's house and what I used to see and they used to show me and stuff, it just made me think, alright cool- I wanna be like my older brothers, you know what I mean? (Aldane, aged 17, permanently excluded in year 10, unemployed)*

Dara, one of the Gaskell Academy students on the re-engagement scheme, described how he got into crime through members of his family.

*I went into it from Year 9. Most of the people, my relatives and my family, like do that as well, innit? And so, obviously, to me it's kind of pressured, 'cos obviously I saw people doing it and I'm thinking – and I just saw money in their hands at that time. Obviously everyone wants money, so I'm just thinking what can I do? So I just went to my cousin and my cousin just told me what to do, and that's really it.*

In other cases, the young men had been specifically asked to carry out crimes, such as running drug errands, by an 'older', someone higher up the criminal hierarchy.

*I don't know like, see, like obviously there's a lot of people, you see people selling food (drugs) and that, see bare (lots of) shit happening, like, you know. Then after I just some how got into it, someone just said, 'do this for me, like get a little oner (100 pounds) a day or something, feel me'. So I'm just thinking, woah like a oner, people who are older ain't seen that kinda dough. (Cadman, aged 16, dropped out of school at 15 when went to jail, unemployed)*

## Perceived lack of alternative opportunities

The community interviewees who had dropped out or been excluded from school had not achieved any GCSE grades A to C. and some had no passes at all. In their experience, this put them at a great disadvantage when applying for jobs, as employers would make assumptions about their ability based on their lack of academic qualifications

*I'm not a dumb criminal, I'm not some little roadrunner, I'm an entrepreneur.... Obviously they looked at my grades and ...fair enough my attendance was low, yeah. So I give them that. It was right. But how can you tell I'm not dumb. I know I'm not dumb, yeah, but how do you know I'm just not dumb [from looking at my grades]? (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

For this young man, the prospect of rejection by potential employers was just too daunting

*But like I can't just like go around slaving myself, handing out CVs just to get refused. That's not me man. Because do you know how much that affects you? I swear that affects me in a big way. I'm honest. If I done that, if I went to three interviews and got turned down I swear I'd probably just rob a bank or something like that, I'd be feeling so low. I don't like feeling low. I don't want another person to make me feel low. So I'd rather just do what I know.*

Those who had managed to secure some legal employment had found it too poorly paid to be worth the effort. By the time they had paid tax and a contribution to the household expenses, there was not enough money left for leisure pursuits, clothes, or weed. Instead, they preferred to do occasional cash jobs for family or friends but to rely mainly on earnings from the road.

## The desire for material goods

Another reason these young men had turned to crime was they saw this as the only way they might achieve the material lifestyle to which they aspired – for example the possession of gold chains, designer label clothes, a fast car, and the money to afford drugs, or expensive liquor, such as spirits and champagne.

*Obviously seeing older boys round my estate with big chains, loads of money, obviously when you're young you want that, init, you want one. You're thinking, yeah, I want my own money to get sweets, init. You wanna find out how they getting that money. (Dion, aged 17, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

Some had ambitions to travel and were critical of the limited horizons of some of their contemporaries.

*A lot of people have never left this country, so all they know is this country. So, like, I've been around. I've been around in the Caribbean. I've been to Africa. I've been around in Europe. I know there's stuff out there to see. If someone got bored of being in London they'll go to Brighton. I've been to Brighton. I done that two years ago. Like me, I'm trying to save money to go abroad, like go to America or something with my boys. That's what I really want to do. I want to take me and my boys go Miami and rave, innit? (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

Among those interviewed, some claimed they could make several thousand pounds each month from being on the roads, something they could never attain through paid employment.

*They were on the roads, innit, making their money. 'Cos obviously if you ain't going to be in school you ain't going to get your four GCSEs, you ain't going to get a good job. You're going to get obviously minimum wage and stuff. And I don't want to see a person I went to school with, yeah, in a better car than me. They're looking at me and I'm still on my pedal bike. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

### **The importance of reputation – wanting to be the bad man**

Finally, building a reputation for being 'cool' and 'bad' could lead young men into criminal activity.

*There was a thing where like everyone wanted to be the baddest, if you get what I'm trying to say? Like it was the big thing to be the baddest. If you're the baddest you're the guy, like you're the cool kid innit. It's like that. So obviously everyone wanted to be the baddest. [And what would make you the baddest?] I don't know, like stupid things, like have a fight, rob a phone off someone. Something stupid like that. (Curtis, aged 18, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed).*

Sometimes the young men had got involved in crime because they had aspirations to be the 'bad man' in the sense of the one at the top of the criminal hierarchy, making all the money. In this way, they could define themselves as an '*entrepreneur*', not just a '*dumb criminal*'. The bad man was seen as an admirable role model.

*I don't know man. Shit. I thought a bad man was the way forward. You know when you watch them films and you see the bad man having a good time, and you look up to the bad man and think, I want to be a bad man. (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

For others, being the bad man had not been the initial motivator, but was something they hoped to achieve in the future.

*I'll be having people on the road doing it for me. Obviously when I'm a big man I will have people my age doing what I was doing. So I'll just pass it on to the generation. (Abasi, aged 17, dropped out of school at 15, unemployed)*

## **5.5 Strategies for staying out of trouble**

Living in neighbourhoods where criminal activity was all around meant that conscious efforts had to be made not to get caught up in it, and people were aware of how this limited their freedom of action. Gaskell Academy students described a number of different strategies for staying out of trouble and avoiding crime altogether whereas the community interviewees talked about avoiding additional trouble and staying out of danger (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Avoidance strategies**

Gaskell Academy interviewees	Community interviewees
Limiting social contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- staying in</li> <li>- choosing specific activity and venue</li> <li>- choosing friends carefully</li> </ul>	Limiting social contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- avoiding social events where participants are unknown</li> </ul>
Limiting territory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- not hanging around on the streets</li> <li>- avoiding rival neighbourhoods</li> <li>- using private rather than public transport</li> <li>- staying in smaller groups when out of area</li> <li>- choosing big public spaces</li> </ul>	Limiting territory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- avoiding rival neighbourhoods</li> </ul>
Setting own limits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- own moral compass</li> <li>- having confidence to say 'no'</li> </ul>	Setting own limits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- being selective about type of crime</li> </ul>
Avoiding the fate of friends	

### Limiting social contact

One solution, mentioned by Gaskell Academy students was to simply avoid spending leisure time away from home or socialising outside school. This had the added advantage of helping the young men concentrate on their studies and the prospect of doing well at school, going to college and getting a good job kept them focussed and out of trouble

*I'm not, social life not so much. I used to come to all that social life, not any more now. [What's changed?] Just really and truly in all honesty most of these people that I go to school with now, don't get me wrong, I love everyone, I get along with everyone ...[unclear phrase]... and I've been told I'm a personable person so I get along with everyone but I don't know, I don't think that – I wouldn't necessarily say I don't think I will know them in a couple of years time because maybe I won't, maybe I would, but I'm sort of more focused on myself as from now. It's education innit, you've gotta be selfish. That's the reason I'm still here. Selfish on my education up to now. (Alvin, year 11, member of mentoring group)*

Another approach was to limit social interaction to visiting friends' houses, with Play Station a popular choice of activity. Alternatively, these young people met with friends outside the home but only for a particular activity in a specific venue, such as: playing football, pool or basketball; attending a youth club; going shopping; or seeing a film together.

Being careful in your choice of friends was also mentioned as a way of avoiding trouble. Even if you could not exclude all bad influences, it was important to have some good people in your group to provide a balance – *'you really you don't get into as much trouble if you don't have all bad friends'*.

Community interviewees talked about avoiding trouble by not socialising with people they did not know, especially if it was in another area

*Certain areas you go to, yeah, if you want to go to a certain party you will have to bring a gun if it's not your area, innit? Like you can bring a knife but when you get that out how many people are you going to stab, two, before you get bottled and you're fucked. They're trying to kill you. So me, if I don't know no one there I'm not even going to bother going there. (Clarence, aged 18, given several fixed period exclusions, finally dropping out of school at 15, unemployed)*

## Limiting territory

Generally not hanging around on the streets was considered a sensible option, as was avoiding unfamiliar or known 'rival' neighbourhoods. Travelling by taxi or by car was seen as safer than using public transport where you might get caught in an altercation with another group. Going out with just two or three friends if you were leaving your area was seen as safer than being on your own or with a bigger group. On the other hand, going to large, busy public areas, such as Hyde Park, was judged to be relatively safe. Not going out of your area was also mentioned as a way of steering clear of trouble by the community interviewees.

Others, however, thought it was important not to be intimidated by the bad reputation of particular neighbourhoods and not to let this limit one's options.

*I remember when I was in west London and I went to school there, and Brixton came on the news and heard it on the news, and these people they were getting so gassed up (hyped up) about that and like, Brixton, brap brap -brap, but they're from west London. And they ain't even from west London, actually from Middlesex. So, in their lyrics they always say, I'm west man, west man, when we're in Southall. But it's not bad around that area, no it's not, it's not. I mean it can, people can look at it as a bad place or whatever. But, no, I don't, I don't see any place as a bad place really. I see negative vibes and stuff like that from going in someone's house. But that's their territory, the street's for anyone really but if you wanna walk around the streets you've gotta walk around them, you can't be scared. (Winston, aged 19, permanently excluded from school in year 10, unemployed)*

## Developing your own limits

Gaskell Academy students also spoke of developing their own moral compass and having the confidence to say 'no' to friends who tried to lure them into committing crime. Sometimes this came about because of a deliberate decision to set a good example to younger siblings; alternatively it was simply part of the process of growing up. Some admitted that they had been caught up in various misdemeanours in the past because they found it hard to refuse when they were thirteen or fourteen, but by the time they were sixteen or seventeen they were able to remain friends with a delinquent peer group without joining them in street robberies or fights.

*Even now there's situations, like if you're just hanging around with a mate, if I'm with a couple of people and a situation occurs where they have to do something and I don't want to do it, I have to say that I don't want to do it, innit? But to them it might seem like I'm chickening out. But they know me. If I say I don't want to do it they're not going to pressure me and say, 'Come. Stop being a pussy,' or whatever, because they know if I say I'm not going to do it, I'm not going to do it. Our relationships are different..... Then I wanted more of a respect*

*like, I wanted to make myself something, but now I've probably grown out of it like. I just don't really see the point. (Aaron, year 10, on re-engagement scheme)*

For community interviewees, on the other hand, it was a question of limiting trouble by being selective in the crimes they committed. For example some chose to sell weed rather than heroin and cocaine because these were the 'big boys' game' and it would be too dangerous to compete. One young man limited his activities to shoplifting rather than engaging in street robbery.

## **Avoiding the fate of friends**

In some cases, it was just that the young men had grown tired of watching their backs all the time and they had seen too many friends get killed or end up in prison. This, together with a growing sense of purpose helped them turn their life around.

*When you grow up on an estate you start off the innocent stage where everyone just plays football. Then you get to an age where curiosity starts to take over. Obviously curiosity killed the cat but that's just [So, what sort of things did you get up to, when you first, when you lost your innocence if you like?] Generally getting chased by police, messing about, I've been in a couple of bad situations, couple of bad things happened. .. nothing serious, obviously smoking marijuana ..... this shit is so easy to get into. It's so available. Can't really make weed illegal, man, it's just so available, might as well be legal..... And then got to Year 9 and had this mentality switch, almost like an epiphany. I just woke up one day and I thought, what am I doing? [So what happened?] I think I started – you know when I first started noticing it, one of my friends passed away back then, one of my friends got shot at that time and it obviously – and the thing I just started to notice, before he got – a couple of months before him another one of my friends got stabbed and then it was just a chain of events like over five months, like my friends getting stabbed, shot, bottled, battered. In a nutshell I just thought 'no man, I can't end up like that'. Everyone told me I had so much potential and everyone told me I'd got a lot to live for and I'm just thinking to myself, would I really be willing to throw this all away? Am I willing, am I so willing to live the moment that I can ignore the future and all that? And I can't. I'd rather suffer in the moment and live in the future, rather than live for the moment and suffer in the future. (Alvin, year 11, member of mentoring group)*

Having discussed ways in which the young people in our study became involved in crime, or managed to avoid doing so, in the final section of this paper we return to our overall project aims – exploring the links between low achievement, school exclusion and crime, and draw on the data from our study to illustrate the process in more detail.



## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 *Low achievement, school exclusion and crime revisited*

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, there is clear support in the literature for a link between low achievement, school exclusion and crime and a number of factors and processes have been identified and put forward by way of explanation, particularly in relation to the overrepresentation of African-Caribbean males in official statistics. These include, for example, economic deprivation and marginalisation, challenging neighbourhoods; difficult family circumstances, racial exclusion and stereotyping, an emphasis on material possessions, a hyper-masculine street culture that dismisses the value of educational qualifications, and individual problems with aggression and anger. Building on the idea of interconnected contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Cole, 1996; Sellman et al, 2002; and Kirk, 2009) we 'locate' a number of factors on an overall map, shown in Figure 11, but we *represent them in terms of the perceptions and accounts of the young men and teachers in our study*. In this way, we aim to illustrate the processes that link 'trouble at school' with 'trouble on the street', using an 'abductive' logic that builds on the way it looks to the people involved (Blaikie, 2009). Of course, mapping this is complicated and messy, as the many arrows in the diagram reveal, not the stuff of elegant models. In our attempt to display micro-social processes (Spencer et al, 2013), we adopt a retroductive logic (Blaikie, 2009), and aim to convey the complex interplay of influences that *could have* shaped young people's behaviour.

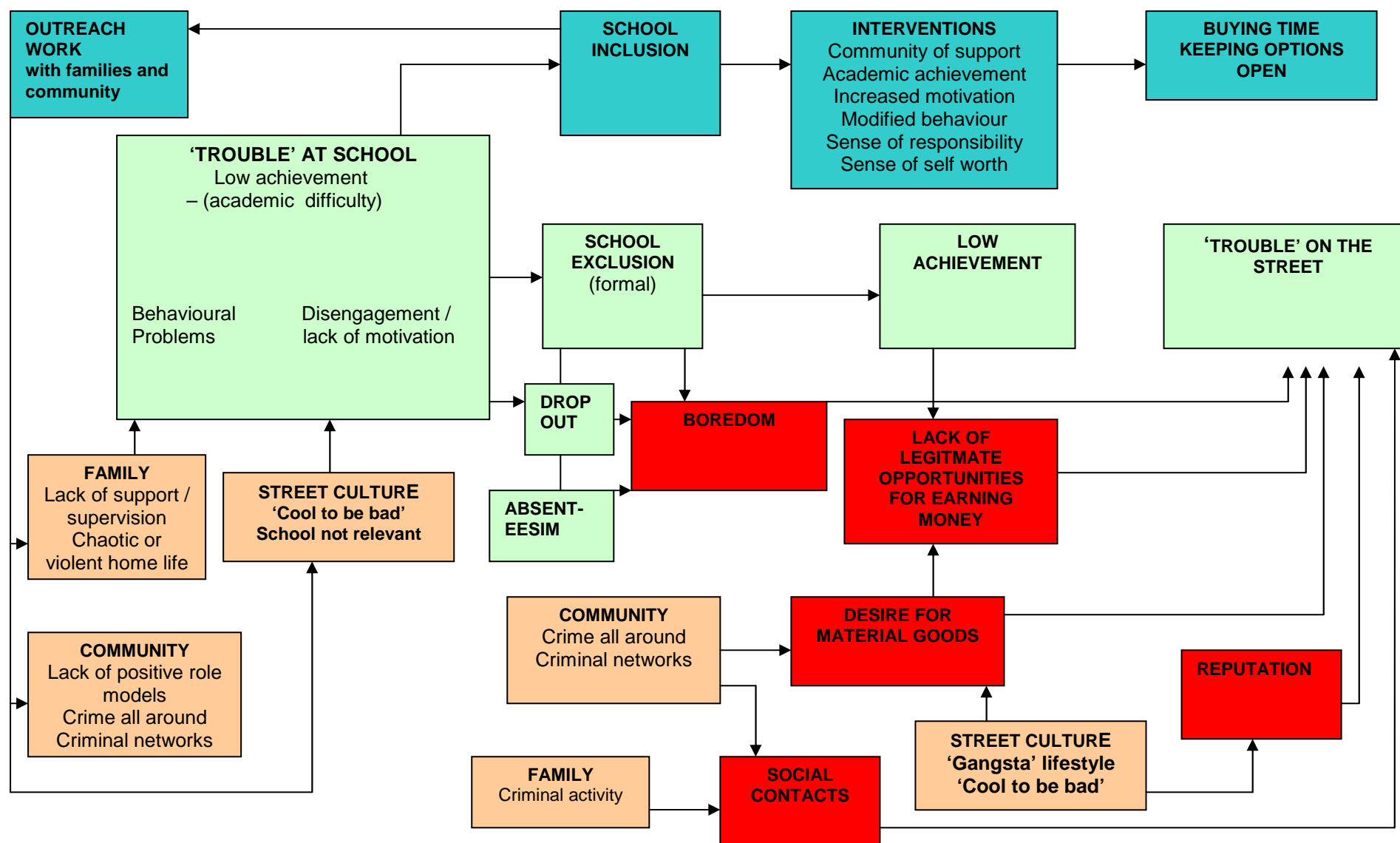
The pale green boxes on the map refer to the low achievement – school exclusion – crime pattern identified in the literature. However, low achievement appears twice: as an aspect of 'trouble' at school and as an outcome of school exclusion. We have also added drop out and absenteeism as informal aspects of exclusion. This means that we have the following six boxes representing key stages in an overall process. :

- trouble at school (academic difficulty, behaviour problems and disengagement)
- formal school exclusion
- drop out
- absenteeism
- low achievement (few or no academic qualifications)
- trouble on the street (crime).

The five boxes highlighted in red represent the routes into crime identified by the young people in our study:

- boredom
- social contacts
- lack of legitimate opportunities for earning money
- desire for material goods
- reputation as a 'bad man'

Figure 11: Mapping the links between low achievement, school exclusion and crime



Key factors and influences identified in the literature are highlighted in orange and appear in different places on the map, depending on the particular aspect deemed to be relevant. These influences include:

- family (lack of support or supervision; chaotic or violent home life; criminal behaviour among family members)
- community (deprivation in the sense of lack of facilities and amenities – *'nothing to do'*, and the pervasive nature of crime and criminal networks – *'it's all around'*)
- street culture (it is 'cool' to be bad; school is not relevant, the dream of the 'gangsta' lifestyle)
- wider culture (an emphasis on material values and lifestyle)

Finally, the boxes highlighted in turquoise refer to inclusive school interventions, which are discussed in the second half of this section.

## The map explained

Data from our qualitative study indicate that pupils get into trouble at school in three main ways: they struggle academically and fall behind, their behaviour is disruptive, abusive or violent – or even criminal in the sense of stealing from other members of the school community, or they become de-motivated and disengaged, not concentrating in class, skipping certain lessons or absenting themselves from school altogether. However, these different kinds of trouble are often interconnected; for example if students find a subject difficult they may not be able to concentrate and may start fooling about in class or express their frustration through other forms of bad behaviour, or they may become de-motivated and stop making an effort with their academic work. Bad behaviour of itself may lead to poor academic performance because students are too frustrated and angry to learn

According to the teachers and young people we interviewed, **family background** can influence trouble at school because of lack of support for academic work, particularly homework. A chaotic or violent home environment can mean that young men take their anger and frustration into school, becoming disruptive or aggressive. **Street culture** may also influence behaviour and motivation at school in the way it extols the virtues of being 'bad' and the idea that school is not 'cool'.

When students experience academic difficulties, feel de-motivated or get in trouble over their behaviour, they may decide to exclude themselves from school, 'bunking off' or dropping out of the education system altogether. A **street culture** that devalues academic achievement encouraged some in our study to take this route, concluding that school *'was just not for me'*. Alternatively, the school itself takes action and excludes pupils for disruptive or violent behaviour.

Although schools are responsible for arranging alternative provision for excluded pupils, in practice, once out of mainstream education students are unlikely to gain academic qualifications and the problem of low achievement is exacerbated. They are then at a disadvantage in the job market, and their perceived **lack of legitimate opportunities for making money** may lead them to engage in various kinds of crime in order to survive economically. Being out of school also means that they are at a loose end, with time on their hands and no structure to their day. The resulting sense of **boredom** can lead some young men to resort to illegal activities just for

something to do, or to provide some kind of excitement in their life – ‘*an adrenalin rush*’. **Community** factors are also an important influence at this stage: the absence of facilities or interesting activities – ‘*nothing to do*’ - means that young men may get ‘*up to no good ... crime, doing stuff, stealing things from different people, just doing bad things really*’.

Exclusion from school also means that young people can be lonely and miss their friends. In their search for company, they meet others who are also out of school, and who may turn out to be a ‘bad’ influence. **Social contacts** in general can provide an important route into crime. For example, in **communities** with high levels of crime it is easy to get caught up in criminal networks or be recruited to run illegal errands. **Family** can also be a source of criminal contacts, providing a ready-made entrée into illegal activity should a relative wish to take this path.

An emphasis on material goods in the **wider culture** can fuel young people’s aspirations, but it seems that **street culture** might be an even more important influence, particularly on young African-Caribbean men, given the actual items they crave. Obvious symbols of wealth – gold chains, fast cars, designer label clothes, and expensive liquor – are the objects of their desire, the archetypal trappings of a ‘gangsta’ lifestyle. Young men are aware of ‘bad men’ in their **community** who live like this and want to emulate them. However, it is a lifestyle based on the spoils of crime, and crime is the only way that the young men can envisage having that kind of wealth.

Finally, **street culture** may attract young men into a life of crime because not only do they want the material trappings of the ‘bad man’, they want to be ‘bad men’ themselves. In their view, robbery and selling drugs would not only bring them material success but also a sense of identity and respect. Indeed, one young man wanted to be treated as an ‘*entrepreneur*’ rather than a ‘*dumb criminal*’. Being prepared to engage in violence is also an important aspect of the tough, bad man persona, someone who is not to be messed with, who is not a victim.

## **A complex interplay of factors**

The evidence from our qualitative study provides support for the thesis that the links between low achievement, school exclusion and crime are underpinned by a complex interplay of influences as argued by, for example, Case and Haines (2008), Lea and Young (1993) and Young (1999). Some of these influences are structural, such as the deprivation found in certain neighbourhoods, or the exclusion from – or at least disadvantage in – the labour market for those without academic qualifications. Others relate to aspects of family breakdown and disorganisation, where young people are growing up in chaotic and violent households. At the cultural level, it seems that an emphasis on material lifestyle can fuel aspirations that are unrealistic. The response of the school is also crucial to the long term opportunities of young people and exclusion makes them even more vulnerable to the risk of becoming involved in crime.

Of particular relevance for this study of African-Caribbean young men, however, is the pressure and lure of street culture, compounding the influence of other factors. Rooted in Black American gangster movies and ‘gangsta’ rap, which extol the hyper-masculine virtues of being tough and ‘bad’, dismissing education and qualifications as a route to ‘success’ and defining ‘success’ in terms of flamboyant and outward displays wealth (albeit wealth in the sense of disposable income rather than long term assets), this culture can provide an alternative road map and a sense of identity.

## **6.2 Implications for school interventions**

### **The current policy context**

Of course, if pupils are formally excluded from school alternative provision is statutorily required. However, the quality of that provision can be very varied, as a recent Ofsted report confirmed (Ofsted, 2011). Indeed the young men in our study were extremely critical of the arrangements made for them, especially at Pupil Referral Units, and soon made the decision to drop out anyway. So, whether students drop out of alternative provision, or directly out of school, they are then disadvantaged in the job market because they lack the qualifications that employers are looking for.

These problems are not new, as discussed earlier in this paper, and are very much on the political agenda again. For example, the Department for Education has launched a three year project, running from 2011 to 2014 and involving 180 schools in 11 Local Authorities, in which schools take on more responsibility for organising alternative provision for permanently excluded pupils. Funding for placements comes from money devolved from Local Authority budgets and there is also funding for earlier interventions to reduce the need for exclusion. Early feedback from the project suggests that greater effort needs to be focused on early intervention, picking up students who might be at risk of exclusion (DfE, 2013).

### **Taking a multi-stranded approach**

More than a decade ago, an evaluation of school-based interventions concluded that single-stranded initiatives, tackling just one aspect of students' behaviour, were less successful than ones adopting a multi-stranded approach (Hallam and Castle, 2001). In this context, the interventions introduced by the school in our study are particularly relevant. Gaskell Academy adopts a supportive rather than punitive approach, aiming to avert the need for exclusion by tackling 'trouble' on several different fronts. Early detection and support are at the centre of its strategy so that students whose academic performance or behaviour is a cause for concern, and those at risk of exclusion, are identified and given help.

Those with challenging or violent behaviour are given individual mentoring or referred to the Learning Support Centre. In the case of year 10 and year 11 boys, special mentoring groups have been set up, which the students attend each week. Pupils identified as having behaviour problems at primary school are given extra help when they make the transition to secondary school and are placed in special year 7 class for their first term. Support offered for challenging behaviour includes anger management counselling, encouragement to think through the consequences of actions, and mentors going into the classroom to help them resolve issues. Those in mentoring groups are encouraged to share their experiences with each other, and students who spent time in the Learning Support Centre can return there at any time if they feel a situation escalating out of control.

Low or under achievement is addressed through special literacy and numeracy tuition, or through referral to the Learning Support Centre where the high teacher

pupil ratio means that intensive help can be given. Re-engagement and respite schemes have also been set up for pupils excluded from other schools. Since the research reported here was completed, the re-engagement and respite schemes have been reorganised into a single one year programme offering alternative provision for year 10 and 11 students from other schools across three London boroughs. All participants take a minimum of 5 GCSEs, including English and mathematics and, so far, 94% have achieved at least 7 passes.

Staff also attempt to identify cases where under achievement is linked to a lack of motivation rather than academic difficulty, or to a fear of failure, which prompts students, particularly young black males, to put in so little effort that they can then rationalise poor performance by saying they didn't *'really try'*. Special motivational mentoring groups have been set up for boys in year 10 and year 11, in which they are encouraged to discuss any difficulties they are experiencing and to set their sights higher. Visits have also been arranged from an ex pupil who is studying at Cambridge University.

As well as working with students on their behaviour and motivation, the school helps students to build a sense of competence and self-worth, and to gain respect within the school community. Various opportunities to take on responsibilities are provided, such as deputising as prefects in year 10, acting as a mentor to younger pupils in the school, and working in the school youth club.

Aware that pupils' achievement and conduct are influenced by pressures outside the school, an additional aim of all the mentoring groups has been to tackle street culture that dismisses the value of education and promotes tough and violent behaviour. Gaskell Academy is also engaged in outreach work with parents, attempting to build a partnership with them, and in the wider community. Indeed, since the research took place the school has obtained funding to work with pupils over the age of 16, enabling them to gain GCSEs and supporting them to go on to A level. Some of the students have been referred as they come out of a young offenders' institution, others have been directly recruited in the community, through a joint venture between the school and local youth clubs in one particularly deprived ward.

As discussed in section 4 of this paper, responses to these initiatives have been generally positive. Overall, the main benefits of participation are seen as: being part of a community of support, either in the Learning Support Centre or in a mentoring group; gaining confidence to ask for help and seeing improved academic achievement; becoming more motivated and disciplined in their work; learning to express emotions and handle frustration and anger; being encouraged to take responsibility; and feeling a sense of self-worth.

## **What schools can do**

In our view, the success of the school's approach seems to stem from a sophisticated understanding of the problems that students face, and the fact that the school has a supportive, inclusive ethos rather than a punitive, exclusionary one. For example, staff recognise that different kinds of trouble at school – low achievement, challenging behaviour and lack of motivation – are often interlinked and require co-ordinated interventions. Staff are also aware that pressures outside school, such as chaotic family backgrounds, alternative 'street' culture, and deprived neighbourhoods all have an impact on students' motivation, achievement and behaviour, and so some interventions are designed to help alleviate those external pressures. Support from

the very top of the school and a school-wide commitment to inclusion are also very important ingredients of the effectiveness of the overall policy.

Given the complexity of the links between low achievement, school exclusion and crime, and the additional pressures faced by young African-Caribbean men, our research suggests that schools should focus in a coordinated and concerted way on different aspects of the problem, but also on those aspects over which they can exert some influence. Schools cannot reduce neighbourhood deprivation, economic marginalisation, unemployment, domestic violence, or change the fact that some pupils' families include convicted criminals. However, schools can challenge the view that being tough and 'bad' are virtues, help students cope with frustration and anger, encourage them to take personal responsibility, motivate them to achieve their potential, help them gain qualifications that improve their chances in the job market, provide them with alternative role models and give them aspirations beyond a flashy lifestyle. Perhaps, most important of all, schools can buy time, retaining vulnerable young men within the educational system, keeping their options open until they have a chance to mature, rather than leaving them to the uncertainty of 'the street'.

### **6.3 Postscript**

'Rachel', our project champion at Gaskell Academy and 'Lance', our prison contact, were both invited to comment on this paper, and we are grateful for their input. Overall they were very positive about the piece as the following comments clearly indicate.

*I was blown away by the accuracy and detail of the report.... Coming from the perspective of 'the street' and 'education' your comments and conclusions are absolutely spot on- it's really fantastic to read*

*I can't say enough how good it was to read something so balanced and accurate about street culture and education*

However, they were both keen to draw even greater attention to aspects of the problem of low achievement, school exclusion, and crime, and to pull out wider implications for policy. We have decided that the best way to handle this is to include a final section in which they can each have their say.

#### **'Lance'**

- The young men are often seeking a sense of self-worth and security that is missing in their lives
- Once they start getting involved in criminal behaviour it often feeds their egos and gives them a sense of belonging
- An anti-authority sentiment is deeply entrenched in street culture. This is compounded by
  - the perceived bullying nature of police behaviour
  - a feeling that teachers are undermining the young men's confidence in their academic ability and threatening their sense of identity. If they feel under threat the young men will respond in an angry way and disengage in order to save face and protect their vulnerabilities

- The young men need positive role models, to be shown that they can achieve and have an income in a legitimate way. Often they are reflecting the deprivation around them and see the world of work and business as something that isn't open to them or doesn't relate to them

### **'Rachel'**

- Experience of domestic violence and trauma are extremely common amongst the students who end up excluded or in alternative provision. There is now more recognition of this and a joint local authority/NSPCC project will be piloted, addressing cycles of aggression, and the way young people are often repeating the violence that they have witnessed in the home and which has become 'normalised' to them.
- The unmet mental health needs of these young people are a huge issue and something that is often brushed under the carpet. The problem is only compounded as the young men become entrenched in street culture.
- Relationships with the police are very difficult and African-Caribbean young men claim that they are 'constantly' being stopped and searched. This does little to create a community outlook or sense of belonging. The anti-authoritarian outlook among these young men is reinforced by what they see as police bullying.
- Schools have the ability to be at the centre of the communities they serve - a positive influence linking parents, residents and young people and counter-acting the negative aspects of street culture. By adopting this approach and extending outreach work into evenings and weekends, schools could build positive relationships with families and provide much-needed support for the young people.
- Education can provide a 'way out' from the cycles of offending and crime that these young people are caught up in and give them the skills and opportunities to build more positive futures



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## Appendix 1: Obtaining consent

### ***Coping with life in and out of school.***

#### **Information sheet for year 10 and year 11 students**

Dear Student,

My name is Liz Spencer and I am a researcher at the University of Essex.

The particular piece of research I want to tell you about is exploring some of the pressures young people face at secondary school and how they cope with different demands – school work, home life, things they might do in their ‘free’ time.

I am particularly interested in what schools can do to help with these pressures, especially as students approach exams like GCSE. Your school is running some special schemes and I would really like to be able to talk to some of the people who are taking part. Your views and experiences are very important and could help this school and others develop more programmes in the future.

If you would like to join in the study, it would involve talking with me or with James, another member of the research team, about your experiences of the scheme, and about how you manage life in and out of school. The interview would be completely private, and very informal. It would last for about an hour, and take place at school, at the end of the school day or during a free period.

Ideally, I would like to talk with you twice. The first time would be in May this year. If you are in year 11, I would like to interview you a second time after you have got your GCSE results, to find out what your future plans are. If you are in year 10, the second interview would be when you are in year 11, after you get your mock GCSE results

Anything you tell me during the interview will be kept completely confidential. No one will know what **you** said, and your name will not be used in anything I write about the project. The information will be kept locked in a safe place, and only the research team will be able to look at it.

It is entirely up to you to whether or not you would like to take part. If you would like to know more about the project, please do ask me while I am in the school. If you would like to join in the research, we will send a letter home to get permission from your mother or your father.

Liz Spencer  
Research Associate  
Institute for Social and Economic Research  
University of Essex

## ***Coping with life in and out of school.***

### **Information letter for parents of year 10 and year 11 students**

Dear Parent,

My name is Liz Spencer and I am a researcher at the University of Essex.

I am writing to tell you about a piece of research being carried out at your son's school / X school. The project is exploring some of the pressures young people face at secondary school and how they cope with different demands – school work, home life, things they might do in their 'free' time.

I am particularly interested in what schools can do to help with these pressures, especially as students approach exams like GCSE. I would really like to be able to talk to some of the boys who are taking part in a scheme at X school. Their views and experiences are very important and could help the school (and others) develop more programmes in the future.

Your son might be interested in joining in the study, but we would like to ask for your permission first. It would involve him talking with me or another member of the research team about his experiences of the scheme, and about how he manages life in and out of school. The interview would be completely private, and very informal. It would last for about an hour, and take place at school, at the end of the school day or during a free period.

Ideally, your son would be interviewed twice. The first time would be in May 2010. If he is in year 11, the second interview would be after he gets his GCSE results, to find out about his future plans. If your son is in year 10 now, the second interview would be when he is in year 11, after he gets his mock GCSE results.

Anything your son tells me during the interview will be kept completely confidential. No one will know what he said, and his name will not be used in anything I write about the project. The information will be kept locked in a safe place, and only the research team will be able to look at it.

If you would to know more about the project, please don't hesitate to call me on .....

I do hope you will agree to your son taking part.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Liz Spencer  
Research Associate  
Institute for Social and Economic Research  
University of Essex

## Parental consent form

Title of project: ***Coping with life in and out of school.***

Researcher: Liz Spencer

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information about this study and have had a chance to ask for further information if I need it.
2. I understand that my son's participation is completely voluntary and that he can withdraw from the research at any time if he wants to. Any information that he has given to the researcher will be destroyed if he would like it to be.
3. I understand that information given in the interview will remain confidential and anonymous.
4. I give my consent for my son to take part in the study.

Name of parent .....

Name of student .....

Date: .....

Signature of parent .....

## Appendix 2: The interview guides

### COPING WITH LIFE IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL -

#### TRANSITION INTERVIEW GUIDE

Aims of the research:

exploring some of the pressures young people face at secondary school and how they cope with different demands

- school work
- home life
- things they might do in their 'free' time.

#### 1. Introduction

Who we are

What the study is about - talking with students who are taking part in some school-based initiatives and in your case with students who have just moved from primary to secondary school

Very informal and completely confidential

Permission to record.

#### 2. Primary School experience

Which primary school were you at?

What bits of primary school life did you like?

- What?
- Why?

What about your friends, what did they enjoy?

Any bits of primary school you did not like so much?

- What?
- Why?

What about your friends, what do they not like?

What do you think you are good at?

What, if anything, do you find difficult at primary school?

- why

How did you feel about leaving?



### **3      Moving to secondary school**

Why did you come to this school?

- Reasons?
- First choice?

How many of your friends have come here as well?

Describe some of your early impressions of QK?

What is the biggest difference from your primary school?

What (if anything) do you like about your new school?

How do you feel you are settling in?

How do you get on with the teachers?

Are there any things that are difficult about this new school?

- what?
- In what way?

How are you managing to cope?

What about your friends, how are they settling in?

How seriously do you take school

- how important is it in your life?
- How important to your friends

Do you ever feel under pressure to do things to fit in with your friends / class mates?

- what kind of pressure?
- to do what?
- Ever been in trouble with teachers at QK?
- How did the teachers deal with it?

Which class are you in?

Are any of your friends from primary school in the same class?

How much contact do you have with the other classes in your year group?

Is the school doing anything to help you settle in at the new school?

- What kind of things?
- How helpful are they?

How are friends from primary school settling in to other schools - those who have not come to QK?

#### **4      Managing school life and 'free time'**

Are you given homework to do?

How easy is it to get this work done?

- other distractions / what?
- anywhere quiet to work at home?
- any encouragement from your family?

And how do you like to spend your free time?

- who with?
- what doing (probe interests, activities etc)?
- where (find out about neighbourhood / places they like to hang out)?
- Any local activities you enjoy (youth club)?

#### **5      Future plans**

Any idea of what you would like to do long term after you leave school

- what
- why

Have your family got any particular hopes / suggestions for your future?

- what

## COPING WITH LIFE IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

### RE-ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEWS

Aims of the research:

exploring some of the pressures young people face at secondary school and how they cope with different demands

- school work
- home life
- things they might do in their 'free' time.

#### 1. Introduction

Who we are (James and I)

What the study is about - talking with students who are taking part in some school-based initiatives and then, later, talking with students who have been excluded from school

Very informal and completely confidential

Permission to record.

#### 2. Interests and activities outside school

***Before I ask you about school and exams and so on, I just wanted to find out a bit about you and what you like to do when you're not at school.***

So, how do you like to spend your time?

- who with?
- what doing (probe interests, activities etc)?
- where (find out about neighbourhood / places they like to hang out)?

What do your friends like to do?

Any time spent as a family?  
(explore who is in the family)

*[if any gang activity / criminal activity mentioned, decide whether to explore not or under section 5]*

### **3. School life**

What school / schools were you at before you came to Q K school?

What bits of school life did you like - if any?

- What?
- Why?

What about your friends, what did they enjoy?

What bits of school life did you not like so much?

- What?
- Why?

What about your friends, what did they not like?

What do you think you were good at?

What, if anything, did you find difficult at about school?

- why

### **4 The re-engagement scheme**

How did you come to be part of the re-engagement group at QK school?

- circumstances / what happened at previous school(s)

Tell me what it involves?

What do you like about the group?

- in terms of studying / school work / work experience
- socially (are any of your friends in the group?)

Is there anything you dislike / find difficult about being in the group?

How does it compare with what school was like in your previous school / schools?

What subjects are you taking for GCSE?

How are you feeling about the exams?

- what do you hope for?
- what would you be pleased with?

How has being in the group affected your school work?

- results
- confidence

How has being in the group affected how you feel about school?

If you could recommend any changes to the re-engagement scheme, what would you suggest?

- why?

## **5      Managing school life and 'free time'**

How easy is it to get your school work done?

- other distractions / what?
- anywhere quiet to work at home?
- any encouragement from your family?

How interested are you in doing well?

How interested are your friends in doing well?

## **6      Future plans**

What are you planning to do next September?

- staying on at school
- doing something else / what?

If stay at school, what subjects would you like to take?

What about friends, what are their plans?

Any idea of what you would like to do long term after you leave school

- what
- why

Have your family got any particular hopes / suggestions for your future?

- what

Tell me what you would like to be doing in 5 years time.

CHECK OK TO BE INTERVIEWED IN SEPTEMBER AFTER HAVE GOT GCSE RESULTS

## COPING WITH LIFE IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

### MENTORING INTERVIEWS

Aims of the research:

exploring some of the pressures young people face at secondary school and how they cope with different demands

- school work
- home life
- things they might do in their 'free' time.

#### 1. Introduction

Who we are (James and I)

What the study is about - talking with students who are taking part in some school-based initiatives and then, later, talking with students who have been excluded from school

Very informal and completely confidential

Permission to record.

#### 2. Interests and activities outside school

***Before I ask you about school and exams and so on, I just wanted to find out a bit about you and what you like to do when you're not at school.***

So, how do you like to spend your time?

- who with?
- what doing (probe interests, activities etc)?
- where (find out about neighbourhood / places they like to hang out)?

What do your friends like to do?

Any time spent as a family?  
(explore who is in the family)

*[if any gang activity / criminal activity mentioned, decide whether to explore now or under section 5]*

### **3. School life**

How long been at Q K school?

What bits of school life do you like - if any?

- What?
- Why?

What about your friends, what do they enjoy?

What bits of school life do you not like so much?

- What?
- Why?

What about your friends, what do they not like?

What do you think you are good at?

What, if anything, do you find difficult at about school?

- why

### **4 The mentoring scheme**

When did you first hear anything about this mentoring group?

What was your initial reaction?

Tell me what it involves?

What do you like about the group?

- in terms of studying / school work
- socially (are any of your friends in the group?)

Is there anything you dislike / find difficult about being in the group?

What subjects are you taking for GCSE?

How are you feeling about the exams?

- what do you hope for?
- what would you be pleased with?

How has being in the group affected your school work?

- results
- confidence

How has being in the group affected how you feel about school?

If you could recommend any changes to the mentoring scheme, what would you suggest?

- why?

## **5      Managing school life and 'free time'**

How easy is it to get your school work done?

- other distractions / what?
- anywhere quiet to work at home?
- any encouragement from your family?

How interested are you in doing well?

How interested are your friends in doing well?

## **6      Future plans**

What are you planning to do next September?

- staying on at school
- doing something else / what

If stay at school, what subjects would you like to take?

What about friends, what are their plans?

Any idea of what you would like to do long term after you leave school

- what
- why

Have your family got any particular hopes / suggestions for your future?

- what

Tell me what you would like to be doing in 5 years time.

CHECK OK TO BE INTERVIEWED IN SEPTEMBER AFTER HAVE GOT GCSE RESULTS



## **COPING WITH LIFE IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL**

### **STAFF INTERVIEWS**

Aims of the research:

exploring some of the pressures young people face at secondary school and how they cope with different demands

- school work
- home life
- things they might do in their 'free' time.

#### **1. Introduction**

Who we are (James and I)

What the study is about - talking with students who are taking part in some school-based initiatives and then, later, talking with students who have been excluded from school

Very informal and completely confidential

Permission to record.

#### **2. Own background**

How long been at the School?

What attracted them to the school?

Post and main responsibilities

How school compares to other schools have worked in?

#### **3. Pressures faced by the students**

##### ***Teachers involved in Year 10 and 11 schemes***

What are the main challenges that 'underachieving' boys face?

- coping with school
- home backgrounds / parental support
- street culture
- peer pressure

How does this vary between students from different class / ethnic backgrounds?

##### ***Teachers involved in Year 7 transition scheme***

What are the main challenges students face moving from primary to secondary school?

How does this vary between students from different class / ethnic backgrounds?

#### 4. What the school tries to do / the scheme

How can the school help the students?

How /when did the particular schemes come about?

- history
- changes

How are students identified?

- on what basis are students chosen to take part?

What does the scheme aim to do?

What happens /what does it involve?

What is their (the teacher's) involvement?

How well is the scheme working?

- which bits work well
- which bits don't work so well
- what would count as success / what hoping for

How optimistic that it will achieve its aims?

**Any ideas for future changes?**

# **LIFE IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL: COPING WITH DIFFERENT PRESSURES**

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS**

### **1. Introduction**

Hello, my name is ..... from the University of Essex.

THANK YOU very much for agreeing to meet me today.

The study I am working on is looking at the pressures young people face - and how they deal with different demands like school, home life, things they like to do in their 'free' time.

We are particularly interested in what happens when people are excluded from school or leave school without getting their qualifications - how they spend their time, how they make some money, and their hopes for the future.

Your views and experiences are very important to us. Anything you tell me will be kept **completely confidential**. No one will know what **you** said, and your name will not be used in anything we write about the project. The information will be kept locked in a safe place, and only the research team will be able to look at it.

***[Ask permission to record]***

### **2. About you**

***Want to find out a bit about you ...***

Who lives at home with you?

- who is in the family?

How old are you?

- where fit in the family (older or younger brothers and sisters)

Where do you live?

- describe the area
- what is it like?
- how long have you lived there?

### **3. Current situation in terms of school**

Just want to check your current situation in terms of school

- have you already left?
- are you excluded at the moment?
- are you just not going in to school much / at all?

#### ***If already left***

When did you leave?

How felt about leaving?

What exams did you take - if any?

- What results did you get?
- How felt about results?
- Were they what you expected?

#### ***If excluded***

What happened - why excluded?

- probe for details
  - o how long for?
- How feel about exclusion?
- Any alternative educational provision
- How feel about it?

#### ***If absent from school / not attending much***

About how often go to school?

Why go (when do go in)?

Why don't go (when absent)?

### **4. School life**

#### ***When you are / were at school .....***

What secondary school / schools have you been to / are at now (if still on school roll)

What was it like moving from primary to secondary school?

How easy was it to make the transition?

- any particular difficulties?
- any particular pressures?

#### ***For each secondary school .....***

What was / is school like?

- how get on with teachers?
- how get on in class?

What bits of school life do / did you like - if any?

- What?
- Why?

What bits of school life do / did you not like so much?

- What?
- Why?

What do you think you are / were good at?

What, if anything, do / did you find difficult at about school?

- why?

How do / did your friends get on a school?

Thinking of your friends at school ....

- do / did they go in every day?
- did they miss school with you?

What kind of pressures were on you from other people in the school?

- ever felt you had to do certain things to fit in?
- what kinds of things?

Were you ever in trouble at school?

- what for?
- Who was involved (eg other friends)?
- What happened as a result?
- How felt about it?

Was any support offered to you when / if you got in trouble at school?

- What?
- how well did it work?

How easy is / was it to get your school work done at home (homework)?

- other distractions / what?
- anywhere quiet to work at home?
- any encouragement from your family?

## **5      Life outside school**

***Now want to ask you about life outside school .....***

Thinking about your particular group of friends ...

- where are they from?
- how did you meet them?

What kind of things do you do with these friends?

- describe different activities
- how much is there to do in your area?
- what about youth clubs?

Are there any special / distinctive things about your group / your people?

- particular clothes or music?
- do you have a special territory / do you like to go to particular places?

How important is this group of friends to you?

- in what way is it important?
- What do like most about being part of it?
- anything you don't like about being part of it?

Do you and your friends like to drink (alcohol)?

- what?
- how much / how often?

What about drugs?

- what?
- how often?

Ever been involved in any kind of violence?

- o What happened?
- o Why did it happen?

Ever been involved in any kind of 'criminal activities'?

- what kind of things? (eg selling drugs, robbery etc)
- how did you get into it?
- why did you get into it?
- how long do think you'll carry on doing these things?

How much money do you / they make?

What do you / they like to spend that money on?

Are you ever worried about getting caught?

Have you ever been in trouble with the police?

What do you think about the police in this area?

- any encounters?
- what happened?

Have you ever been offered any support - like youth offending teams?

- what do you think of them?

## **7. Future plans**

Any plans for the future?

What do you see yourself doing in 5 years' time?

- work / employment?
- making money from criminal activities?

What would you like to be doing?

If you had your time at school again, is there anything you would do differently

- what?

How important / relevant is school?

If you have kids in the future, what would you like them to do?

## **Appendix 3:**

### **Thematic Framework for initial indexing of young people interviews**

#### **1. Profile**

Age

Current status (school year, occupation)

School initiative (Gaskell Academy pupils)

Qualifications gained

#### **2. Experiences of school**

Priorities and motivation – perceived relevance of school

Challenges faced

Relationship with teachers

Transitions

Trouble at school

Truancing

Experiences of exclusion

Hopes for academic achievement

#### **3. School initiatives**

Mentoring

How referred

Typical activities

Likes

Dislikes

Suggested improvements

Re-engagement

How referred

Typical activities

Likes

Dislikes

Suggested improvements

Respite

How referred

Typical activities

Likes

Dislikes

Suggested improvements

Transition schemes

How referred

Typical activities

Likes

Dislikes

Suggested improvements

Learning Support Centre

How referred

Typical activities

Likes  
Dislikes  
Suggested improvements

Informal help from teachers (community interviews)

#### **4. Dealing with the street**

Perception of neighbourhood  
Experience / perpetration of crime (past and present)  
Routes into crime  
Strategies for avoiding trouble on the street  
Experience of gangs  
Perceptions of 'your people', and friendship groups