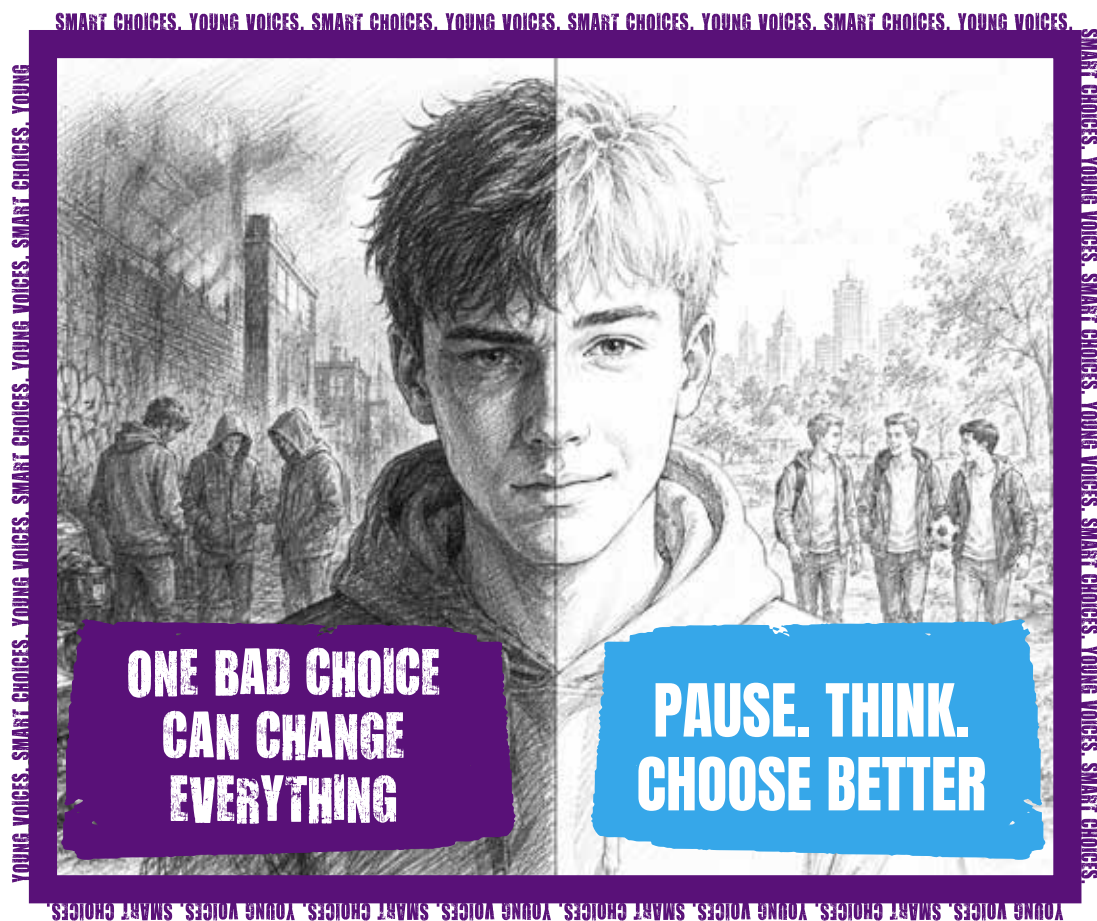


EDGE-AWAY

SMART CHOICES, YOUNG VOICES

Evaluation of The Weapons Prevention Programme

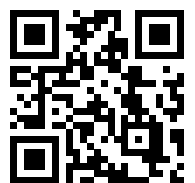
“Edge Away” By Dr Sue Redmond, March 2026



**“It’s not really about weapons. It’s about emotions
and how to deal with it.”**

— Facilitator

SCAN ME



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt,
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Department of Justice,
Home Affairs and Migration



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Government of Ireland



An tSeirbhís Phromhaidh
The Probation Service



About This Research

Evaluation of the Edge Away Weapons Prevention Programme

Prepared by: Dr Sue Redmond

Commissioned by: Céim ar Chéim / Department of Justice

Date: March 2026

Purpose of the Evaluation

This report presents findings from an independent mixed-methods evaluation of the Edge Away Weapons Prevention Programme delivered across youth settings in Limerick.

Evaluation Objectives

- Assess changes in attitudes towards weapon carrying
- Examine the development of emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills
- Explore participant and facilitator experiences
- Identify strengths, limitations and future recommendations

Acknowledgements

This evaluation would not have been possible without the generosity, honesty and engagement of the young people who participated in the Edge Away Weapons Prevention Programme. We are deeply grateful to each young person who contributed their experiences, perspectives and reflections throughout the programme and evaluation process. Their voices are at the heart of this report.

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We would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of the Steering Committee throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of the programme. Their expertise, insight and commitment to violence prevention helped shape both the programme and this evaluation.

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We also acknowledge the participating youth projects and community organisations whose partnership made delivery possible. Their ongoing commitment to supporting young people and creating safer communities is greatly valued.

Finally, we wish to thank the Department of Justice for funding and supporting this initiative. Their investment in prevention, early intervention and evidence-informed practice contributes to building safer, more resilient communities for young people across Ireland.

**EDGE-AWAY
FROM
WEAPONS.
BUILD A
SAFER
FUTURE.**



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt,
Gnóthaí Baile agus Imirce
Department of Justice,
Home Affairs and Migration

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"A knife won't help solve problems.

It'll only make problems worse."

— Youth Participant



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Weapon carrying among young people is widely recognised as a complex social issue shaped by multiple interacting factors including exposure to violence, fear for personal safety, peer dynamics, masculinity norms and broader structural disadvantage. Research suggests that young people often frame weapon carrying as a rational strategy for protection in environments perceived as unsafe.

The Weapon Carrying Prevention Programme was developed in response to this evidence base. Grounded in a public health and ecological model of violence prevention, the programme focuses on strengthening young people's emotional regulation, conflict resolution skills, critical awareness of masculinity norms and understanding of the legal and personal consequences of violence.

This evaluation examined the implementation and early outcomes of the programme delivered across three youth settings in Limerick. A mixed-methods approach was used to assess both measurable change and participants' experiences of the programme.

Methods:

A mixed-methods design combined quantitative pre-post survey data with qualitative focus groups involving programme participants and facilitators. Nineteen young people completed baseline surveys and twelve completed post-programme surveys, with nine participants matched across timepoints. Survey measures assessed violence endorsement, non-violent coping, conflict self-efficacy, harmful masculinity norms, perceptions of community safety and legal knowledge. Six focus groups (four youth groups and two facilitator groups) were conducted following programme completion and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Results:

Quantitative findings indicated promising directional changes, including reduced endorsement of violence and increased legal knowledge related to weapon carrying. Improvements were also observed in non-violent coping and conflict self-efficacy, although these changes were modest given the small cohort size. Qualitative findings reinforced these trends, with participants describing increased reflection on the consequences of violence, greater emotional awareness and new strategies for managing conflict. Facilitators identified relational trust, emotional literacy development and critical dialogue around masculinity as key mechanisms supporting change. Although the cohort size was small (baseline $n=19$; matched $n=9$), the findings provide promising early evidence of reduced endorsement of violence and increased legal knowledge among participants.

Conclusion:

The programme appears to support early cognitive and emotional shifts associated with violence prevention. While structural factors continue to shape young people's experiences of safety and conflict, the intervention provides a relational and reflective space that challenges normalised narratives around weapon carrying and promotes non-violent alternatives.

"It's about feeling safe."

— Youth Participant



1. INTRODUCTION

Weapon carrying among young people remains a significant public health and community safety concern nationally and internationally. Although overall youth crime in Ireland has declined since the mid-2000s (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2015), knife-related incidents and seizures continue to generate concern. Internationally, youth violence remains a leading cause of death and injury among young people (CDC, 2016).

Research consistently demonstrates that weapon carrying is not a random or isolated behaviour. Rather, it is embedded within wider social, relational and structural contexts including deprivation, exposure to violence, peer norms, identity formation and gendered expectations (Harding, 2020; Haylock et al., 2020; McVie, 2010). Knife carrying is frequently framed by young people as a strategy for self-protection in environments perceived as unsafe (Riggs & Palasinski, 2011; Lemos & Crane, 2004).

The Weapon Carrying Prevention Programme was developed in response to this evidence base and informed by contemporary research on youth violence prevention, trauma-informed practice and ecological models of intervention (David-Ferdon et al., 2016; Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009).

This evaluation examines the implementation and impact of the programme across three participating youth settings.

**"There's not
really much
you could do
to protect
yourself...
unless
you have
something on
you."**

— Youth
Participant

2. LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

2.1 Risk Factors Associated with Weapon Carrying

The literature identifies youth weapon carrying as a product of interacting individual, relational, community and societal factors (Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009).

Social Inequality and Deprivation

Concentrated poverty, material inequality and limited access to opportunity are strongly associated with youth violence (Farrington et al., 2012; Grimshaw & Ford, 2018). Low socioeconomic status has been linked to higher rates of knife use among both offenders and victims (Harries, 1989; Marshall & Webb, 1994).

Exposure to Community Violence

Exposure to violence, whether through victimisation or witnessing violence, significantly increases the likelihood of weapon carrying (McCoy et al., 2015; Maschi et al., 2010). Such exposure impacts cognitive functioning, threat perception and emotional regulation (McCoy et al., 2015).

Gangs, Belonging and Identity

Gang membership can provide identity, attachment and perceived protection in contexts of insecurity (De Vito, 2020; Klein et al., 2014). Social identity theory suggests that young people construct identity through group affiliation, particularly during adolescence (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Harding (2020) describes knife carrying as embedded within "street capital" and reputation management in violent social fields.

Masculinity Norms

Research highlights the role of aggressive or "toxic" masculinity (or harmful masculinity norms) in normalising emotional suppression, dominance and violence (Kupers, 2005; Harding, 2020). Knife carrying can become intertwined with performances of respect, status and manhood, particularly in environments where traditional pathways to achievement and recognition are limited (Baird, 2018). In such contexts, carrying a weapon may function symbolically as a marker of strength, reputation and protection. Challenging narrow constructions of masculinity and expanding young men's emotional and relational repertoires is therefore a critical component of prevention.

Emotional Regulation and Impulsivity

Deficits in impulse control, emotional regulation and problem-solving are associated with higher levels of violent behaviour (Petrus et al., 2008; Ttofi et al., 2016). Young people who struggle to identify, tolerate or regulate intense emotions may be more likely to react defensively or aggressively in conflict situations. In high-stress or trauma-exposed environments, heightened threat perception can further compromise regulatory capacity, increasing the risk of escalation. Strengthening emotional literacy and regulation skills is therefore central to reducing reactive violence.

Media Influence and Fear Amplification

Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1994) suggests media exposure shapes perceptions of risk and violence. Research indicates that overrepresentation of violent crime in media can heighten fear and perceived threat, potentially reinforcing self-protective weapon carrying (Intravia et al., 2017; Holligan et al., 2017).

Importantly, deterrence-only approaches have limited impact. Systematic reviews of "Scared Straight" and similar fear-based programmes demonstrate ineffectiveness and potential harm (Petrosino et al., 2005; Petrosino et al., 2013).

2.2 Protective Factors

While the literature identifies significant risk factors associated with weapon carrying, it equally highlights a robust body of evidence regarding protective factors that buffer against youth violence. Protective influences operate across individual, relational and community levels, reinforcing the importance of ecological and multi-layered prevention approaches (Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009). Strengthening these protective mechanisms is central to sustainable violence reduction.

Individual Skills

Healthy social skills, emotional regulation, empathy and problem-solving abilities reduce the risk of violent behaviour and weapon carrying (Kim et al., 2016; Ttofi et al., 2016). Skills such as negotiation, perspective-taking and conflict de-escalation equip young people with practical alternatives to aggression. Importantly, skill-building interventions grounded in cognitive-behavioural and trauma-informed approaches have demonstrated measurable effects on behavioural outcomes (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). Developing these competencies enhances both immediate safety and longer-term life opportunities.

Positive Adult Relationships

Strong connections with caring adults beyond parents, including teachers, youth workers, coaches and mentors, significantly reduce involvement in violence (Resnick et al., 2004; DuBois et al., 2011). These relationships provide emotional security, modelling of prosocial behaviour and consistent boundaries, all of which contribute to resilience. Trusted adults also create safe spaces for disclosure and guidance, particularly for young people exposed to adversity or community violence. Relational engagement is therefore not peripheral but foundational to effective prevention work.

Parenting and Family Environment

Warm and supportive parent-child relationships, characterised by consistent boundaries, monitoring and open communication, are associated with lower levels of youth violence (Farrington et al., 2012; Piquero et al., 2016). Parenting programmes that strengthen parental skills in behavioural management and relational attunement demonstrate significant preventive effects (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). Positive family environments enhance young people's sense of security and belonging, reducing the need to seek identity, protection or validation through risky peer affiliations.

School and Community Connectedness

School attachment and positive peer networks function as important buffers against violence (Dahlberg et al., 2006). Feeling valued within school and community contexts fosters belonging, future orientation and social responsibility. At the community level, collective efficacy, defined as shared trust among residents and willingness to intervene for the common good, is associated with lower levels of violent crime (Sampson et al., 2002). Well-maintained public spaces, accessible youth activities and safe community environments further enhance perceptions of safety and reduce opportunities for violence (Crowe, 2000; Lorenc et al., 2013).

A Multi-Level Protective Framework

Taken together, the evidence indicates that no single protective factor operates in isolation. Rather, protective processes are cumulative and mutually reinforcing across developmental systems. Effective prevention strategies therefore seek not only to reduce risk but also to actively strengthen young people's internal capacities, relational supports and environmental conditions. This ecological perspective underpins contemporary public health approaches to violence prevention and informs the design of the current programme (Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009).

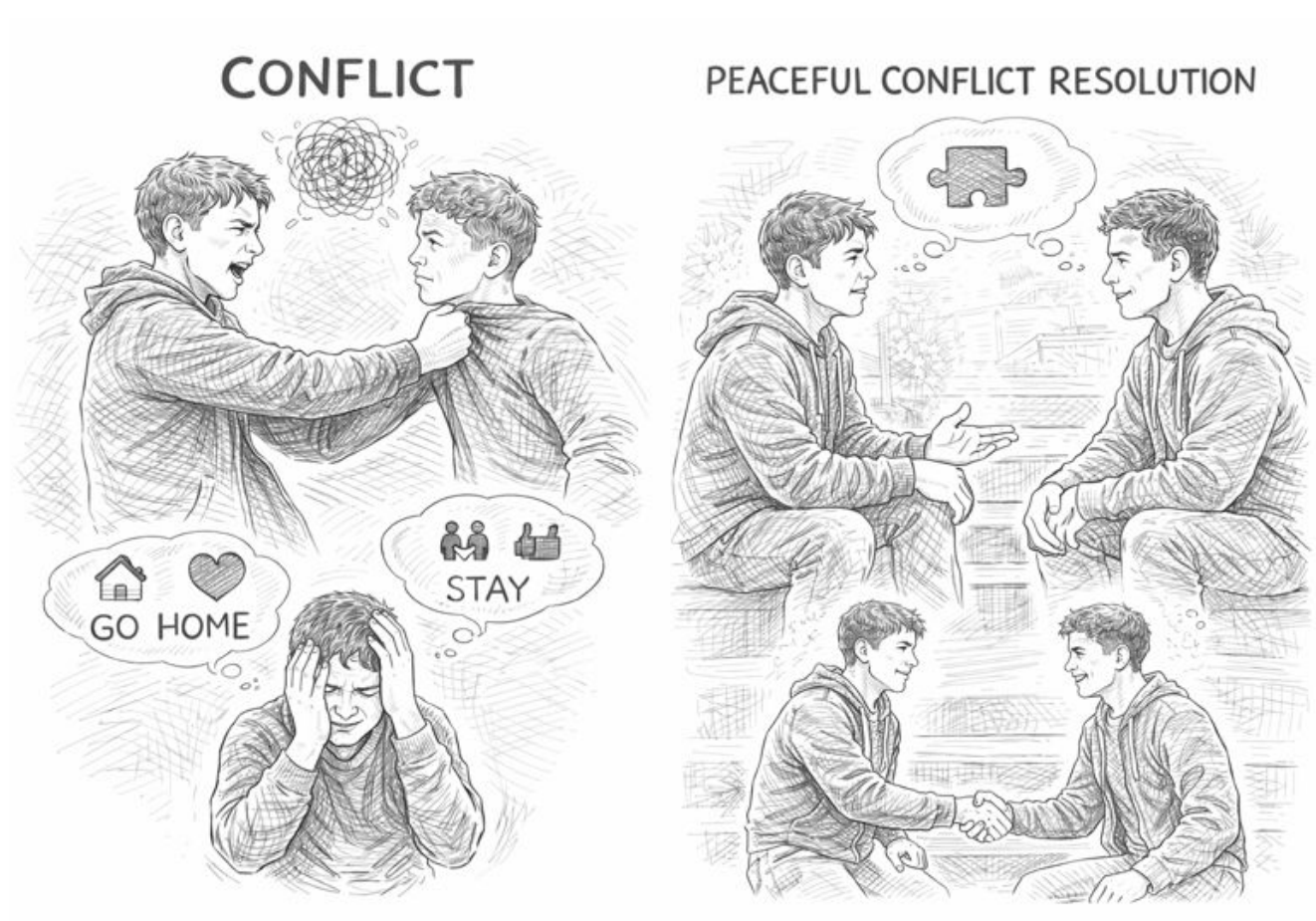
2.3 What Works in Prevention

The strongest evidence supports multi-component, ecological approaches addressing risk and protective factors across multiple levels (Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009). The Scottish Violence Reduction Unit's public health model demonstrates the effectiveness of upstream prevention strategies (Rainey et al., 2015; Scottish Government, 2021). Systematic reviews indicate that effective programmes focus on:

- Negotiation and peaceful conflict resolution skills
- Emotional regulation and cognitive-behavioural approaches
- Positive peer influence
- Trauma-informed practice
- Community and family engagement

(Kovalenko et al., 2022; David-Ferdon et al., 2016).

Single-strategy or enforcement-only approaches are insufficient to achieve sustained population-level impact.



3. CONTEXT

Within Ireland, while overall youth crime has decreased (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2015), knife seizures have increased in recent years (Department of Justice data reported in The Irish Times, 2023).

Urban communities experiencing deprivation, residential instability and limited access to services face elevated risk factors associated with youth violence (Farrington et al., 2012). Such “toxic environments” — shaped by austerity, service cuts and weakened relational infrastructures — contribute to fear, disaffection and vulnerability (Case et al., 2019; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022).

Research suggests that young people often frame knife carrying as a rational response to perceived threat and lack of protection (Riggs & Palasinski, 2011; Harding, 2020). Parents also report lacking confidence and tools to discuss knife crime with their children (Violence Reduction Alliance, 2023). This contextual evidence underscores the need for relational, skills-based and trauma-informed prevention work.

4. OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME

The Weapon Carrying Prevention Programme is grounded in a public health and ecological model of violence prevention (Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009).

Theory of Change

The programme posits that increasing knowledge, strengthening emotional regulation, challenging harmful masculinity norms, and building negotiation and restorative skills will reduce endorsement of weapon carrying and increase young people’s capacity for non-violent conflict resolution.

Core Components

The programme integrates:

- Education on myths, risks and legal consequences
- Critical examination of masculinity and identity
- Emotional regulation and impulse control skills
- Negotiation and conflict resolution training
- Restorative practice approaches
- Peer and bystander support strategies

This aligns with evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of skill-building and trauma-informed, relational approaches (Kovalenko et al., 2022; David-Ferdon et al., 2016).

5. AIMS OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation aims to examine:

1. Changes in attitudes towards weapon carrying.
2. Shifts in perceptions of masculinity, respect and conflict.
3. Development of emotional regulation and negotiation skills.
4. Increased confidence in choosing non-violent alternatives.
5. Experiences of implementation and practitioner delivery.

The evaluation set out to assess both short-term attitudinal shifts and skill development, alongside qualitative insights into programme experience and perceived impact.

THEORY OF CHANGE



6. EVALUATION APPROACH

6.1 Overall Design

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative pre-post survey data with qualitative focus groups involving both young participants and programme facilitators. A mixed-methods approach was selected to enable both measurement of attitudinal and skill-based change and deeper exploration of participant experience, implementation processes and contextual factors influencing outcomes.

This design aligns with best practice in youth justice and violence prevention evaluation, which recognises the importance of combining outcome measurement with process and experiential insight (Reddy & Redmond, 2022). The integration of quantitative and qualitative data strengthens validity through triangulation, allowing patterns observed in survey findings to be explored and contextualised through participant voice.

**"You could
actually say
what you
think."**

**— Youth
Participant**

6.2 Quantitative Component

Design

A pre-post survey design was used to assess changes over the course of programme participation. Baseline questionnaires were administered prior to programme commencement, and post-programme questionnaires were administered following completion of the final session.

The survey tool included items measuring:

- Attitudes towards weapon carrying
- Perceived legitimacy of weapon carrying as self-protection
- Understanding of risks and consequences
- Emotional regulation and impulse control
- Confidence in negotiation and conflict resolution
- Perceptions of masculinity, respect and peer influence

Where possible, surveys were matched using anonymous participant ID codes to enable paired analysis. However, due to attendance patterns and incomplete data, the dataset included both matched and unmatched cases.

Sample

The quantitative sample comprised, baseline responses with 19 participants and post-programme responses with 12 participants, this led to 9 matched cases.

Analysis

Quantitative analysis included:

- Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages)
- Comparison of baseline and post-programme aggregate trends
- Paired comparisons for matched cases where available
- Exploration of composite scales where items were grouped thematically

Given the relatively small cohort size, statistical analysis was interpreted cautiously, with emphasis placed on descriptive statistics, effect size trends and directional change rather than statistical significance testing alone. Findings were interpreted as indicative rather than definitive, contributing to programme learning rather than generalisable population claims.

6.3 Qualitative Component

Design

The qualitative strand involved focus groups with young participants and focus groups with staff facilitators following programme completion. Focus groups were selected as the primary qualitative method due to their capacity to generate collective reflection, explore peer dynamics and elicit discussion about shared experiences of the programme. For facilitators, the group format enabled reflection on delivery processes, implementation challenges and perceived impact.

Sample

A total of four youth focus groups (n=12; 4f/8m, age 11–17 years) and two facilitator focus groups (n=5) were conducted. Participants were drawn from both Youth Diversion Projects and community youth settings, while also including both younger (11–13) and older (15–17) cohorts.

Data Collection

Semi-structured topic guides were used to explore the experience of the programme for participants and facilitators. For young participants exploration included; perceptions of weapon carrying before and after the programme, experiences of learning about masculinity, respect and identity, emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills, relevance and realism of scenarios discussed and perceived behavioural or attitudinal change

For facilitators exploration included; observed changes in participants, engagement and participation levels, strengths and challenges in delivery, appropriateness of materials, recommendations for the future. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved familiarisation with transcripts, initial coding across the dataset, development of themes, refinement and consolidation of themes.

Analysis was conducted at both semantic (explicit content) and latent (underlying meanings, norms and discourses) levels. Particular attention was paid to how young people constructed narratives around safety, masculinity, fear and identity. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, acknowledging the evaluators' positionality and professional experience within youth justice and prevention work.

6.4 Integration of Findings

The mixed-methods design allowed for triangulation across data sources. Quantitative findings regarding shifts in attitudes or skills were examined alongside qualitative accounts of change. Where convergence occurred, this strengthened confidence in programme impact. Where divergence emerged, qualitative insights were used to interpret possible explanations (e.g., social desirability bias, nuanced attitudinal shifts not captured in survey items). This integrative approach allowed the evaluation to address not only whether change occurred, but also how and why change may have occurred, and under what conditions.

6.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of discussions relating to violence and weapon carrying, ethical considerations were central to the evaluation process. Participation was voluntary, informed consent procedures were followed, confidentiality was maintained, subject to safeguarding obligations and trauma-informed principles were applied during qualitative data collection.

6.6 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted, the small sample size limits statistical power, attrition between baseline and post surveys reduced matched sample size, self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability bias, selection bias as participants were not randomly selected, short programme duration and short-term post-intervention data does not capture long-term behavioural outcomes. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design provides a robust exploratory assessment of programme implementation and short-term attitudinal and skill-based change.

7. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Qualitative data from four youth focus groups and two facilitator focus groups were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis was conducted inductively, while being sensitised by the programme's Theory of Change and the wider literature on youth violence, masculinity and conflict resolution. Coding was conducted across the full dataset, and themes were developed at both semantic (explicit) and latent (underlying meaning-making) levels.

7.1 Youth Data

The overarching themes were identified in youth focus groups include:

1. From Fear to Reflection: Reframing Weapon Carrying
2. Masculinity, Respect and Identity Work
3. Emotional Awareness and Regulation in Practice
4. Relational Safety and the Importance of Consistent Adults to Build Trust
5. Normalisation of Violence and Structural Context

Each theme is outlined below, focusing on youth participants and supported by facilitator perspectives.



**"Boys
have
to be
tough."**

— Youth
Participant

"Everyone has feelings... when you get into that dark room you're going to cry."

— Youth Participant

Theme 1: From Fear to Reflection: Reframing Weapon Carrying

"It's about feeling safe" – Participant 3

Across the youth focus groups, weapon carrying was frequently discussed initially in terms of fear, so not primarily as aggression but as protection. Participants described knife carrying as something that "people do to feel safe" or because "you don't know what might happen." This framing aligns with existing literature describing weapon carrying as a rational response to perceived threat.

"There's not really much you could do to protect yourself... unless you have something on you." – Participant 1

Fear was described as ambient, unpredictable, and tied to place:

"You could be mistaken for the wrong fella... anything can happen." – Participant 3

The idea that *"there's no such thing as a fair fight"* (Participant 7) reflects a perceived erosion of social trust.

Younger groups echoed this protective framing:

"To stay protected... they're scared." – Participant 8

However, participants also articulated a shift in thinking following the programme. Several described "actually thinking about the consequences" for the first time, including legal, relational and personal implications. Young people spoke about how discussions challenged the idea that carrying a knife guarantees safety.

"A knife won't help solve problems. It'll only make problems worse." – Participant 5

The programme appears to create cognitive dissonance between fear-based reasoning and consequence awareness. Rather than describing dramatic transformation, most participants articulated a more subtle shift, from automatic justification to reflective consideration. The programme appeared to create space for young people to interrogate myths, peer narratives and assumptions around protection and status.

Facilitators observed that participants began to question statements such as "everyone carries" or "you have to." This suggests early movement from normalisation towards critical awareness.

Interpretation:

This theme reflects a cognitive shift from reactive fear-based reasoning towards more deliberative thinking. While not necessarily eliminating perceived risk, the programme appears to create cognitive dissonance between fear-based reasoning and consequence awareness. This creates space for changing beliefs and ensuing behaviours.

"Someone who has a job and takes care of their family."

— Youth Participant describing the 'ideal man'

Theme 2: Masculinity, Respect and Identity Work

"Respect is everything" – Participant 9

The social construct of masculinity was repeatedly linked to toughness, reputation and emotional suppression. The pressure to be tough was central across groups. Young men in particular spoke about respect, reputation and not wanting to appear weak. The concept of "disrespect" was repeatedly linked to escalation and conflict.

"Weak guys get picked on." – Participant 11

"Boys have to be tough." – Participant 8

Participants described how “small things” such as looks, comments, online interactions, could be interpreted as challenges to status. This reflects the strong role of masculine honour codes and identity performance within peer environments. However, youth also articulated counter-narratives:

“Everyone has feelings... when you get into that dark room you're going to cry.” – Participant 5

Challenging Stereotypes

Importantly, participants also described appreciating space to talk openly about masculinity. Some articulated that they had “never talked about it like that before.” There was evidence of reflection around emotional suppression, with young people acknowledging pressure “not to show feelings.” The programme’s “ideal man” exercise revealed tension between, the “regular man” (cool, tough, feared) and the “ideal man” (provides, moral, cares for family). This duality suggests emerging reflective capacity and the male participants talked about the type of ‘man’ they would aspire to be “someone who has a job and takes care of their family”. This duality suggests emerging reflective capacity. Facilitators reported that sessions on harmful and positive masculinity generated strong engagement and sometimes discomfort, but also meaningful dialogue.

Interpretation:

The programme appears to have facilitated identity exploration rather than prescribing behaviour change. By creating discursive space to question rigid gender norms, it may contribute to long-term shifts in how masculinity is performed in peer contexts.

Theme 3: Emotional Awareness and Regulation in Practice

“It’s about stopping for a second” – Participant 3

A recurrent theme across youth groups was increased awareness of emotional triggers. Participants described learning behavioural strategies such as to “pause,” “walk away,” “go to the gym” or “think before reacting.” Several referenced techniques discussed in sessions around impulse control and emotional regulation.

“Take a deep breath... think about the situation.” – Participant 2

While participants did not claim mastery of regulation skills, they demonstrated language reflecting improved emotional literacy (e.g., identifying frustration, embarrassment, pressure). The programme’s somatic and reflective elements (guided safety/resource exercises) were particularly impactful for younger cohorts.

However, dysregulation remains evident with one young person indicated that they still struggled and would like additional support around emotional regulation.

“I can’t control my anger.” – Participant 5

The programme’s somatic and reflective elements (guided safety and resource exercises) were particularly impactful for participants and facilitators alike.

From Escalation to De-escalation

Facilitators noted observable differences in how participants discussed conflict scenarios by the end of the programme. There was reportedly greater consideration of negotiation and alternative responses.

Young people described recognising that escalation often begins with misinterpretation or perceived disrespect, suggesting emerging metacognitive awareness of conflict dynamics.

Interpretation:

This theme suggests movement towards enhanced emotional self-awareness and early-stage regulatory skill development. Although behavioural change cannot be conclusively measured through qualitative data alone, participants articulated shifts in internal processing.

**“It’s about
stopping for
a second.”**

**— Youth
Participant
describing the
‘ideal man’**

"The relationship is the intervention."

— Facilitator

Theme 4: Relational Safety and the Importance of Consistent Adults to Build Trust

"You could actually say what you think" – Participant 1

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of the group environment and the support of the adult facilitators. They reported feeling listened to, not judged and able to speak openly which were identified as key features of the programme experience. Staff were described as respectful, present, not authoritarian and consistent.

"It was fairly interactive... bit of banter but serious." – Participant 3

Young people described appreciating that facilitators did not "lecture" but instead facilitated discussion. They were also seen as encouraging "They should give it a shot." This relational dynamic appeared to underpin engagement with more challenging topics. Relational consistency appears central to engagement and potential impact.

Similarly, facilitators highlighted the importance of the trauma-informed approach and the time given to build relational connection, trust and consistency. They noted that engagement deepened over time as trust developed. Several facilitators observed that the success of discussions around masculinity and weapon carrying depended heavily on the quality of the facilitator-participant relationship.

Interpretation:

The relational climate of the programme appears to be a critical mechanism of change. Trust and psychological safety enabled exploration of sensitive themes, supporting both cognitive and emotional learning.

Theme 5: Normalisation of Violence and Structural Context

"You wouldn't be surprised" – Violence as Ordinary

Across youth focus groups, violence was frequently described as commonplace and unsurprising within participants' communities. Phrases such as "you wouldn't be surprised" and "it just happens" reflected a sense of normalisation rather than shock. Participants referenced experiences including family incarceration, generational disputes, neighbourhood conflict, economic marginalisation, food insecurity and housing instability.

Violence was rarely framed as an isolated event or individual failing. Instead, it was discussed as embedded within everyday social realities. For some participants, exposure to violence appeared cumulative and interwoven with broader narratives of hardship and limited opportunity. This normalisation suggests that it forms part of the social landscape in which young people are navigating identity, status and safety.

Facilitator Perspectives:

"They're managing a Lot" – Facilitator 3

Facilitators consistently acknowledged the structural complexity of participants' lives. They described working with young people who were negotiating multiple stressors simultaneously; including unstable housing, financial strain within families, exposure to intergenerational trauma, and peer group tensions.

Several facilitators emphasised that weapon carrying, where present, was often linked to fear and perceived necessity rather than aggression. They reflected that without acknowledging the broader environment, it would be easy to misinterpret behaviour as purely individual choice or defiance. Facilitators also highlighted that discussions of conflict and regulation sometimes surfaced stories of family imprisonment or long-standing community disputes, illustrating how violence can be transmitted through relational and historical patterns.

Importantly, facilitators expressed both optimism about the programme's impact and realism about its limits. While they observed increased reflection and language shifts among participants, they emphasised that individual-level skill development operates within, and not outside structural constraint.

Interpretation

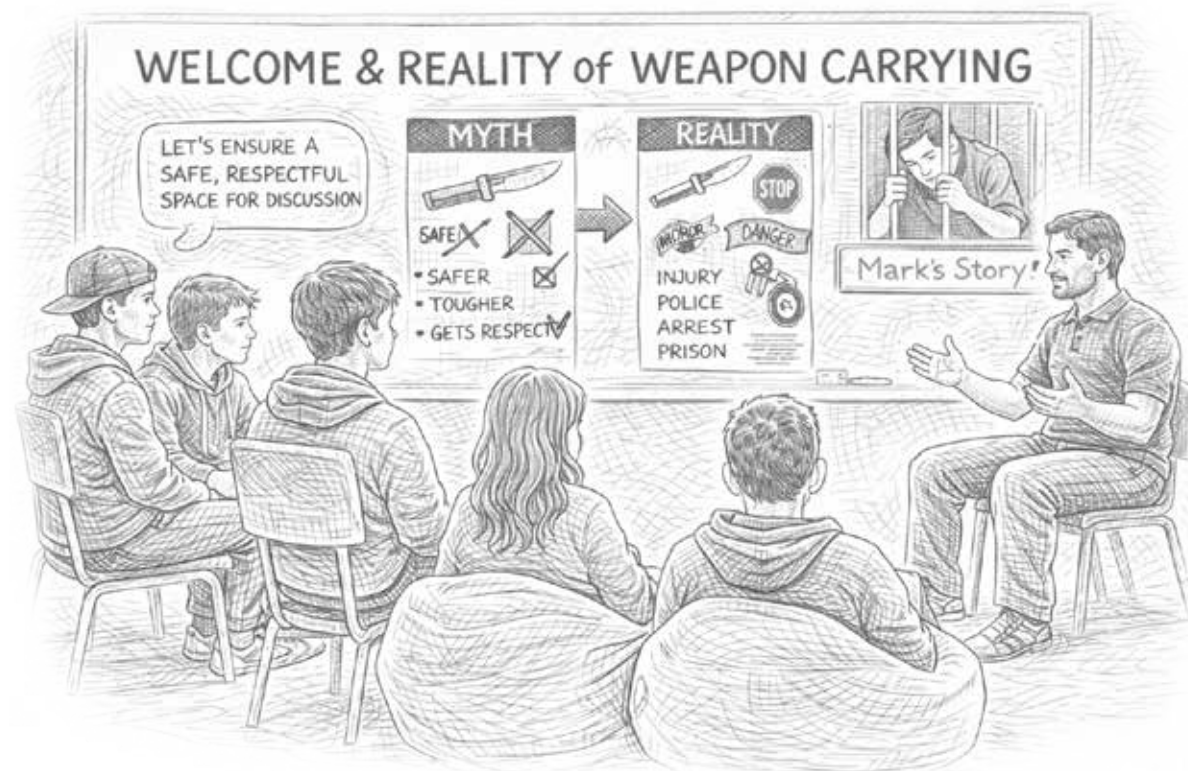
This theme reflects violence as socially patterned rather than individually pathological. Participants' narratives suggest that weapon carrying and conflict behaviours are shaped by structural disadvantage, material insecurity and intergenerational trauma. Such findings align with ecological and public health models of youth violence, which emphasise the interaction between individual vulnerabilities and broader environmental risk factors (Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009).

The normalisation of violence appears to function as an adaptive cognitive strategy within unpredictable environments. When violence becomes routine, hypervigilance and defensive behaviours may be understood as rational responses rather than deviance.

From an evaluative perspective, this theme underscores several key implications:

- Individual-level interventions can support reflection and skill-building but cannot alone transform structural inequity.
- Programmes must be trauma-informed and relationally attuned to avoid pathologising adaptive survival strategies.
- Sustainable impact likely requires complementary community, family and policy-level interventions.

Rather than diminishing the value of the programme, this theme situates it appropriately within a multi-layered prevention ecosystem. The intervention appears to function as an early-stage disruption to normalised narratives of inevitability, thus creating space for critical reflection even within structurally constrained environments.



7.2. FACILITATOR DATA FINDINGS

Two focus groups were conducted with programme facilitators following completion of delivery across sites. These discussions explored experiences of implementation, observed participant change, challenges encountered, and reflections on programme design and theory.

Analysis generated four key themes:

1. Relational Practice as the Core Mechanism of Change
2. Masculinity Conversations as Both Challenging and Transformative
3. Emotional Regulation as a Practical Skillset
4. Structural Realities and the Limits of Individual-Level Intervention

These themes reflect facilitators' interpretations of both process and impact.

Theme 1. Increased Emotional Awareness as a Core Outcome

The programme's most consistent outcome was greater emotional awareness, rather than immediate behavioural regulation. Facilitators found that young people became more aware of emotions, triggers, and internal states. They highlighted that many participants had previously been disconnected from emotional language or self-reflection. They also saw that awareness was seen as a necessary precursor to behavioural change.

"For me, I think no, it did not change emotional regulation. If anything, it brought about more awareness... that's the first step." – Facilitator 1

"They're totally disconnected from how they feel... the programme helped them connect that even a little bit." – Facilitator 5

Facilitators reported that emotional regulation strategies were well received, particularly when framed as practical tools rather than abstract theory. Techniques around pausing, walking away, and recognising triggers were described as accessible and relatable.

"They liked having something concrete" – Facilitator 4

Facilitators observed that some participants began applying regulatory language to real-life scenarios discussed in sessions.

Interpretation:

Facilitators viewed skill-building as one of the programme's strongest components, particularly when reinforced across sessions. They emphasised repetition and practice as essential to consolidation. The programme appears to function as a developmental intervention, strengthening emotional literacy and reflective capacity, which are key protective factors against weapon carrying and impulsive violence.

Theme 2. Improved Understanding of the Emotional Roots of Weapon Use

Increasingly weapons were seen as a symptom, with emotional dysregulation as the core issue. It was seen as downstream of trauma, anger, family dysfunction and masculinity pressures. Further to this was the impact intergenerational trauma with staff referencing developmental windows, generational murder and incarceration as well as school disengagement patterns.

"It's not really about weapons. It's about emotions and how to deal with it." – Facilitator 2

Facilitators consistently reframed weapon carrying as an emotional and relational coping strategy, not a criminal behaviour alone. Facilitators found that participants began to link their emotions such as anger, shame, fear, trauma and peer pressure to risk-taking and weapon use.

"I know you call it a weapons thing, but it's really around their emotions and how to deal with it." – Facilitator 3

"They couldn't see what their feelings had to do with carrying a knife — that shifted." – Facilitator 1

Interpretation:

The programme appears to disrupt simplistic narratives of violence and replaces them with psychologically coherent models, helping young people understand themselves rather than only the law.

**"They felt
they belonged
somewhere
and could trust
someone."**

— Facilitator

Theme 3. Increased Sense of Safety, Belonging, and Relational Trust

A major emergent outcome was a felt safety and belonging, especially among highly vulnerable participants. Facilitators observed that participants increased openness and emotional expression, reduced guardedness, had greater willingness to engage and young people returning voluntarily and asking for facilitators again. These all indicate engaging material, positive relationships with the facilitators which are precursors to a felt sense of safety, belonging and relational trust.

"They're so open." – Facilitator 2

"They felt they belonged somewhere and could trust someone." – Facilitator 1

"When are you coming back to see us?" – Youth Participant 5

Unexpectedly for one facilitator who was initially resistant to one of the practices (the guided safety/meditation component) they found that it was highly impactful.

"It works." – Facilitator

Staff described observable shifts in settling behaviour, reflective capacity and emotional awareness. All important components that impact behaviour.

"The relationship is the intervention" – Facilitator 1

Facilitators consistently emphasised that the programme's effectiveness depended heavily on relational trust. They described the group environment as foundational to engagement, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as weapon carrying and masculinity.

Facilitators noted that young people were initially cautious or guarded, but participation deepened as consistency and psychological safety were established. The importance of "not judging," "not preaching," and allowing young people to arrive at their own conclusions was repeatedly highlighted.

Trauma-Informed Engagement

Several facilitators referenced the value of trauma-informed principles embedded within the programme guidance. Recognising that some participants may have direct or indirect exposure to violence shaped how discussions were managed.

Facilitators described consciously monitoring activation, disengagement or bravado as possible indicators of discomfort rather than resistance.

Interpretation:

This relational safety appears to be a mechanism of change, enabling engagement with difficult content and emotional material. The programme functions as both preventive intervention and relational repair space. This aligns with youth work literature emphasising authenticity, attunement and trust as prerequisites for meaningful intervention.

**"We're
working on
that moment
of madness..."**

— Facilitator

Theme 4. Enhanced Capacity to Reflect Before Acting (Disruption of 'Moment of Madness')

Facilitators described noticing greater willingness among participants to consider alternative responses in hypothetical conflicts. Rather than defaulting to escalation narratives, young people were more likely to articulate negotiation or disengagement strategies. However, facilitators remained realistic about the complexity of transferring these skills into high-pressure real-world environments.

Facilitators observed improved cognitive pause, young people showing more reflection on consequences before acting. Young people demonstrated improved awareness of legal consequences, stop-and-search rights, and escalation pathways. Facilitators explicitly referenced interrupting impulsivity.

"We're working on that moment of madness... giving them the knowledge about consequences and feelings." – Facilitator 2

Interpretation

Rather than eliminating risk behaviour, the programme appears to slow down impulsive response patterns, which is a critical harm-reduction outcome in violence prevention.

Theme 5. Increased Empathy and Moral Reasoning Through Scenarios and Storytelling

The scenario work and narrative-based learning produced strong outcomes in participants perspective-taking, moral reasoning and emotional empathy. Facilitators consistently named the scenarios, Mark's story and the visual narratives as impactful components of the programme.

"Nobody ever forgot the Mark's story." – Facilitator 2

"The scenarios created space for debate — even reluctant participants got drawn in." – Facilitator 4

Outcome Implication:

These tools helped young people mentally simulate consequences without self-disclosure, enabling emotional processing while maintaining psychological safety, something that is particularly valuable for trauma-exposed participants.

Theme 6. Increased Emotional Containment and Regulation Within Sessions

While long-term emotional regulation did not significantly shift, facilitators observed session-level regulation improvements, particularly among younger, more dysregulated cohorts. Facilitators found that chaotic groups became more settled over time. Participants tolerated stillness, silence, and reflective practices, and young people engaged unexpectedly well with grounding and mindfulness exercises.

"They were chaotic at the beginning... but they settled." – Facilitator 1

"That safety and resources piece... it's magic." – Facilitator 2

Interpretation

The programme appears to improve situational emotional containment, laying groundwork for longer-term regulatory development if practiced regularly.

Theme 7. Normalisation of Non-Violent Emotional Expression (Cultural Shift)

During the programme participants began expressing vulnerability, distress, and emotional experiences more openly, particularly boys from high-risk environments. Facilitators noticed unexpected emotional openness, an ability to talk about family trauma and instability and greater comfort discussing feelings in group contexts

"Just hearing them talk like that... with everything going on." – Facilitator 2

"They're well able to speak." – Facilitator 3

Interpretation

This suggests a shift in masculinity norms, through emotional permission, and help-seeking behaviours, these are important indirect outcome linked to violence reduction.

Theme 8. Strengthened Facilitator Practice and Trauma-Informed Delivery

Another theme that emerged which is admittedly a secondary outcome but highly relevant to sustainability and fidelity, was that facilitators reported significant learning in relation to trauma-informed practice, emotional containment, relational safety and flexible delivery.

"I learned lots – relationship-building, safety, tuning into groups." – Facilitator 5

"No two groups are the same." – Facilitator 4

Interpretation

This strengthens the programme's implementation integrity and increases its likelihood of producing consistent outcomes across settings.

Theme 9. Limits of Impact Without Structural and Family-Level Supports

Facilitators emphasised that programme impact is constrained by structural adversity, including, poverty, family violence, homelessness, care instability, criminalisation and food insecurity.

"They're starving." – Facilitator 3

"They don't know where they're sleeping." – Facilitator 2

"We're dealing with very heavy stuff." – Facilitator 1

Interpretation

The programme functions as a protective buffer, not a standalone solution. Outcomes are maximised when embedded within wider, family support, therapeutic services, youth development pathways and economic opportunities.



7.3 CROSS-CUTTING INSIGHTS

Where young people and facilitators converge in their experience is that they both identify fear as central, both recognise masculinity pressures, both see employment as protective and both value relational consistency.

Where they diverge is that young people frame weapons as protection, while staff frame weapons as symptom. Younger cohorts show greater malleability, while older cohorts show entrenched environmental narratives.

"It worked better with the younger kids — they latched onto us." – Facilitator 5

"For older lads... 8 sessions isn't going to change that much." – Facilitator 4

7.4 INTERPRETATION

The programme appears to operate through three mechanisms:

1. Cognitive Reframing by challenging myths about protection and consequence.
2. Emotional Literacy Development by increasing awareness of anger, fear, and bodily signals.
3. Relational Regulation by providing consistent, safe adult presence. Impact appears strongest in younger cohorts, where relational continuity exists and when integrated with wider structural supports

7.5 IMPLICATIONS, INSIGHTS & IMPACT

The findings suggest that weapons prevention programmes should, begin early, include parent/family components, embed emotional regulation work, address masculinity explicitly, link to employment and structured activity pathways and include realistic follow-up / exit strategy.

Across themes, facilitators identified several strengths; structured engaging yet flexible curriculum, clear facilitator guidance, space for open discussion, integration of identity, emotion and practical skills and trauma-informed framing. Also from the facilitators standpoint, the programme, operates primarily through relational trust, creates rare space for critical masculinity dialogue, builds practical emotional regulation tools, encourages reflective thinking around conflict and faces structural constraints beyond its immediate scope. Facilitators viewed the intervention as an important preventive measure, particularly valuable in disrupting normalised narratives around weapon carrying, even if broader systemic issues remain.

They also identified areas for development; time constraints limiting depth, the need for booster or follow-up sessions, potential value of stronger parent engagement components and managing mixed engagement levels within groups.

Facilitators reported observing, increased openness in discussions, greater critical reflection about weapon carrying, emerging emotional vocabulary, improved conflict scenario analysis, and stronger peer-to-peer dialogue

While they noted that some young people did shift their attitude and even their behaviour from weapon carrying, importantly, facilitators also described noticing cognitive and reflective shifts.

7.6 CONSIDERATIONS

As evaluator and practitioner embedded in violence prevention, interpretation may lean toward trauma-informed framing. However, strong triangulation between youth and staff accounts increases analytic credibility.

8. QUANTITATIVE DATA

8.1 DESIGN AND SAMPLE

A pre–post questionnaire design was used. Baseline questionnaires were completed before programme delivery and post questionnaires were completed following programme completion. Where possible, participants were matched across timepoints using an ID reference code. Nineteen young people completed the baseline questionnaire and twelve completed the post questionnaire. Nine participants could be matched across timepoints using an ID code. Missingness is expected in small, real-world cohorts and analyses were conducted using both matched (within-person) and unmatched (group-level) comparisons.

Table 1. summarises the sample at each timepoint.

Timepoint	N	Age mean (range)
Baseline	19	15.4 (12-18)
Post	12	15.0 (13-17)

Table 2. Gender.

What is your gender:	Baseline	Post
Male	13	8
Female	6	4

Table 3. Community Group

What Community Group are you attending?	Baseline	Post
Kings Island	3	3
MYA	13	6
YDP	3	3

8.2 MEASURES AND SCORING

Likert items were coded from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Two items were reverse-scored so that scale direction was consistent: 'Men need to call out their friends' disrespectful behaviour...' (reverse-scored within harmful masculinity norms) and 'I avoid conflict because I do not know how to resolve it peacefully' (reverse-scored within conflict self-efficacy). Composite scales were calculated as the mean of items, requiring at least half of scale items present.

A legal knowledge score (0-4) was calculated from four knowledge questions (legality of carrying a knife/weapon in public, self-defence, weapon definition, and penalty). Participants were included in this score if they answered at least three of the four knowledge items.

8.3 RELIABILITY

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each composite scale. With small samples, alpha values can fluctuate and should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 4. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha)

Scale	Cronbach alpha (baseline)	Cronbach alpha (post)
Community safety	0.65	0.32
Harmful masculinity norms	0.39	0.26
Violence endorsement	0.45	0.33
Conflict self-efficacy	0.49	-0.27
Non-violent coping	0.81	0.86

8.3 KEY FINDINGS

Overall scale changes

Figure 1 shows baseline and post mean scores for each composite outcome (mean $\pm$ 95% confidence interval).

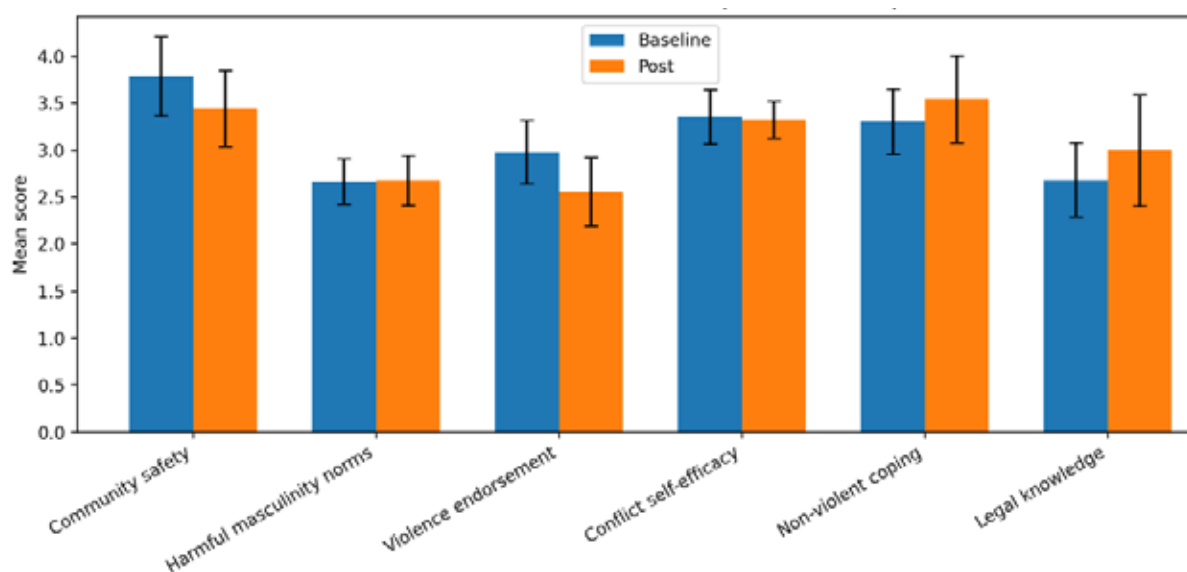


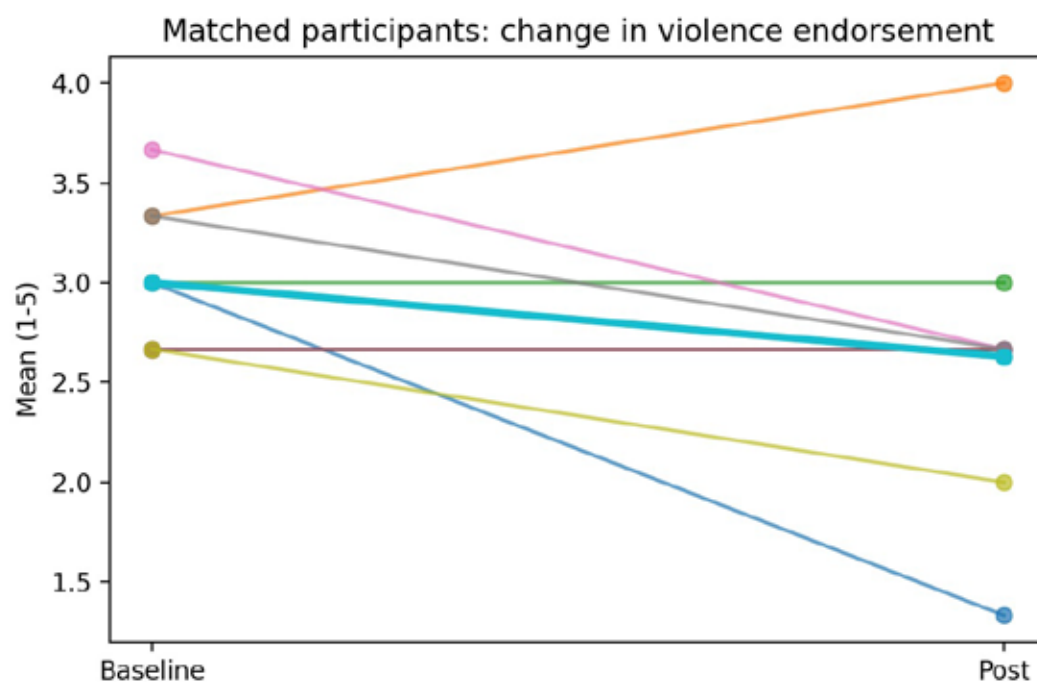
Table 5 summarises baseline and post scores and effect sizes for both matched and unmatched analyses.

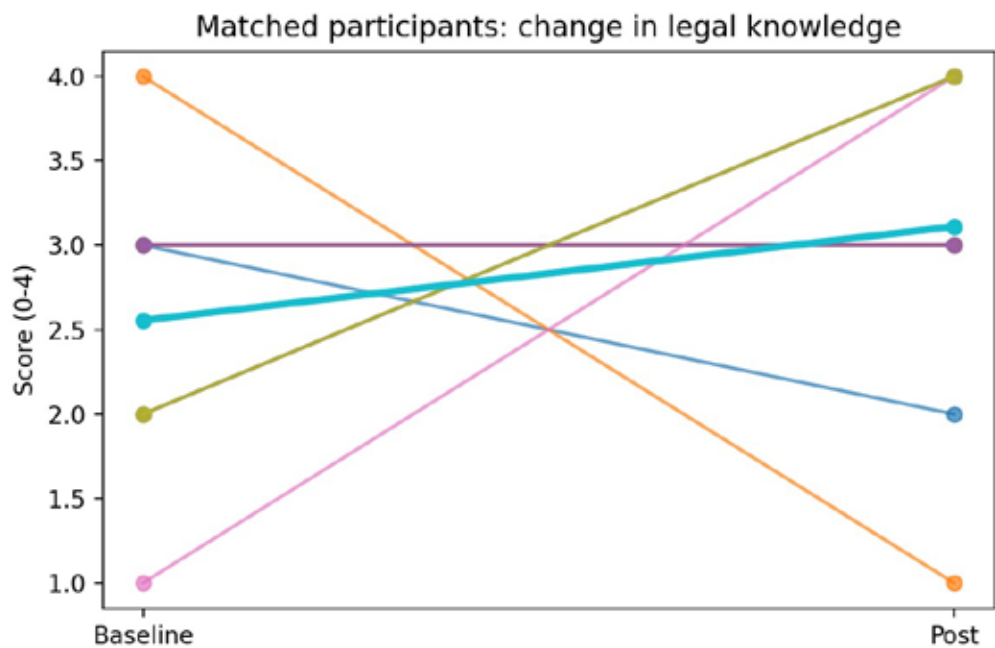
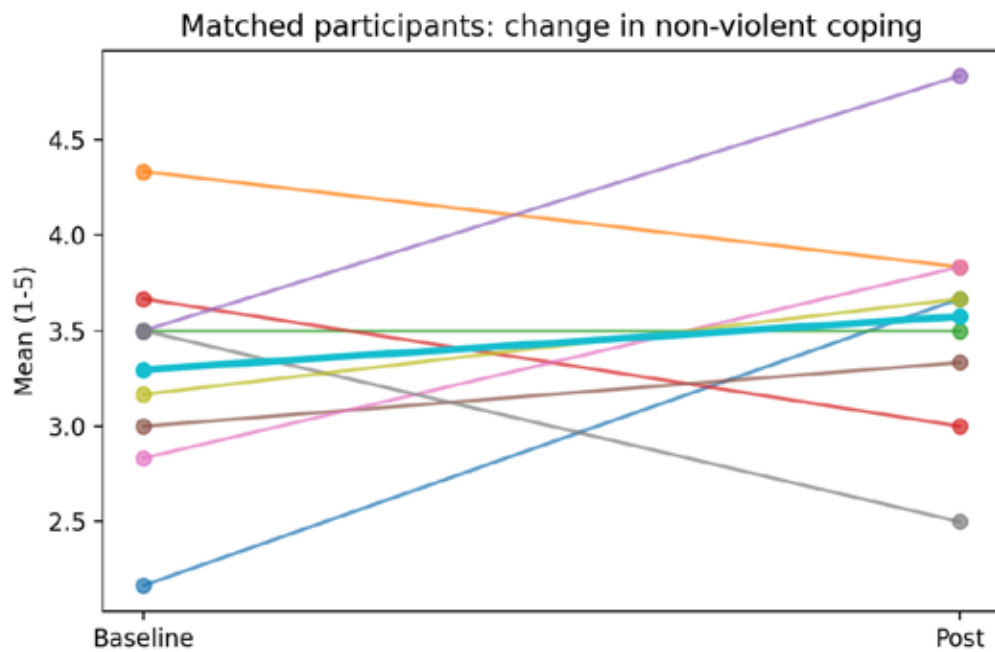
Table 5. Outcomes summary (means, change, and effect sizes)

Outcome	Baseline mean (SD)	Post mean (SD)	Matched n	Matched change (post-pre)	Paired p	Cohen's dz	Hedges g (unmatched)
Community safety (higher=safest)	3.79 (0.94)	3.44 (0.72)	9	-0.52	0.133	-0.56	-0.39
Harmful masculinity norms (higher=more harmful)	2.67 (0.53)	2.68 (0.46)	9	-0.16	0.481	-0.25	0.02
Violence endorsement (higher=more pro-violence)	2.98 (0.76)	2.56 (0.64)	9	-0.37	0.149	-0.53	-0.58
Conflict self-efficacy (higher=better)	3.36 (0.64)	3.33 (0.35)	9	0.17	0.302	0.37	-0.06
Non-violent coping (higher=better)	3.31 (0.77)	3.54 (0.82)	9	0.28	0.378	0.31	0.29
Legal knowledge (0-4)	2.68 (0.89)	3.00 (1.04)	9	0.56	0.401	0.30	0.32

Matched participant change (within-person)

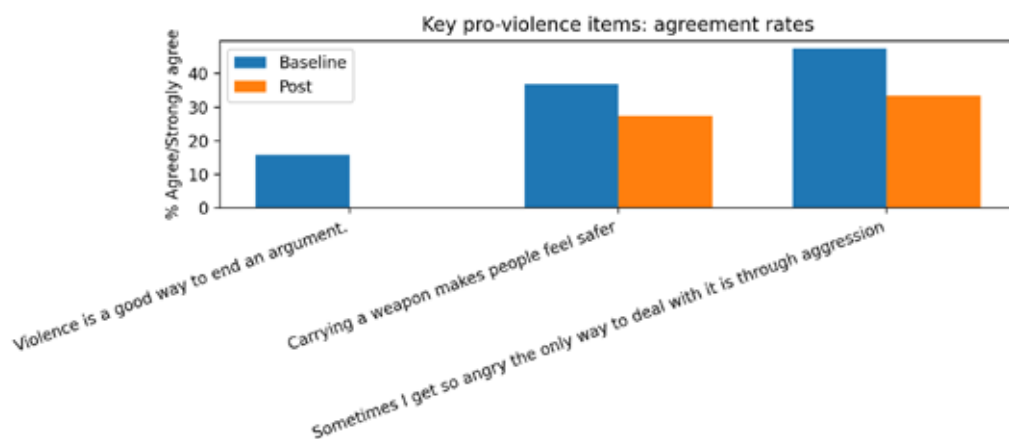
Figures 2-4 show individual change trajectories for matched participants (thin lines) and group means (bold line).





Key item shifts

Item-level shifts can be easier to interpret than composite scores. Figure 5 shows agreement rates for three key pro-violence items.



These three items together tell a coherent story in relation to reduced pro-violence / weapon-as-safety beliefs.

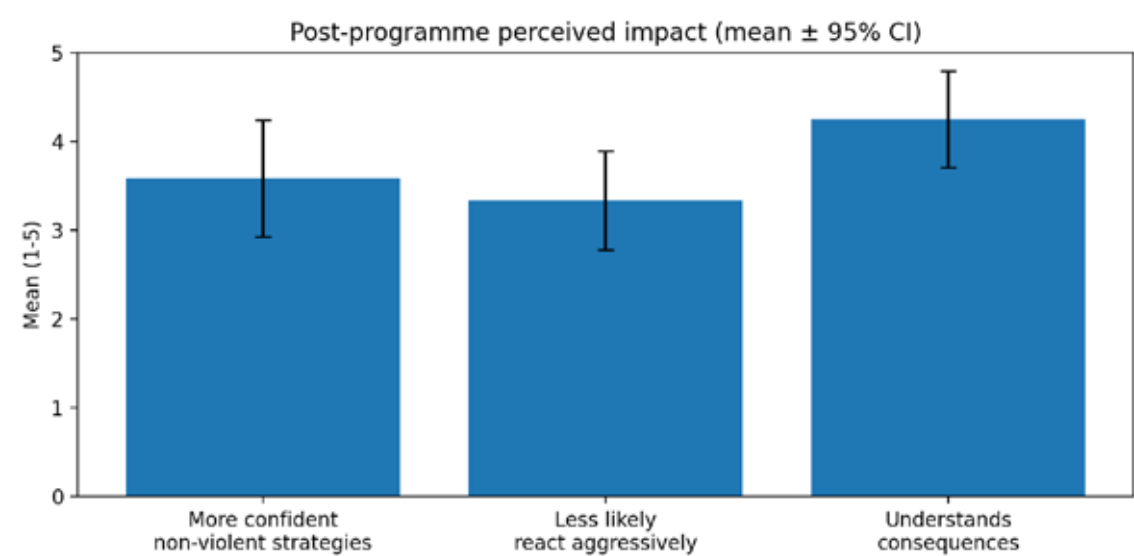
“Violence is a good way to end an argument” Baseline 15.8% → Post 0% (mean 2.16 → 2.00)

“Carrying a weapon makes people feel safer” Baseline 36.8% → Post 25.0% (mean 3.26 → 2.82)

“Sometimes I get so angry the only way to deal with it is through aggression” Baseline 47.4% → Post 33.3% (mean 3.53 → 2.92)

Post-programme perceived impact

Post-only impact items were coded on a 1-5 scale. Figure 6 shows post-programme perceived impact (mean ± 95% confidence interval).



Item	Mean	% Agree/Strongly Agree
More confident using non-violent strategies	3.58	66.7%
Less likely to react aggressively when provoked	3.33	50.0%
Better understands consequences of violence	4.25	83.3%

Overall Programme Impact Scale mean = 3.72/5.

8.4 INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

Because cohort sizes are small, statistical significance testing is underpowered. The most informative indicators are: (1) direction of change, (2) magnitude of change (effect sizes), and (3) consistency of individual improvements among matched participants.

Promising signals

1) Reduced pro-violence beliefs (promising change)
Violence endorsement decreased from baseline to post. In the matched sample, this reduction showed a moderate effect size (Cohen’s dz ≈ -0.53). At item level, endorsement of “Violence is a good way to end an argument” dropped from 15.8% agreeing at baseline to 0% post.

2) Improved legal knowledge (promising change)

Legal knowledge increased from 2.26/4 to 2.83/4 overall. In the matched sample, the increase showed a moderate effect size ($d_z \approx +0.45$), suggesting meaningful gains in understanding legality, penalties, and weapon definitions.

3) Skills and regulation moved in a positive direction

Non-violent coping increased (baseline 3.31 to post 3.54). Conflict self-efficacy was broadly stable overall with slight improvement in the matched group. Given the small sample size, these changes are best interpreted as directional and practically meaningful rather than statistically conclusive.

4) Post-programme self-reported impact was high

Post-only ratings indicated strong perceived impact (overall mean 3.72/5), particularly on understanding consequences of violence (mean 4.25/5; 83.3% agree/strongly agree).

Context-sensitive outcomes

Perceived community safety declined from baseline to post ($d_z \approx -0.56$). This type of perception can be strongly influenced by recent events, peer narratives, or wider community context. It is recommended to interpret this measure as a contextual indicator rather than a direct programme outcome. It is common for environmental perceptions to move independently of programme learning.

For matched participants only

Violence endorsement: 4/9 improved (decreased)

Non-violent coping: 5/9 improved (increased)

Conflict self-efficacy: 6/9 improved (increased)

Legal knowledge: 5/9 improved (increased)

Community safety: 2/9 improved (increased)

Item-level shifts

- "Violence is a good way to end an argument"
Baseline 15.8% → Post 0% (mean 2.16 → 2.00)
- "Carrying a weapon makes people feel safer"
Baseline 36.8% → Post 25.0% (mean 3.26 → 2.82)
- "So angry the only way is aggression"
Baseline 47.4% → Post 33.3% (mean 3.53 → 2.92)

These three together tell a coherent story, reduced pro-violence / weapon-as-safety beliefs.

Behaviour (past 3 months) – % Yes

(Only n=10 in post answered these)

- Witnessed someone carrying a weapon: 63.2% → 33.3%
- Felt unsafe in community: 31.6% → 50.0%
- Tried to resolve a conflict without violence: 73.7% → 50.0%

Summary

Overall the strongest positive movement is in knowledge (moderate effect) and reduced violence endorsement (moderate negative effect = good). Community safety perception drops (moderate negative effect). This can reflect real-world context rather than programme impact (e.g., incidents happening in the community). Skills scales move slightly positive but are not statistically detectable at this cohort size (still potentially meaningful).

Interpretation

Despite a small cohort, findings suggest promising shifts in the intended direction for two core outcomes: reduced violence endorsement and increased legal knowledge, alongside positive movement in non-violent coping. The programme appears to support learning and attitudinal change, while perceptions of community safety likely reflect external context and should be monitored separately.

Limitations

- Small sample size (matched $n=9$) limits statistical power; lack of significance does not imply lack of impact.
- Some missingness at post reduces matched sample size; future evaluations should continue to prioritise survey completion.
- Some scales (e.g., masculinity norms and conflict self-efficacy) showed low internal consistency in this cohort, suggesting future refinement may strengthen measurement. This may also be due to inaccurate responses from the cohort.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The mixed-methods design enabled triangulation between quantitative survey outcomes and qualitative insights from youth and facilitator focus groups. This integration strengthens interpretive validity by examining whether measured changes correspond with participants' lived experiences and reflections during programme delivery. The integration process followed three analytical lenses: convergence, complementarity and dissonance.

Alignment Between Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Several key findings demonstrated convergence across both datasets.

Reduced Pro-Violence Beliefs

Quantitative analysis indicated a moderate reduction in violence endorsement from baseline to post-programme. Agreement with the statement "Violence is a good way to end an argument" fell from 15.8% at baseline to 0% at post-programme.

This shift aligns strongly with qualitative accounts from participants describing increased reflection about the consequences of violence. Young people repeatedly articulated a reframing of weapon carrying from a protective strategy toward something that could escalate harm:

"A knife won't help solve problems. It'll only make problems worse."

Participants described "thinking about consequences" and questioning the assumption that carrying a weapon increases safety. Facilitators similarly observed young people beginning to challenge peer narratives such as "everyone carries" or "you have to." Together, these findings suggest the programme supported early cognitive shifts away from normalised violence narratives.

Increased Legal Knowledge

Quantitative findings showed improvement in legal knowledge scores, with a moderate effect size among matched participants. Post-programme self-report measures also indicated that understanding consequences of violence was the strongest perceived outcome (mean 4.25/5).

This aligns closely with qualitative accounts describing how discussions of legal consequences, real-life scenarios and narrative-based learning prompted reflection. Facilitators reported that stories and case scenarios were particularly memorable and helped young people mentally simulate consequences without direct personal disclosure. These exercises appear to have strengthened both cognitive understanding and moral reasoning regarding weapon use.

Development of Non-Violent Coping and Emotional Awareness

Survey measures indicated directional improvements in non-violent coping and slight improvement in conflict self-efficacy. Although statistical power was limited due to the small sample size, qualitative data strongly reinforced these findings.

Participants described learning strategies such as pausing, breathing, walking away and seeking support. Several young people articulated the importance of “stopping for a second” before reacting in conflict situations. Facilitators observed similar changes, noting increased use of reflective language when discussing hypothetical conflicts.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data suggest emerging emotional literacy and early-stage regulatory skill development.

Complementarity: Qualitative Data Explaining Mechanisms of Change

While the quantitative data captured directional shifts in attitudes and knowledge, the qualitative findings provided insight into how and why these changes may have occurred.

Relational Safety as a Mechanism of Engagement

One of the strongest qualitative themes concerned the relational climate of the programme. Young people repeatedly emphasised the importance of feeling listened to, respected and not judged by facilitators.

Facilitators described relational trust as foundational to engagement with difficult topics such as masculinity, fear and weapon carrying. Participants initially appeared guarded but became increasingly open as trust developed.

This relational environment appears to function as a mechanism enabling cognitive and emotional learning. It created space for participants to question peer norms, reflect on identity and engage with emotionally charged topics without fear of judgement.

Identity Exploration and Masculinity Dialogue

Quantitative measures relating to harmful masculinity norms showed limited overall change. However, qualitative discussions suggest that the programme facilitated deeper identity exploration rather than immediate attitude shifts.

Young men discussed the pressure to appear tough and avoid emotional expression, while also articulating aspirations towards more relational and responsible forms of masculinity. Exercises examining “regular man” versus “ideal man” narratives created space to reflect on competing identity models.

These discussions suggest that change in gender norms may emerge gradually through reflective dialogue rather than immediate measurable shifts.

Emotional Awareness as a Foundational Outcome

Facilitators consistently emphasised that the most immediate impact of the programme was increased emotional awareness rather than fully developed regulatory skills. Many participants initially lacked emotional language or self-reflection capacity.

The programme appeared to help young people connect emotions such as anger, fear and embarrassment to conflict behaviour. Facilitators framed this awareness as a necessary developmental step preceding behavioural change.

This insight helps explain why quantitative improvements in coping and conflict self-efficacy were modest but moving in a positive direction.

Divergent Findings and Contextual Interpretation

One area of divergence emerged between quantitative and qualitative findings regarding perceptions of community safety.

Quantitative data showed a decrease in perceived community safety between baseline and post-programme surveys. At first glance, this might appear contradictory to the programme’s intended outcomes.

However, qualitative findings provide important contextual interpretation. Young people described violence as normalised within their communities, referencing neighbourhood disputes, family

incarceration and economic hardship. Phrases such as “you wouldn’t be surprised” reflected the everyday nature of violence within their environments.

Rather than indicating programme failure, the decline in perceived safety may reflect increased critical awareness of environmental risk. As participants engaged with discussions about violence and structural context, their perceptions may have become more realistic or reflective of lived experiences.

Facilitators also noted that perceptions of safety can shift in response to local incidents or community narratives outside programme influence. For this reason, community safety perceptions are best interpreted as contextual indicators rather than direct programme outcomes.

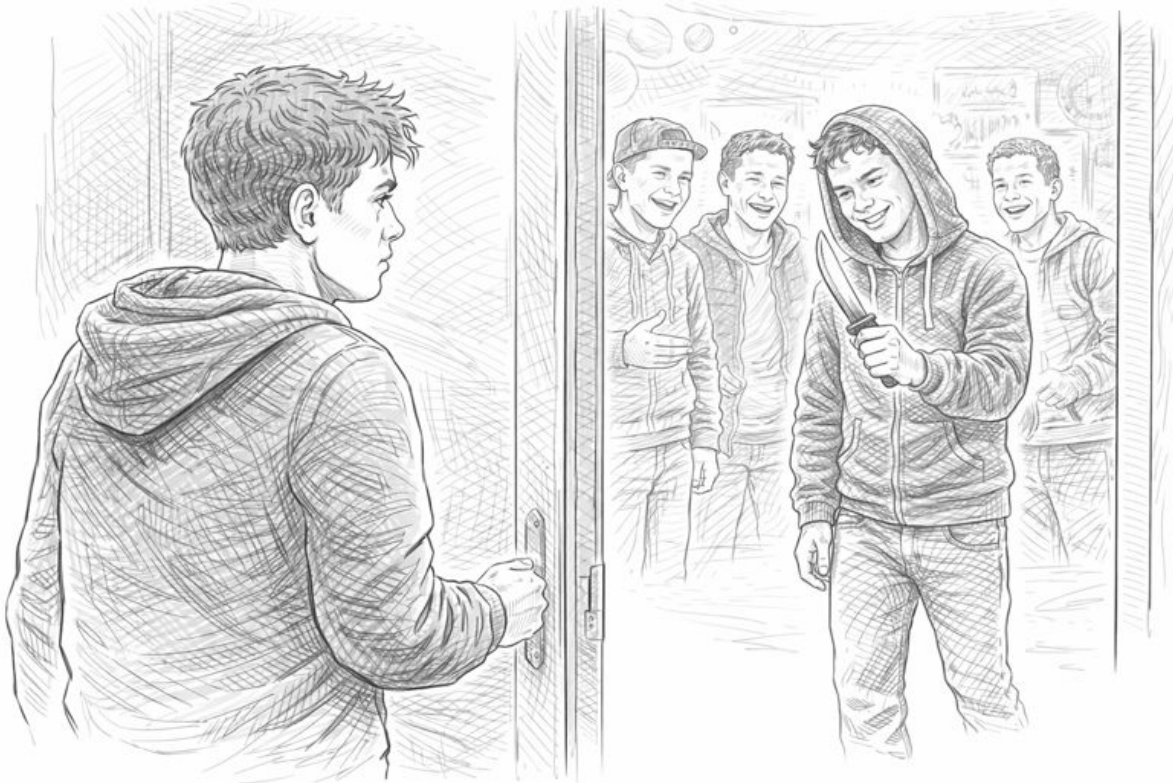
Overall Integration

Across the datasets, a coherent pattern emerges. Quantitative data indicates promising shifts in attitudes toward violence, increased legal knowledge and emerging improvements in coping strategies. Qualitative findings reinforce these changes while highlighting the relational and developmental processes underlying them.

The programme appears to operate through three interrelated mechanisms:

1. **Cognitive reframing**, challenging myths about protection and violence.
2. **Emotional literacy development**, increasing awareness of feelings and triggers.
3. **Relational regulation**, providing safe adult relationships that support reflection and discussion.

These mechanisms are consistent with the programme’s theory of change and align with wider evidence on effective youth violence prevention.



9 DISCUSSION

This evaluation sought to assess whether participation in the Weapon Carrying Prevention Programme was associated with changes in attitudes towards violence, conflict resolution skills, masculinity norms and knowledge of legal consequences.

Despite the small cohort size, the findings provide encouraging evidence of early attitudinal and cognitive shifts among participants. Quantitative results suggest reductions in pro-violence beliefs and improvements in legal knowledge, alongside directional improvements in non-violent coping strategies. These findings align with the programme's core objectives of challenging weapon-carrying myths and strengthening young people's capacity to respond to conflict without violence.

The qualitative findings deepen this understanding by revealing how these changes may occur. The programme appears to provide a rare space in which young people can critically reflect on fear, masculinity, identity and conflict within a supportive relational environment. Rather than prescribing behaviour change, the intervention facilitates reflection, dialogue and emotional awareness. Such processes are consistent with developmental approaches to violence prevention, which emphasise the importance of cognitive and emotional skill-building as precursors to behavioural change.

Importantly, the findings also highlight the structural realities within which participants live. Many young people described exposure to violence, community instability and economic hardship. In these contexts, weapon carrying is often framed as a rational protective strategy rather than purely aggressive behaviour. Recognising these environmental influences is essential to understanding both the motivations behind weapon carrying and the limits of short-term interventions.

The programme therefore functions not as a standalone solution but as an early-stage preventive intervention that disrupts normalised narratives around violence. By creating opportunities for reflection, emotional literacy and relational connection, it contributes to strengthening protective factors known to reduce youth violence.

The evaluation also highlights several practical insights for programme development. Facilitators observed stronger engagement and impact among younger adolescents, suggesting that earlier intervention may be particularly effective. Additionally, the importance of relational trust and trauma-informed facilitation emerged as critical to programme success.



10 RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue and Expand the Programme

- Continue delivering the programme within youth justice and youth work settings.
- Expand delivery to additional youth projects, schools, and community-based services where young people may be at risk of weapon carrying.

Early intervention programmes delivered in trusted youth work environments are shown to reduce violent behaviour and support pro-social development (WHO, 2015; Public Health Scotland, 2020).

Embed the Programme within a Public Health Approach to Violence

- Position the programme as one component of a wider public health approach to violence prevention.
- Strengthen links with community safety initiatives, youth justice services, schools, and family support services.
- Ensure young people experiencing multiple adversities are connected with appropriate supports.

Research consistently shows that effective violence prevention requires coordinated, multi-agency responses rather than stand-alone programmes (World Health Organization, 2015).

Additional Interventions to Strengthen Emotional Regulation and Conflict Resolution Skills

- Create an expanded programme to strengthen emotional regulation, impulse control, and conflict resolution skills.
- Integrate additional experiential exercises that allow young people to practise:
 - walking away from conflict
 - de-escalation strategies
 - recognising escalation cues in themselves and others.

Evidence suggests that programmes that build social and emotional competencies significantly reduce aggressive behaviour (Durlak et al., 2011).

Address Masculinity Norms and Social Identity

- Continue incorporating structured discussions around masculinity, identity, and peer influence.
- Provide opportunities for young men in particular to reflect on:
 - social expectations around toughness
 - pressure to retaliate
 - alternative ways of gaining respect and status.

Research shows that addressing harmful gender norms is an important component of violence prevention (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Support Facilitators with Ongoing Training and Reflection

- Provide ongoing facilitator training in areas such as trauma-informed practice, managing difficult conversations and group facilitation in high-risk settings.
- Build in structured reflective supervision to support staff working with complex issues.

This helps maintain programme fidelity and supports staff wellbeing.

Incorporate Lived Experience and Peer Voice

- Continue incorporating real-world scenarios and storytelling.
- Where appropriate, include peer mentors or credible messengers who can speak authentically about the consequences of violence and alternative pathways.

Evidence suggests that credible messengers can enhance engagement and relevance in youth violence programmes (Butts et al., 2015).

Strengthen Monitoring and Long-Term Evaluation

- Continue using baseline and post-programme surveys to track changes in attitudes and knowledge.
- Where possible, explore longer-term follow-up measures (e.g., 3–6 months post programme).
- Continue collecting qualitative feedback from participants and facilitators to capture lived experiences of change.

Ongoing evaluation will support programme improvement and strengthen the evidence base.

Explore Opportunities for Early Prevention

- Consider adapting elements of the programme for (e.g., primary school).
- Focus on emotional literacy, conflict resolution, peer pressure and decision making.
- Earlier preventative work can reduce the likelihood of later weapon carrying behaviours.
- Ensure Space for Discussion of Structural Realities
- Maintain programme elements that allow young people to discuss these structural realities openly.
- Frame violence prevention not only as individual responsibility, but also as part of broader social conditions.

This helps avoid framing violence purely as a personal failing and supports more meaningful engagement.

Invest in Youth Work as a Core Prevention Strategy

The evaluation highlighted the central role that trusted youth workers and youth work settings play in engaging young people in meaningful conversations about violence, safety, and life choices. Given that youth work services often operate within precarious and short-term funding structures, greater investment is required to ensure their sustainability. Strengthening the youth work sector will enhance the long-term impact of violence prevention initiatives and support young people in developing constructive pathways toward education, employment, and community participation.

- Increase sustainable funding for youth work services as a key violence prevention intervention.
- Recognise youth work not only as a programme delivery mechanism but as an ongoing relational support system that helps young people navigate challenges, build resilience, and access opportunities.
- Support youth projects to provide practical pathways for young people, including connections to education and training programmes, employment supports and apprenticeships, mentoring and career guidance and wellbeing and family supports.

Research consistently shows that high-quality youth work provides protective factors for young people by strengthening relationships with trusted adults, supporting identity development, and expanding future opportunities.



11 CONCLUSION

This evaluation provides promising evidence that the Weapon Carrying Prevention Programme contributes to early attitudinal and cognitive shifts related to youth violence and weapon carrying. Quantitative findings indicate reductions in pro-violence beliefs and improvements in legal knowledge, while qualitative data highlights increased emotional awareness, critical reflection and engagement with non-violent conflict strategies.

The programme appears to operate through relational, cognitive and emotional mechanisms that support young people to question prevailing narratives around fear, masculinity and protection. These processes are particularly significant in environments where violence has become normalised and where young people may feel limited control over their broader circumstances.

While the small sample size limits statistical generalisation, the consistency between quantitative trends and qualitative experiences strengthens confidence in the programme's developmental impact. The intervention appears to function as an important preventive space that encourages reflection, builds emotional literacy and challenges harmful norms.

Future programme development would benefit from continued evaluation with larger cohorts, longitudinal follow-up and greater integration with family, school and community supports. Violence prevention requires sustained, multi-level approaches that address both individual skills and structural conditions.

Within this broader ecosystem, the programme represents a meaningful contribution to early prevention efforts by equipping young people with the awareness, language and relational support necessary to choose alternatives to violence.

**"A knife
won't
help solve
problems.
It'll only
make
problems
worse."**

**— Youth
Participant**



12 APPENDIX

Appendix A. Quantitative Scale

Community safety

- I feel safe walking in my community during the day.
- I feel safe walking in my community at night.
- There are enough resources in my community to address youth violence.

Harmful masculinity norms

- Boys and men have to hide their emotions to get along.
- Men have to act aggressively to prove they are 'real' man.
- Boys/men should feel ashamed if they cry.
- Men are made fun of if they express kindness or empathy.
- Women are weak.
- Weak boys get picked on.
- Men need to call out their friends disrespectful behaviour, whether it is in person or online.

Violence endorsement

- Carrying a weapon makes people feel safer
- Violence is a good way to end an argument.
- Sometimes I get so angry the only way to deal with it is through aggression.

Conflict self-efficacy

- When I am in a conflict, I prefer to talk things out rather than use aggression.
- When I'm faced with a disagreement, I look for help from someone rather than resort to aggression.
- I feel confident in my ability to negotiate a fair solution during a conflict.
- I am comfortable stepping in to mediate a conflict between my friends.
- I avoid conflict because I do not know how to resolve it peacefully.
- Non-violent coping
- I feel calm and in control when trying to resolve a disagreement.
- I know how to deal with my anger and frustration without violence.
- I am comfortable walking away from a confrontation or conflict
- I believe there are better ways than fighting to resolve differences.
- I know where to go for help when a conflict feels too difficult to resolve on my own.
- I am more likely to use non-violent alternatives when I feel angry or frustrated.

Legal knowledge (0-4) is based on four knowledge questions; score reflects number correct (participants included if 3+ items answered).

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NOTES

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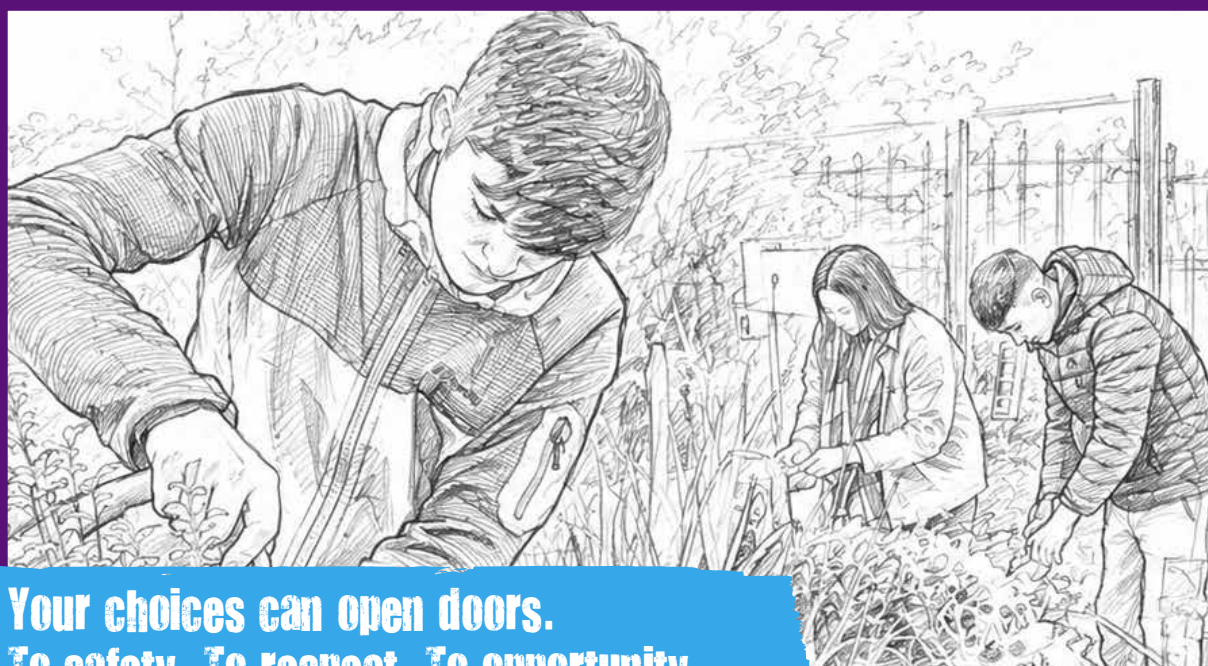
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Department of Justice,
Home Affairs and Migration
 
 Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland
  An tSeirbhís Phromhaidh
The Probation Service



EDGE-AWAY

SMART CHOICES, YOUNG VOICES

SMART CHOICES, YOUNG VOICES, SMART CHOICES, YOUNG VOICES, SMART CHOICES, YOUNG VOICES, SMART CHOICES, YOUNG VOICES,

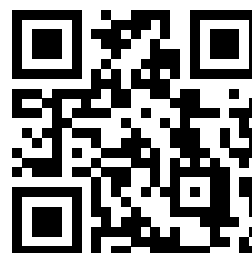


Your choices can open doors.
To safety. To respect. To opportunity.

Every positive step builds something stronger
in you, and in your community.

You are not defined by one moment.
You are shaped by what you choose next.

SCAN ME



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