

Case Study

Young Researchers

By Liz Fekete

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Hertsmere Young Researchers' Network, in advocating for young people, has produced first-rate research into the media portrayal of youth, gangs and knife crime.

THE National Youth Agency Young Researchers' Network funded Hertsmere Borough Council to support a team of seven young people in Hertsmere, Hertfordshire, aged 14 to 19, to research a topic of their own choosing, namely 'Unbalanced negative media portrayals of youth'. The result, *A youth research project looking at unbalanced negative media portrayal of youth*, is a first-rate piece of research that speaks volumes about the impact of inter-generational injustice in the UK.

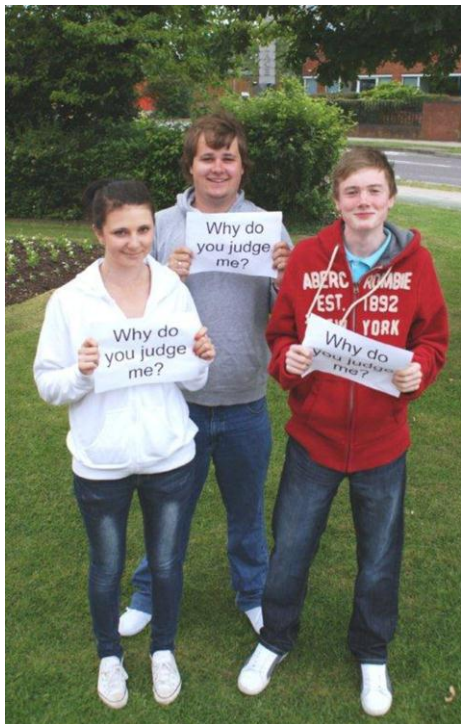
The young people set out with a basic proposition: the media's reporting of issues relating to young people creates negative-bias, stereotyping and fear in a way that erodes the confidence of young people and stymies community cohesion as a whole. In order to understand this further, the young researchers set out to investigate the 'negative stereotype'. Online surveys, vox-pop interviews, perception studies, invisible theatre, literature reviews, statistical analysis (using data provided by the Institute of Race Relations[1] and the Homicide Register), comparison of media reportage involving a study of the reporting of five cases by the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Guardian*. The way that the Hertsmere Young Researchers' Network gathered together its evidence is truly impressive - it could even make some of the academics involved in big university-funded studies blush!

The seven researchers tease out from the evidence important insights into the impact that the media's portrayal of 'gangs' has on readers, criticising also the governmental tendency to 'court media attention'. Context to the current debate on 'gangs' is provided by a short review of youth subculture and moral panics - in the Victorian era it was 'The Hooligans' who were decried, more recently 'Teddy Boys', 'Mods and Rockers', 'Hippies', 'Punks' and 'Hoodies' have felt the nation's wrath.



The 'Postcode Gangs' of today are part of this history of youth subculture but 'as per usual with most media stories' postcode gangs are 'portrayed as far worse than the facts actually suggest. The media portrays postcode gangs as hungry for violence, and having a need for gang warfare, when in actual fact this is not the case, there tends to be few individuals who actually cause violence, the others simply group together in large numbers, providing an intimidating image but not necessarily a threat'. Hertsmere Young Researchers' analysis of the statistics shows that adults caused sixty per cent of teenage violent deaths in 2008; and of all murders using a sharp instrument from March 2008 to April 2009, only 7 per cent were carried out by teenagers on teenagers.

Hertsmere Young Researchers' Network concludes that the statistical evidence on 'knife fatalities shows without a doubt that the problem of fatal incidences as a result of attacks using a knife/sharp instrument is much wider than the problems as they are reported and in actual fact an adult is more likely to commit such a crime in an everyday situation'.



Media coverage

The criteria for comparison of the three newspapers' coverage of knife crime killings includes factors like contextualisation of the story, tone (factual or emotive) and extent of newspaper coverage. The five cases studied were Sofyen Belamouadden (15), Sandra Crawford (43), Jane Clough (30), Marcin Bilaszewski (19) and Aliza Mirza (17). In the cases involving adults, the diminished responsibility of the killer was acknowledged and the stories tended to be regarded as tragedies with unfortunate circumstances. The cases which were most widely covered by the newspapers were reported with the least facts, details or context. The two cases which solely involved teenagers, those of Sofyen Belamouadden and Aliza Mirza, were the cases in which the media provided the least context or background information, with the Sofyen Belamouadden case being the only one of

the five cases in which the media indulged in speculation: 'From our research we saw that the media further hypes up teen knife crime by linking all of the stories together even though they are isolated incidents that are nothing to do with each other. Can you imagine if this was done every time there was a case of domestic violence resulting in murder? Or every time there was a drunken street brawl? '

Another point the young researchers make is that when youth try to take a stand on an issue - as in the recent student protests - media negative stereotyping and bias again kicks in: 'This method of reporting news by focusing on the negatives has been going on for too many years to change with a click of the finger but we hope that we've helped with the process', the young researchers conclude. Hertsmere Youth Researchers' call for a national campaign to 'Look Beyond the Headlines', deserves to be heard.