



## YOUNG CHILDREN TALKING ABOUT STREET VIOLENCE

### Growing up, being streetwise and doing good

*You know if you see a fight, you feel like your legs start shaking.*

*10 year old*

*Something I don't get is that people do bad stuff to people they don't even know. Like they'll shoot them for something – and that person will die, and they will just go free. They'll be able to run away and the policemen, like, get them very late.*

*10 year old*

*This is London – it's not like, say, South America or Africa, like, where they actually care for you.*

*10 year old*

*Do you know what I don't get? If someone with a normal life was walking in the road and someone was to steal something from them, it wouldn't be really big. But if someone who had a lot of money and was rich or something... yeah, wealthy, and someone took their things, more police would be trying to get the person or it will be in the news. But if it was someone normal, it wouldn't.*

*11 year old*

*I was thinking that it's just juvenile what people do today and the reasons are not necessarily because of the children but it's about what environment they are living in and what is happening in that environment and what they've been through in their life and things like that.*

*11 year old*

*You know when people say that 'Hackney is a crime place', 'Hackney's got bad people'. They might have bad people, but it's not always, it's not all like that...*

*11 year old*

*If no one saw, there's no witnesses. That means that the attacker wouldn't be confronted and just get away all the time, all the time, all the time...*

*11 year old*



## FOREWORD

Witness Confident is a charity that champions the role of the independent witness. We believe that if more people are given the confidence to speak up when they witness street violence, these crimes will be reduced and our communities will be safer.

While the charity's work covers the country, we are running a campaign to reduce the level of street violence in the London boroughs of Hackney and Islington by 20% over the next four years. There are three practical strands to this campaign

1. We are piloting an interactive map that (a) offers people a new and secure route to report street violence; (b) provides a safe and simple way to post witness appeals; and (c) shows any trouble-spots and how the police are responding;
2. We are offering free legal advice to victims and witnesses in cases of street violence;
3. We are running the SPARKLE campaign to prepare people on what to do when they see street violence – Shout, Photograph, Avoid risks, Report the crime, Keep a record, Lead by example and Engage with the police.

Underpinning this campaign, we are talking with people across these two communities

- a) To gauge whether and how they are affected by street violence;
- b) To understand their views about the role of the witness, the police and the criminal justice system; and
- c) To challenge the perception that if people who witness crime don't walk on by but engage with the Criminal Justice System, it will only cause them grief.

This report sets out what we found when small groups of young children from across these two communities discussed these issues. While this research was modest in scope and tentative in methodology, we believe this report will be of interest and assistance to

- Heads and teachers at primary and secondary schools;
- Policy makers in education, community safety and criminal justice;
- Academics and researchers in the fields of law and social sciences.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

As part of our campaign to understand and reduce the level of street violence in Hackney & Islington, we thought we could learn a lot by listening to young children discuss their experiences and their attitudes to the role of witnesses.

We decided to focus on primary schools because they are critical hubs<sup>1</sup> in the lives of communities in and beyond the inner city.

We wanted to hear what 10 and 11 year olds said about these issues as they are at a pivotal age – beginning to explore life away from the safety of the home and school and soon to move on to secondary school.

We wanted to centre their discussions on the role of the witness for several reasons. Firstly, this is the role that this charity champions. Secondly, as street violence can be a troubling and upsetting issue, addressing it from the witness perspective seemed to us to be less threatening and less pointed than discussing this issue from the position of victim or perpetrator. Thirdly, we hoped the witness perspective would allow the children to express their views about their community and how they see their role in it.

We are grateful to the six primary schools<sup>2</sup> - three in each borough – who agreed to participate in this project and who selected a cross-section of their children to take part in this pilot study. We are particularly grateful to the 55 children who shared their views and experiences with us.

Nine discussions took place, each with six or seven children. The sessions took place in school time and lasted no more than an hour. All were conducted by an independent researcher and facilitator whose role was to explain the purpose and scope of the discussions; to introduce the same scenario and prompts to each group; to answer questions any children might have; and to try and ensure that each child had an opportunity to contribute<sup>3</sup>.

As the facilitator had not previously met any of the children, we hoped this would counter any pre-conceptions the children had about how the worth of their own views or those of their colleagues.

In each session almost all the children responded positively to the opportunity to talk about street violence and about their perspective as a potential or actual witness and many expressed the desire to talk again.

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<sup>1</sup> There are 93 primary schools in Hackney and Islington compared to 12 secondary schools. The vast majority of the children we spoke to walk to school and so have a sense of safety on the streets.

<sup>2</sup> All the head teachers were aware of street violence in their communities and as a result had concerns about the welfare of the children at their school. They thought this pilot study offered a potentially helpful and valuable way to talk with and learn from the children about these issues.

<sup>3</sup> In seven groups a member of the school staff was also present as an observer.

## 2 SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Street violence is a live issue for these young people

In seven of the nine groups, one or more children described an incident of street violence - mostly fights between young people or between adults – of which they had first or second hand knowledge. Two of the 55 children said they had witnessed an incident of street violence in London and three children said a family member had been a victim.

At the same time as these discussions were underway and quite independently of them, Vincent Stops a Hackney councillor attended a Democracy Day event at a primary school that did not participate in this study. Explaining the advantages of democracy, he canvassed the 10 and 11 year old children on what issues – play areas, cycling, the environment, school - concerned them most and which they wanted to be addressed. By a show of hands and much to his amazement, approaching 90% of them said crime and safety was their number one concern.

### Finding their own way home

When we asked the children if they talked to their parents or the school about street violence or about how they might respond to a particular incident, most said they had not or that they had discussed it only very rarely. To this extent, these discussions offer a child's view of these issues of street violence and growing up in the diverse and disparate communities that now make up our inner cities.

You're not trained for it. We teach our children how to walk across the road safely, we teach them not to do the stranger-danger, don't we? ... I've never been told what to do if I see something like a mugging, and we don't teach our children.

(Teacher, Hackney)

Absent any official or explicit guidance on how to respond if they witnesses street violence, these children brought their own experiences and observations to the issue and how they might be able to influence their own safety and that of others in their community. Listening to the conversations, it was clear the children were used to talking among themselves and that they learned a lot about these issues from one another<sup>4</sup>.

### Young shoulders, wise heads

What was both striking and cheering was that so many of these young children embraced the idea of their own sense of responsibility and their ability to influence events should they witness street violence. Even where the victim in the mugging scenario was a boy they did not like, they were ready to help – be it by tending the victim, calling (or getting an adult to call) the police and even by giving chase.

These young children thought about and discussed these potentially difficult issues in sophisticated and mature ways. While many adults in Hackney & Islington (and

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<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with other research into the role of informal talk of 10-12 year old school children which noted that "children accumulate a considerable amount of knowledge about a particular social activity, like smoking, through group conversation (which often included conflict as well as collaboration)". See Maybin, J (2006) Children's Voices, Talk, Knowledge and Identity p 188 (Palgrave Macmillan).

those we spoke with at the schools connected with this research<sup>5</sup>) seem to instinctively fear that street violence is likely to be part of gang violence and so assume it is best to 'walk on by' rather than help, these 10 and 11 years olds were much more discerning. It may be that this was as much influenced by the scenario that was put to them as by their own experiences, but the potential significance of the point<sup>6</sup> means we think this ability to separate street violence from gang violence an issue that warrants further study.

I think, yeah, what's the point in having gangs? Firstly, they don't own the place. Secondly, they don't pay for stuff like traffic lights and stuff in their area – so why is it theirs? (Girl)

### Diversity and plurality

As the information about the children in the Appendix shows, the ethnic mix of primary school children in Hackney & Islington and of those who participated in these discussions is much more diverse than the respective adult populations. Nonetheless in these groups, growing up in such diverse school communities, we noticed no clear ethnic correlations in discussing these themes.

The thing is, I don't want to be ... though I'm Black, I don't want to be racist, but whenever I go to the park and I see 15, or more than 5, big Black people and like, I won't just go in the park because I know - although I'm Black - like my instinct is that some Black are people trying to make a point – I think the reason that some people are in gangs and some people are like racist to White people is because like, in history, like how the White people were bad to the Black people, now they think it is their time to be, to retaliate for like their ancestors. (Boy)

Equally as to gender, there was no striking divide between the children. Where a child took a distinctive or different view from their group or challenged others, it was as likely it was a boy as a girl. While boys were more likely to say they would give chase, in one group the only child who advocated this response was a girl. The one tentative exception to this was that more boys than girls said they were more likely to respond actively if the victim was a girl. While some boys explained this as chivalry or because girls are more fragile than boys, some girls objected strongly to these views.

### Further research

As we have indicated above, we hope this small study will lead to more detailed research by those experienced and resourced to build on some of these issues. We found the conversations refreshing and valuable and we believe there is real virtue in discussing these issues with children as young as 10 or 11 years old and doing so from the perspective of the witness. It is not just that this perspective starts from a

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<sup>5</sup> A summary of the discussions with these adults is available along with this report on our website at [www.witnessconfident.org/knowledge/policy](http://www.witnessconfident.org/knowledge/policy)

<sup>6</sup> As much of the policy debate, research and actions around violence and young people focuses on gun & knife crime and on gang violence, this may colour the views of adults – see for example *Tackling Knife Crime and Serious Youth Violence* (2011) Home Office Research Report 53 and *Young People, Knives and Guns: A comprehensive review, analysis and critique of gun and knife strategies* (2009) Centre for Crime & Justice Studies. More generally, as Pain observes "...children and young people are "widely constructed as threatening or threatened" in A Nayak (2003) Through children's 'eyes': childhood, place and fear of crime, *Geoforum* 34, p. 305.



less alarming or defensive response than approaching it from the perspective of a victim or a perpetrator, but it allows children to explore and articulate the role of a good citizen and their sense and confidence of being able or unable to influence events around them. While it is a call best made by others, we think it is a good way to enable children to grow into adolescence with a confidence to face and adjust to the risks and opportunities it will bring.

Additionally, we and the children found that the focus group's approach worked despite their young age. With an external facilitator present making it clear she was there to guide and listen, most of the children seemed to feel free and able to contribute to the discussions.

### Conclusion

We hope this report is of interest and value to those concerned with the welfare and education of children, or with safety in the community and engagement with authority. While we must stress that it is limited in scope to 55 children in six schools in Hackney and Islington, we think it offers an interesting snapshot into how young children can and do think and talk about street violence and that they often do so in more sophisticated ways than many might expect.

But I was thinking that its just juvenile what people do today and the reasons are not necessarily because of the children but it's about what environment they are living in and what is happening in that environment and what they've been through in their life and things like that. (Boy)

When people talk about the issue of children, young people and street violence, it is often despairing. Even if the premise is not that the child is a perpetrator or a victim, it is often about how challenging it is to keep children safe and how threatening many young people now seem. Listening to children air these issues does not sweep these concerns away but it does help put them in perspective. Fear or safety were but two of the factors that children considered when they talked about street violence and it was enlightening to listen to how they perceived themselves in their communities, acting on and evaluating what matters to them in their daily lives.

Above all what was reassuring was that the majority of children seem to take a practical and sensible view about what can happen on the street. Taking account of their own safety did not preclude children from thinking they or others should try to do something to help. Although two girls felt strongly that it was best not to get involved in any way, the majority of the children showed a real sense of social responsibility and were ready to engage if they witnessed street violence.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## To schools

- Enabling children at the end of primary and the start of secondary school to discuss street violence from their experiences and the perspective of a witness is a good way to gauge and develop their maturity, assessment of risk, sense of safety and their social responsibility.
- While doing this in a focus group with an external facilitator worked well in this study, other options schools should consider include addressing these issues in class discussions, an assembly, staff meeting or with the PTA or Parents' Council.
- Schools in Hackney & Islington that decide to address this issue are eligible for free support from this charity - be it devising, attending or leading a session with children, staff or parents. This offer is available on a first come, first served basis. Beyond these communities, we plan to make available early in 2012 practical materials to assist schools address these issues.

## To policy makers

- In the absence of any official guidance on reacting to street violence, young children seem to have developed a sensible, socially aware approach to navigating their streets and considering how to respond to street violence.
- Initiatives that focus on street violence as opposed to gang violence and which look at the young person's role as a witness rather than as a victim or perpetrator not only chimes more with their own experiences but reduces the risk of fostering fear or unwittingly disengaging them from authority.

## To research institutions

- Children as young as 10 are capable of discussing sensitive issues like street violence from the perspective of a witness and say they enjoy doing so in a focus group setting.
- Thorough research is needed to explore and test some of the observations and recommendations made herein. This could usefully consider these matters in locations distinct from – and not as deprived as - Hackney and Islington and use this approach to explore social cohesion, citizenship and the early formation of people's relationships with authority and the state.

### 3 THE SCOPE AND PROMPTS FOR THE DISCUSSIONS

These questions were used to help prompt the discussions and provide some consistency across the groups. Not all issues were covered in all groups.

#### Scenario

*Imagine you go to the local shop one Saturday afternoon. There are people around. As you are coming out of the shop you spot a boy you recognise standing across the road. Suddenly someone pushes him over, grabs his bag and runs off.*

#### Reaction to the scenario & prompts

What if you don't like the boy? What if you like him? What would be different if your mum or your dad was with you? What if you thought you recognised the person who did it? Would you tell anyone? Who?

As to other people around, if something like this were to happen to you, your brother or sister, what would you want these adults to do? Some of them may live in the area and some just passing through – do you think people react differently if they are in their own area? Why?

Thinking of all the adults you know, are there any who would always try to help or get involved in some way in such an incident? Are there any who definitely would not? Why do you think they are like that?

Are there good reasons for not doing anything if you see a mugging? What are they? Are they as valid for a child as an adult?

If you saw a mugging on the street, would you want to be able to do something? If so, what? Do you think it matters when a crime happens on the street, whether or not witnesses (people who see it) try to do something or not?

If you were mugged on the way to school who would you tell? Why? If you told the school, what would you want it to do?

If you were mugged on a weekend, would you tell your teacher? Would your mum or dad tell the school about something that happened outside school? When it comes to incidents outside the school, do you think the school can or should do anything to help?

Have you ever been helped by a stranger? Has anyone in your family been helped by a stranger? Do you think people should care about what happens to people they don't know?

Have you or any of your close family ever been a victim of street violence?

## 4 WITNESSING A MUGGING

*Imagine you go to the local shop one Saturday afternoon. There are people around. As you are coming out of the shop you spot a boy you recognise standing across the road. Suddenly someone pushes him over, grabs his bag and runs off.*

The scenario proved a useful and non-threatening way to get almost all the groups<sup>7</sup> to talk about issues around street violence in the community, the role of witnesses and the factors and influences that affect their responses.

### 4.1 Reactions

Most of the children volunteered that they would do something to help if they witnessed another child being mugged, whether or not they liked him, and in each group different actions were emphasised. Calling the police was mentioned unprompted in all but one group and in another group, five out of six of the children said they would call the police:

I wouldn't touch the person, but I would call the police. (Group 4)

Before the police come, you should wait like with the person so when the police comes you can tell them what happened. (Group 5)

None of the children suggested they needed an adult to make the call except where they would not have access to a phone:

If you see it and you don't have a phone, you can just ask an adult that you see, even if you don't know them, you just ask them if you can use the phone and call 999. (Group 5)

Two children from different schools said they had already called 999 to report an incident on the street<sup>8</sup>.

While it was clear that most children saw the role and sense in contacting the police where there had been a mugging, the picture was not uniform as the following brief exchange shows:

Could you call the police if someone just comes up to you and hits you in the face, like on a tube or a bus? (Boy)

No, because the police don't do anything. (Girl)

<sup>7</sup> One group - the only one with more boys than girls - started by swapping stories about incidents they had seen or heard about, primarily local fights between youths or adults. This approach provided fewer opportunities for the group to engage in a shared discussion.

<sup>8</sup> One child had been 8 years old at the time she rang the police. The fact that children do contact the police on their own initiative – and that 2 out of the 55 children we talked to said they had – chimes with Home Office data that 23% of children had contact with the police and of these, 30% were contacts initiated by the children. See Scribbens, M. et al. (eds) (2011) *Experimental Statistics on victimisation of children aged 10 – 15: Supplementary Volume 3 to Crime in England and Wales Statistical Bulletin*, Home Office. Page 36.

**In seven groups one or more child said they would give chase to try and get the bag back:**

I'd chase them... because if I know that they are not dangerous or nothing, I'd chase them or go to the nearest shop or something. (Group 2)

I think I'd try to grab the guy who stole his bag but if not, I think I'd go up to him and ask if 'are you okay?' (Group 1)

I'd say 'are you okay?', I'd help him up and if his bag was taken I'd go chase after the person that took the bag off him. (Group 6)

Help him. If he's all right, chase the guy. (Group 9)

Just call the police or run after. Get it. If I can't find him, look for the bag. (Group 3)

If it's like a public place where it happened, the person that's hurt will be all right because there's loads of people around to help and that would make it easier for you to go after the person. (Group 2)

**This stated willingness to chase was asserted more often by boys though in two groups it was qualified by the chaser being fit and able and in two others it prompted discussions about the sense of chasing a mugger who was older and stronger, even if he did not have a weapon:**

Why would you go after the person? If he's older than you. Say he's older than you and you say 'can I have that bag?' and he just punches you. (Group 8)

**In five groups at least one child identified their responsibility as a witness being to give a description of the suspect and one boy said that if his dad was with him, his dad would take a photo of the mugger and show it to the police:**

I think it is important to be like a witness for a gun crime – because – even though you are not included in the thing that happened, you can still tell who's right and who isn't. (Group 4)

If you don't have no witnesses you ain't going to solve it. (Group 5)

**Over half the children said they would do something to help even if they did not like the victim. In two groups at different schools all of the children said they would help him and the following exchange in one of these groups gives a sense of the attitude of the children:**

I would, even though – we don't like each other, I would still go and help because he's getting attacked and, like, you think ahead so I would help them and I'd just forget about what happened, if we don't like each other. (Girl A)

*What about you?* I would help them, then, because even though I don't like that person it is still the right thing to do. And then after a while we might be friends. (Girl B)

Even though we are not friends, I would still help out because he just had an accident and if you don't help, he'll just stay like that and then he might... I'd just help him. That's all. (*How would you help?*) I'd say 'are you okay?', I'd help him up and if his bag was taken I'd go chase after the person that took the bag off him. (Boy A)

*Do you agree?* Uhm I don't agree because I would help the boy and then... I won't go chasing after the bag because you know, it's not that important and if he got hurt that's more important. That's why I would just help him up and then, if he's got an injury, like tell his mum or go to the hospital, something, the doctors, check it out. (Girl C)

*What about you?* I would help him or her, because like, you wouldn't want to see anybody hurt in public. That would be, like, a problem. I would help him by taking him to my house and I would just... help him. (Boy B)

**In three groups at three schools as many as half the children initially said they wouldn't help a boy they didn't like, thus prompting a debate in one:**

I wouldn't help them because they don't like me, I don't like them. (Boy A)

But at least you might become friends after you get to know each other, how kind you are. (Girl A)

I would help him though I don't like him. But like, he might not like me [only] because I don't like him, so I might as well help him. (Boy C)

I'll just laugh and walk off. (Boy A)

Well, you're sad. (Girl B)

I'll just start laughing. (Boy B)

That's really sad, he'll just hate you more....(*and later*)... They are still human beings. (Girl A)

I would help them, I don't care. (Boy C)

But if they said something about your family? (Boy B)

If they're really injured, you help them. (Girl A)

But I know it's not true, I know it's not true so I would still help them. (Boy C)

If they've done something to your family? (Boy B)

If they've done something to my family then no, I wouldn't help them. But if they just said something, then I would help them. (Boy C)

#### 4.2 Street violence and gang violence

It was striking that these discussions about street violence – no doubt promoted in large part by the scope of the scenario – rarely strayed in any depth into the areas of gang culture or serious violence that feature in media reports in these areas and that fed the anxiety of the teaching and non-teaching staff we spoke with.

One child who did raise this spectre attributed her resolve not to help the victim to advice from her mother who had grown up in Nigeria:

My mum says that if you don't know somebody, and they are on the floor and they're dead... My mum does have feelings yeah but, personally, she thinks you can get yourself in trouble by helping somebody else. Like, if somebody has a grudge against somebody, and they're not friends, then you would be getting yourself in trouble as well, because they'll come after you, like saying 'why you helping them?'  
(Group 9)

While other children in this group reminded her more than once that the victim in the scenario was pushed over and not stabbed, it was notable that this girl attributed her fear to her mother. In the linked discussions we had with a handful of adults from these schools, they too imagined the scenario to be more serious than it was, often adding a weapon or assuming a life-threatening injury.

Generally, and across all the groups, the children seemed to distinguish between the type of incident presented in the scenario and more serious street violence, and responded accordingly as shown by the range of responses they suggested.

- Help – ask if the victim if he is okay
- Chase the mugger to get bag back
- Call the police
- Go to the nearest shop and get help
- Call an ambulance
- Tell the victim's mother or father
- Take them home
- Run away
- If you disliked the person, laugh

#### 4.3 What if you thought you recognised the mugger?

In seven groups, the children were asked whether they would tell anyone if they thought they recognised the mugger. This prompted a mixed and rich response with some children raising the risk of naming the wrong person. In the three groups that discussed this issue in some detail, the children said it was best to be sure who did it before mentioning any names in case the wrong person was blamed.

As the following exchanges show, other children raised the risk of being a target of retaliation:

If you know the mugger then, if they are a child or something you are supposed to tell their mum. If it's an adult then you get, whoever you're with, get them, like if they have a phone, you call the police. And just help the person. (Girl A)

If it was a person I knew, I would just help the victim and let the person go because at the end of the day, I'm going to, like, catch him. Because if I know him, I'll see him about sometimes and just catch him, put him in a head lock... (Boy A)

And then shank him. (Boy B) *Laughter*

Stop saying that. (Girl C)

... and tell him like 'where's the stuff?' and if he refused, I'd just tell his mum. (Boy A)

Well if it's a public place where it happened, the person that is hurt will probably be all right because there's loads of people around to help and that would make it easier for you to, like, go after the person who... (Girl C)

Why would you go after the person? If he's older than you. Say he's older than you and you say 'can I have that bag' and he just punches you. (Boy B)

But if I know him or them, they probably won't. (Girl C)

*If you recognised him, would you tell the victim who you think stole the bag?*  
No. (Girl C)

Yes. (Girl A)

No, because they could like, I dunno, retaliate. (Girl C)

They would do their revenge. (Girl A)

No, you have to tell them, you're helping them out at the end of the day, you have to tell them who took the bag – it's their bag. (Girl B)

Yeah, but you're putting him in danger. He's going to be angry. Call his mum or dad. (Boy B)

Oh my God, you have to tell him. How is he going to get angry? He must be angry in the first place anyway, okay. He got knocked down, he's on the floor. (Girl B)

**In five groups, children mentioned the possibility of getting into trouble with the perpetrator if they told anyone:**

*Would you tell anyone if you thought you recognised who did it?* Yeah. (Girl B)

Yeah. (Boy B)

*Who would you tell?* The police. (Boy B)

I'd tell the police and my parents. (Girl C)

I would do the same because at some point – if you tell [someone] who is, like, your best friend – they might just tell the person, and they might just get a gang and at some point, they will destroy everything and destroy your life. (Girl B)



If they go to the same school as me, I would tell the teacher to sort it out and then I'd call the police. (Girl C)

Technically I don't think it has anything to do with the teachers. (Girl A)

*So who would you tell?* The police and the parents. (Girl A) *Your parents? Or the parents of the victim?* The parents of the victim. (Girl A)

In three of these groups, there was a discussion whether the person who did it might be linked to some sort of gang. While this risk was often the focus of the discussions among adults, it was raised in passing in most of the groups of children. It also featured a good deal in one discussion at a school where the headteacher had earlier described her dismay that children in Year 6 had asked for an outing to a local park to mark the end of SATs to be relocated. Though the park was less than a mile from the school, the children asked to be taken to a different park so as not leave their postcode. A child in the group at this school that talked most about gangs said he thought it was sad that people get hurt for being a 'snitch' because it is right to tell the police if something bad has happened.

#### 4.4 What if it happened to you?

When we asked children what they would want adults to do if they were the victim, or if it happened to their brother or sister, most said they wanted someone to make sure they were all right, call the police, chase the mugger to get the bag back, or a combination of all three:

Help. Either help or call the police. Like one or two helping but other people call the police. (Group 7)

I would want them to do the thing that I would do for them – call the police and sort it out. (Group 3)

I want those people to like, one person to run for him, one person, like, look after my little sister, and then the other one, calling the police. (Group 9)

*And if nobody helped?* I would be disappointed and sad because I had the effort to help someone else and no one had the effort to help me. (Group 4)

Below is one exchange on this:

To run after him. (Boy A)

Who wouldn't? (Girl A)

I would just want them to call the police, the Old Bill. (Boy C)

If someone knocked me over and if I had my phone, and my other arm was injured, I would just get out my phone and call the police to arrest them.

*What about the other people on the street who saw it, do you want them to do anything?* Uhm yes, because they could be a witness. (Boy D)

They will just get him and say 'why did you do that?' and after, he'll be scared and after, he'll run to his mum. (Boy B)

If that happened to me I would go to the nearest place possible to ask them to phone the police, and if I couldn't, then I would just scream for help...to come over and then I would ask them to phone the police. (Girl B)

The few children who had said they would laugh or run away if they saw a child they knew get mugged, were those most likely to think no one would help them or to say they wouldn't want anyone to help if it happened to them.

#### 4.5 What if it happened on the way to school?

In five groups, we asked the children who they would tell if they were mugged either on the way to or from school and in these groups, the children held strong and varying opinions. In four groups, the children talked about whether the school could do anything about the mugging and the limit of their school's responsibility for them outside school hours and outside school gates<sup>9</sup>.

For some children it seemed obvious to tell a teacher or another member of staff as soon as they could or after telling their parents or the police. In the group that had talked a lot about fights on the street, telling the teachers for one boy seemed sensible because "...they can sort it out and they're more independent than some other adults, and they're nearer." Two boys in this group had already seen the head teacher react to incidents at the school and they trusted she would do something<sup>10</sup>.

Very few children in any group mentioned the school as a source of comfort or reassurance and four children in three separate groups said that telling the school could make matters worse, either because the school would think they had done something amiss, or because it would get their parents in trouble. This excerpt reveals the factors that children in all five groups considered and talked about:

*If something like that happened to you on the way to school or outside of school hours, would you tell anyone at the school that it had happened to you?*

Outside school hours no. (Boy A)

I would keep it to myself. (Boy B)

I would keep it to myself. (Boy A)

I would tell someone. (Girl A)

I would tell [name of a teacher]. (Girl B)

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<sup>9</sup> The staff member observing one group said he had been surprised at how many children doubted whether the school could or would do anything to help. He said he thought senior staff would be particularly surprised given the effort they made to reach out to support children and their families.

<sup>10</sup> Both of these were threats from outside the school fence. Once a man verbally threatened the children through the school gate and on another occasion someone shot pellets at the children in the play area. On both occasions the children said they told the headteacher and she called the police.

Yeah, actually, I would tell someone because if I didn't tell someone they might keep chasing me and I might get scared. (Boy B)

I won't tell the school because I doubt they would solve it, they won't go to the police or nothing. (Boy C)

*But would you let them know it happened, whether or not they could solve it?*  
Nope, I won't come to school. (Boy C)

I'll ask [name of a teacher]. (Girl B)

I wouldn't tell anyone at school. Let's say I told a teacher and ... (Girl C)

They really hated you. (Boy A)

...then after, they'll think it is really dangerous and they will tell my parents [that they] did something bad, like they didn't look after me and then they could do something to my parents, like make us apart and I wouldn't want that. And anyway, why would I tell? Because it's none of their business. And secondly, I wouldn't tell because it happened to me in the past. I would just tell my family and I'll tell maybe the police maybe. (Girl C)

I would tell my family because the school, their job is only teaching. (Boy C)

No, its not. (Boy B)

Yeah it is. Most of their job it is. Most of the teachers say, yeah, its after school hours so they can't do nothing about it, its after school hours. (Boy A)

As soon as you step in this building you're their responsibility. (Boy C)

I would first tell the police, then I would tell the teacher. So I know the police is going to sort it out, and go and tell the teacher, for safety okay. So like one of them could walk me home for example. (Girl A)

One child in another group thought telling someone at school was pointless because the mugger would be long gone and it would be much better to ring the police right away. Another boy in the group suggested that the school should tell the police to ensure that the local community police who are walking around the area know about it and so the incident is logged.

#### 4.6 A 'walk on by' culture?

In seven groups we asked the children directly whether they thought it mattered if people do anything if they witness street violence and whether it was likely that passers-by would help:

But Miss, definitely there are always 5 or 6 people walking on the road and if you shout, then they will obviously help you. (Group 5)

I think everybody reacts the same, it's like when somebody gets knocked over, they're not just going to walk away, everybody's going to react the same – just help them. (Group 2)

But one person out of the crowd will help you. (Group 9)

**This exchange shows that though the children had already talked about what could happen and identified the risks of engaging, most said they thought it mattered:**

*Do you think it matters if when people witness things on the street they do anything?*  
Yeah it does. (Girl A)

*[General agreement]. Why?* Because if you are telling the truth, yeah, and the police don't believe you, you can just bring someone and they will tell the truth and they will arrest the person whoever did that thing. (Boy A)

*So you think the more people involved...*The more the police believe you. (Boy A)

Yeah, because if they don't do anything, they're stuck with it. (Girl B)

That's their fault. (Girl A)

The rest of their life. If they see someone dying and they don't try to help them, they'll be like 'oh, I could have saved their life if I went there and helped them' 'I could've done this, I could've done that' to help them. (Girl B)

*So you could have a guilty conscience?* Yeah. (Girl B)

*What if they just witnessed a mugging, do you think it matters if people do anything or not?* Yes it does matter because, let's say, whatever situation you're in, let's say someone is getting bullied. Imagine if that was happening to you. Like you're bullying someone, imagine someone is bullying you. So you shouldn't bully them. So like say, if you see somebody being mugged, what would you do if somebody saw you being mugged? Would you want them to stand there? So, you will like help them up. (Boy B)

Yes, it matters. Because they'll feel happy for the rest of their life, because they did something good instead of just ignoring them, just leaving them. (Boy C)

*So it's helpful for the individual anyway, for their own sense of themselves?* To boost their confidence. (Boy B)

**A child in one school commented it mattered that people did not walk on by because without witnesses:**

that means the attacker wouldn't be confronted, and just get away all the time, all the time, all the time. (Group 2)

**And in another school, a child said that:**

crime was basically about witnesses. If you don't have witnesses, you ain't gonna solve it. (Group 5)

## 5 LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

### 5.1 As witnesses

In seven of the nine groups one child or more spontaneously mentioned incidents of street violence and many of these were about fights between young people or between adults they had seen or heard about. In three groups, children mentioned drunk adults as a problem.

One group from Islington talked primarily about fights in their area; at the park and around a shop where young people gathered. The main incident they discussed was between an adult and the local shopkeeper who had told a child to leave the shop. The children said the boy told his father that he had been hit and that there was then a violent confrontation between the father and the shopkeeper. The children described how local youths had intervened to defend the shopkeeper.

In four groups when the children talked about seeing fights, watching violence on television, or hearing about local incidents of street violence, they said it made them feel scared or sick with one boy asking other children in his group if their legs shook like his did.

Two girls in the same group described different fights they had seen involving both teenage boys and girls. One described how a fight involving a number of teenagers at a takeaway had ended with a teenage girl being hit in the stomach with a baseball bat. The child said lots of people had tried to stop the fight and the police were called. Another girl described how powerless she felt when she witnessed teenage boys harassing a teenage girl in her area.

So many times, it still happens nowadays you know, but I couldn't, I don't know what to do about it. They're like boys, I can't just go up and say, stop fighting, I can't just do that. (Girl A)

Get someone. Get someone to help you. Get your dad, get your mum, get your brother, get your... (Boy A)

Later, when asked if there was anything that she would like to be able to do that she does not feel able to do now, this same girl said that she would like to be able to stop fights.

But the thing is, normally, its normally teenage boys and teenage girls that fights. I can't just go up to them to stop the fight as I'm scared. They all bigger and feel stronger and everything. Like, if it was someone else really hurt, say a pregnant woman or something like that, then I would go and help even though it was like teenage people because I would feel strongly for the lady. So I would go and help. If it was like a man, I don't know. (Girl A)

Two children at separate schools, one in each of the boroughs, talked about an incident of serious street violence they had witnessed in London. One boy described how he had been driving with his father when they saw someone stabbed on the street. He said his father told him to stay with the victim until the police arrived and chased after the perpetrator with a car iron. Other people also helped the victim, who survived, and his father was not able to catch the perpetrator. (This was one of

the two boys mentioned earlier who talked about being in good physical shape to explain why they, or others, would chase after a mugger<sup>11</sup>).

The second incident of serious street violence was witnessed by a girl. She described what happened two years ago when she went to a sweet shop with her older cousin.

My cousin – he took me to a sweet shop and then some people came and he just started running and I can't run. And then what I see, yeah, he just dropped on the floor because he got shot. And then I had to call the police... cause there was a shop owner, the shop owner, yeah, he just closed the shop and he walked.

The child said that no one on the street did anything at the time and that she had called the police herself. Her cousin survived.

There was a girl in another school who talked about witnessing serious street violence outside the UK. She said she witnessed a shoot-out between rival gangs when visiting family in St. Kitts. This story prompted another boy in the same group to describe an incident his uncle had witnessed during the 'drug wars' in Brazil.

## 5.2 As victims

Three children, in three separate schools, said someone in their family had been a victim of serious street violence involving a weapon. Two children described how their uncles had been attacked; one shot by a BB gun in Muswell Hill when he was 19, and the other mugged twice at knifepoint. In the latter case, the most recent incident happened outside the takeaway where the uncle worked and his car was taken. The children said both incidents were reported to the police. Someone was jailed for the BB gun shooting and the other uncle's car was found and returned to him.

The third child said that his cousin was stabbed in the head as he got off a bus.

I didn't really see it but my cousin was like getting off the bus and then my cousin got stabbed in the head. Then he went to hospital, it went straight through his skull and it just touched his brain. Then the blade snapped off the knife bit but it didn't take off any part of his brain, it just sort of squidged it. They took the knife out, and he didn't really just, he didn't have brain damage or anything but he was in the hospital for like a month or two and having operations, and then he had some metal implants on his skull and then he is left with a big scar...

He said he talked about it with his mum and dad and described how angry he felt. The boy said he thought there had been witnesses but that the strongest evidence came from the CCTV cameras on the bus. He said the perpetrator was caught and jailed for 15 years for attempted murder.

Some of the discussions in Hackney schools took place in the months after the murder of an innocent bystander, 16 year old Agnes Sina-Inakoju, who happened to be in a local take-away when it was the scene of a gang reprisal shooting. The children talked about what happened and how she was not the intended target. One child said his uncle had been near by and had called the police when it happened

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<sup>11</sup> This boy said he was a fast runner and explained that it came from his tribal ancestry.

and another boy said how it would have been better if someone had spotted the gun and called the police before the shooting.

Three children at three separate schools also mentioned muggings that had happened to someone they knew. One said his sister had her iPod stolen on a bus; a second said someone had taken her mum's bag off the back of her pram once and that people in the shop had chased him and got the bag back. In the third, a boy described how his older brother's friend was threatened by another boy with a knife in a mugging who left once he got what he wanted. He said the mugger was later arrested.

Clearly a fair few of these children were aware of serious incidents of street violence and a small number had close-hand experience of it. Nonetheless, the children did not talk about street violence only, or primarily, as a matter of fear<sup>12</sup>. Most of the children concluded – even after airing some potentially serious risks – that it was important that witnesses did something to help if they saw an incident of street violence.

### 5.3 Of strangers

Toward the end of each session, we asked the children if they or a member of their family had ever been helped by a stranger. This was to explore how far the message of stranger-danger is reflected in or negated by their own experiences.

Though a few children said they couldn't think of any time this had happened, many children had stories to tell. In terms of stranger-danger, two girls at different schools described how being helped by a stranger had scared them. One said a woman had grabbed her hand to stop her stepping out in front of a car and that she had thought maybe the woman was trying to take her somewhere. The other girl said that she had been helped by a man in the park after she had fallen off her bike. She said that although he had taken her to her mother, he had squeezed her hand and this frightened her. She said she would have felt safer if a woman had helped her.

More positively, other children described getting lost when they were small and people they didn't know helping them to find their parents, strangers intervening to stop them hurting themselves, or helping them when they had. Here is a selection of stories the children told about being helped by a stranger.

A few weeks ago I was skate boarding and I tripped up and I scraped this part of my eye and this part of my arm. There were very few people in this part of Victoria Park...but there was a woman who came over, because she saw what happened. She asked me if I was all right, if I had to go to the hospital or something but I said no. Even though probably – the best people who would do it would be, like old people, because they been through things... but she was around someone like Miss X's age – she helped me a lot and she gave me a plaster. (Boy)

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<sup>12</sup> Again this chimes with BCS findings that fear of crime was the least common reason (8%) children gave for not going out in the evening without adult supervision. Not being allowed to by their parents (43%), and having no reason to go out (32%) were the two most common reasons. See Note 15, page 72.

I was walking down the street next to Hackney Central – going to Richmond – and I nearly fell into the train track. Some guy, I think he was white, he just held my hand and he picked me up. (Boy)

My little baby brother broke his leg when he was one, and this man was coming through the park when my brother broke his leg on the pole. And he picked my brother up and walked with my mum all the way to the hospital. (Girl)

I ride my bike fast and it was down a hill... there was a red light and a guy was just driving so fast, and another guy, he sort of pushed me with my bike, but I didn't jump off, I just scraped against the wall. And he said, 'be careful', 'are you all right?' (Boy)

I didn't know the prices and I just had 50p and it said 60p so I had to put it back and went out of the shop and some priest came in and bought it for me. (Girl)

On Sunday I was on the bus, I was going to the park with my friends to play football. I was in the bus and then the bus stopped and then my phone fell on the floor and it flew everywhere and then the man helped me. I fell on the floor as well and the man helped me get up. Really nice. (Girl)

Unprompted, four children chose instead to describe how they had helped a stranger. One boy described helping an old man outside his mosque. The old man was having difficulty keeping his balance as he tried to cross the road. The boy said that another man had rebuked him for his efforts. One boy and his mother had helped a lost child in the park and a girl and her mother had offered their drinks to a woman who was feeling faint at a bus stop. Another boy described how he and his cousins had helped move a drunk man to safety after he had collapsed in the middle of the road.



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## APPENDIX: ABOUT THE CHILDREN

We spoke to 55 children in groups of six<sup>13</sup> – two groups in each of the three Hackney schools and one group in each of the Islington schools. The groups were evenly split between boys and girls and according to the schools the groups were broadly representative of the school population.

It should be noted that Hackney and Islington are in the top ten most deprived boroughs in the country and the proportion of children with free school lunches in each of the participating schools, is much higher than the national average<sup>14</sup>. All six schools are located in or near areas of multi-deprivation<sup>15</sup>. This means it is highly likely that many of the children we talked to are exposed to some level of economic or social disadvantage.

A number of the children indicated that they were aware of living in areas not considered safe and some talked directly about it. For instance, a child in an Islington school said muggings happen “billions of times” in her area and her mum was planning on moving, and children in one group in Hackney explained that despite being considered a ‘crime’ area with ‘bad’ people, Hackney wasn’t always like that. In another school, a child said that take-away outlets sometimes refused to deliver food to his estate for fear of being robbed and children in two separate schools said they felt safer once security doors were installed at the entrances to their blocks.

In a short questionnaire designed to set the tone we asked the children to answer a few questions about themselves. As to diversity, the children identified 23 languages other than English that they understood or spoke at home, 17 different languages in Hackney and 14 in Islington (see Appendix). As this was their last year of primary school, we also asked the children to choose two emotions that best described how they felt about going to secondary school. We mention this because only 2 out of 55 children chose two negative words. The overwhelming majority chose positive words and the top three emotions were excited, happy and nervous.

### Age & gender

	Hackney Schools	Islington Schools	Both
Total number	36	19	55
Girls	18	9	27
Boys	18	10	28
10 years old	10	13	23
11 years old	26	6	32

<sup>13</sup> One group had seven children.

<sup>14</sup> Data found in each school’s OFSTED report.

<sup>15</sup> There are a number of sources for this information including ward profiles and neighbourhood information on the Hackney and Islington Borough Council websites - multiple deprivation snapshots by postcode at the Office for National Statistics (<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination>); and London Poverty Profile published the New Policy Institute and City & Parochial Trust (2009) (<http://www.londonpovertyprofile.org.uk/downloads/LondonPovertyProfile.pdf>). The contrast between wealth and deprivation in Islington is explored in Invisible Islington: Living in Poverty in Inner London published by the Cripplegate Foundation (2008) (<http://www.cripplegate.org/wp-content/uploads/Invisible-Islington-Nov08.pdf>)

### National identity

How the children described where they come from

	Hackney	Islington	Both
England	10	8	18
Somewhere else	8	3	11
More than one place	18	8	26
Total	36	19	55

### School stability & affinity

Time at this school since reception and if not, how many others attended?

	Hackney	Islington	Both
Same school	22	10	32
One other school	5	2	7
Two other schools	6	2	8
Three or more schools	3	5	8
Total	36	19	55

If you think back over your time at primary school – which year was your happiest?

	Hackney	Islington	Both
Nursery	1	4	5
Reception	1	5	6
Year 1	2	1	3
Year 2	2		2
Year 3	5		5
Year 4	1	1	2
Year 5	8	5	13
Year 6	14	2	16

(NB Not all children answered)

If you had a child, would you want them to come to this school?

	Hackney	Islington	Both
Yes	24	11	35
No	12	6	18
No answer		2	2
Total	36	19	55

## Language

At home do you speak or understand another language?

	Hackney	Islington	Both
Yes	27	15	42
No	9	4	13
Total	36	19	55
More than two languages	5	3	8

Children in Hackney schools identified 17 other languages:

Bengali = 7	Patois = 1
Turkish = 4	Arabic = 1
Jamaican = 3	Somalian = 1
French = 2	Brahui = 1
Italian = 2	Gambian = 1
Spanish = 2	Ghanian = 1
Nigerian = 1	Japanese = 1
Yoruba = 1	Kurdish = 1
Broken English = 1	

Children in Islington schools identified 14 other languages

Bengali = 3	Spanish = 1
Arabic = 2	Portugese = 1
Somalian = 2	Albanian = 1
Turkish = 1	Cantonese = 1
Jamaican = 1	Vietnamese = 1
Nigerian = 1	Afghani = 1
Yoruba = 1	Polish = 1

Among the 55 children, 23 other languages were identified as being spoken or understood at home.

## Transition

The children were asked to circle which two words best described their feelings about going to secondary school next year,

	Hackney	Islington	Both
Excited	24	14	38
Happy	11	11	22
Nervous	11	4	15
Ready	9	5	14
Curious	6	4	10
Sad	4	3	7
Scared	1	3	4
Worried	2	3	4
Not interested	1	2	2

Only two children chose two potentially negative words together (one: worried and scared; and the other said worried and nervous).

## NOTE ON ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN THESE TWO BOROUGHES

### General population data

According to official data<sup>16</sup>, 60% of the population of Hackney and 75% of Islington is classified as White. In Hackney 47% are White British and in Islington that figure is 58%. The remaining population in Hackney is broadly divided into 25% Black, 9% Asian and the remaining 7% of Chinese or mixed heritage. In Islington, the remaining population is broadly divided into 10% Black, 6% Asian, and the remaining 8% as Chinese and mixed heritage.

### Education data

Education data on ethnicity is collected separately in each borough and highlights a greater ethnic diversity and higher proportion of children and young people being from ethnic minorities than the general population data. Care is needed however in making any direct comparisons given the different (though perhaps more locally relevant) ethnic categories used and the different times the data was collected.

The chart below<sup>17</sup> shows - rounded up - the ethnic breakdown of all pupils in Hackney in January 2009 (The Learning Trust 2009) as against the Islington 2008 children's data<sup>18</sup> which is collected by ward but combined below.

<i>Hackney</i>		<i>Islington</i>	
African	21%	White British	31%
Other	21%	African	15%
English/Scottish/Welsh	14%	Other	10%
Caribbean	14%	Mixed	10%
Turkish/Kurd	10%	White other	9%
Mixed	8.5%	Bangladeshi/Asian	9%
Bangladeshi	6%	Turk/Kurdish	6%
Indian	5.5%	Caribbean	5%
		Not stated	5%

<sup>16</sup> Demography Update October 2007 (2007) Greater London Authority (see <http://legacy.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/factsandfigures/dmag-update-20-2007-ons-ethnic-group-estimates.pdf>)

<sup>17</sup> Hackney Council, City of London & City and Hackney NHS (2009) The health and wellbeing profile for Hackney and the City: Our joint strategic needs assessment, 2009. Page 37.

<sup>18</sup> Islington Council (2008) Area Children and Young People's Partnership Profile. Page 5.





Witness Confident is an independent charity that is taking a stand against the walk-on-by culture that fosters street violence, feeds fear and fuels public disengagement. Our work has four strands:

- working across the community to provide support for people who witness violent or serious crime;
- providing advice, guidance and assistance for such witnesses;
- piloting ways new technology can increase public engagement in the fight against crime; and
- undertaking research, influencing practice, informing policy and enlightening public perception.

This report reviews discussions among 10 and 11 year old children from the London boroughs of Hackney and Islington about street violence and the role of witnesses.

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