RADICAL SYSTEMS CHANGE RESEARCH, SAVING YOUNG LIVES, IN TOWER HAMLETS.

MAPPING A PATH FORWARD.

CO PRODUCED & AUTHORED BY:

100 BROWN & BLACK CHILDREN FROM TOWER HAMLETS.
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VRU
MAYOR OF LONDON
VIOLENCE REDUCTION UNIT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the systemic and structural factors contributing to violence among young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets. It is the culmination of nine weeks of research, integrating surveys, focus groups, and an analysis of existing literature to explore how structural inequalities shape young people's experiences with violence. By adopting a decolonial approach, the study moves beyond conventional frameworks of crime and violence, instead highlighting the role of systemic barriers—such as racialised policing, exclusionary education policies, economic deprivation, and limited institutional support—in perpetuating cycles of harm and disadvantage.

Findings from this study reveal an overwhelming normalisation of violence in the lives of young people, with 98.8% of survey respondents reporting experiences of either emotional, physical, or verbal violence. More than two-thirds believe that violence affects their daily lives, yet this violence is not limited to interactions within their communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than two-thirds believe that violence affects their daily lives, yet this violence is not limited to interactions within their communities. The education system, rather than serving as a protective factor, is seen as complicit in criminalisation, with many young Black and Asian men being disproportionately excluded from mainstream schooling and funnelled into Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). A majority of respondents believe that PRUs are ineffective and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, reinforcing a cycle of disadvantage that extends into adulthood. Economic deprivation and lack of opportunities further compound these experiences, with young people expressing disillusionment about their ability to progress in life within the borough.

Through a critical interrogation of the literature, this report identifies the limitations of existing theoretical frameworks, such as structural violence and the social determinants of health, in capturing the full complexity of young people's lived realities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a response, the study introduces the concept of systemic traps—a framework that articulates how structural inequalities create conditions that ensnare young people in cycles of violence, poverty, and marginalisation. The recommendations presented in this report call for a fundamental restructuring of institutional practices, policy interventions, and investment priorities to dismantle these systemic traps and create meaningful pathways for social mobility and security.

INTRODUCTION

Violence is often framed as an issue of individual pathology or community dysfunction, yet such perspectives fail to account for the broader structural forces that shape young people's experiences. This report challenges reductive explanations of violence and instead situates it within a framework of systemic inequality, arguing that young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets are not merely exposed to violence but are ensnared in what this study terms 'systemic traps.' These traps are the result of intersecting factors, including socio-economic deprivation, institutional neglect, racialised policing, and exclusionary education policies, all of which work in concert to limit young people's opportunities and reinforce cycles of harm. The research underpinning this report is informed by a decolonial methodology that prioritises the voices and lived experiences of young people.

Over the course of nine weeks, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were employed, including surveys and focus groups, to gather rich, empirical data.

The study engaged young men aged 13 to 18 from racialised backgrounds, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how structural inequalities shape their everyday realities. In addition, an extensive review of academic literature was conducted to contextualise these findings within broader theoretical debates on violence, health inequities, and systemic disadvantage.

TOWER HAMLETS: SETTING THE CONTEXT

Tower Hamlets is one of the most socio-economically complex boroughs in the United Kingdom, presenting a striking juxtaposition between rapid economic growth and deep-rooted deprivation. Located in East London, the borough is home to some of the country's most significant financial districts, including Canary Wharf. Despite its proximity to immense wealth, Tower Hamlets remains one of the most deprived areas in the UK, with severe socio-economic challenges disproportionately affecting its residents. This section provides an overview of the borough's demographic composition, economic conditions, and the persistent inequalities that shape the lived experiences of its inhabitants.

Tower Hamlets has the highest rate of child poverty in the United Kingdom, with 42% of children living in poverty, significantly surpassing the national average of 32%.

This stark disparity underscores the borough's ongoing struggle with economic inequality, despite indicators suggesting a relative reduction in deprivation over recent years. The 2015 Indices of Deprivation suggest that while Tower Hamlets has seen some improvements, widespread deprivation persists, and it continues to report the highest rates of child and pensioner poverty in England.

RATE OF CHILD POVERTY

A bar chart titled "RATE OF CHILD POVERTY" with a y-axis from 0% to 100%. Tower Hamlets: 42%. National Average: 32%.
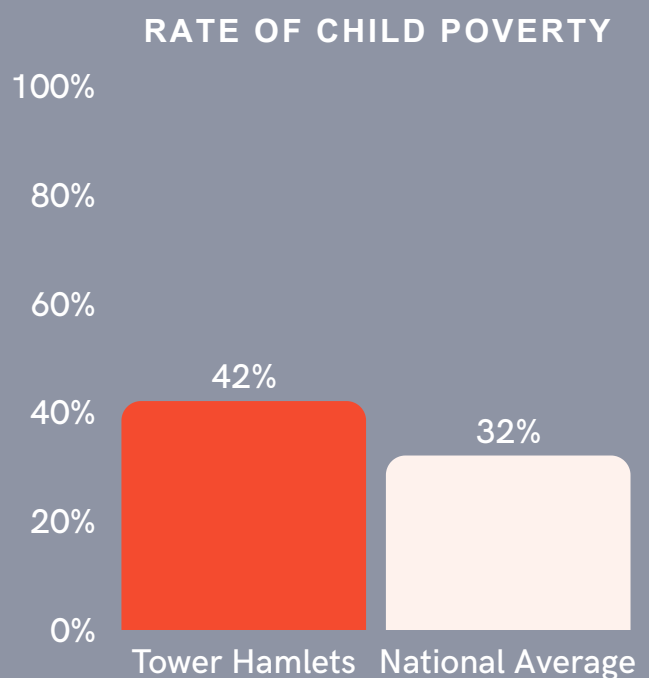
The income deprivation index for the borough stands at 2.03, which is markedly worse than the average for all London boroughs, which stands at 1. This reflects deep financial hardships faced by many residents, reinforcing patterns of socio-economic marginalisation. Housing and employment statistics further illustrate the borough's entrenched inequalities. Three in ten households in Tower Hamlets rely on Housing Benefit, a means-tested benefit aimed at assisting low-income families with rent payments. This high dependency highlights the borough's housing affordability crisis, exacerbated by a rental market in which 70% of dwellings are rented, split nearly equally between social renters and private renters. Overcrowding remains a significant issue, particularly among low-income households. T**he borough's unemployment rate stands at 6.2%,** which is higher than the London-wide average of 5.1%. **Tower Hamlets also has a poverty rate of 41%**, significantly worse than the London average of 25.93%. This economic precarity has direct implications for residents' health and well-being, as evidenced by the borough's **premature mortality rate, which stands at 376 per 100,000 peopl**e, well above the London average of 305 per 100,000.

RATE OF POVERTY

- 100%
- 80%
- 60%
- 40%
- 20%
- 0%

41% — Tower Hamlets
26% — London Average
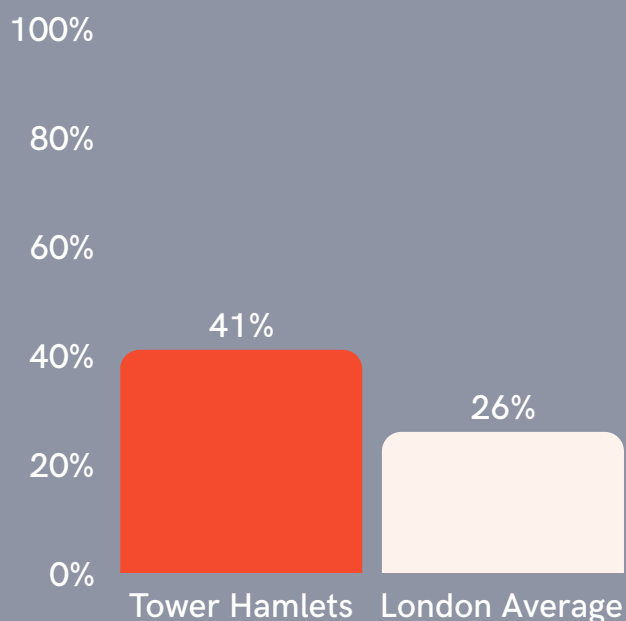
376 PER 100,000 PREMATURE MORTALITY RATE (LONDON AVERAGE OF 305 PER 100,000)

3 IN 10 HOUSEHOLD RELY ON HOUSING BENEFIT IN TOWER HAMLETS

70% OF DWELLINGS IN TOWER HAMLETS ARE RENTED

Despite these socio-economic challenges, Tower Hamlets has experienced rapid demographic and economic transformations. **Between 2011 and 2021, the borough saw a 22% increase in its population**, making it the fastest-growing local authority in England. It is also the most densely populated area in the country, with 15,695 residents per square kilometre.

The borough's median age is just 30 years, making it one of the youngest populations in the UK. Notably, **71% of its residents are of working age (20–64)**, reflecting a high proportion of economically active individuals. However, despite the presence of a young and dynamic workforce, many residents lack the necessary skills required to access high-paying employment opportunities, reinforcing cycles of economic exclusion. While half of adult residents hold high-level qualifications, **16% have no formal qualifications at all,** limiting their ability to benefit from the borough's growing economy.

Tower Hamlets is one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in the country. It is **home to the largest Bangladeshi population in the UK**, with 107,333 residents (34.6% of the total population) identifying as Bangladeshi. The borough is also home to a relatively l**arge proportion of residents identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or other (7.2%**), which is more than double the proportion recorded for England and Wales as a whole (3.1%). Additionally, approximately one per cent of residents have a different gender identity to the sex registered at birth. This diversity adds to the borough's cultural richness but also intersects with social inequalities, as marginalised communities often face additional barriers to economic and social mobility. Economically, Tower Hamlets is paradoxical in nature.

It boasts a **larger economy than major UK cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, or Leeds, with more jobs (291,000) than there are working-age residents**.

Despite this, unemployment remains a pressing issue, particularly among women. Female employment in Tower Hamlets stands at just 59.7%, significantly lower than the national average of 72%. While the borough offers high-income opportunities in financial and professional sectors, many residents are excluded from these industries due to structural barriers, including lack of access to education and training. Although deprivation in Tower Hamlets has slightly decreased in recent years, deep-seated socio-economic disparities continue to shape residents' life chances.

The borough remains highly polarised, with wealth concentrated in certain areas, such as Canary Wharf and Aldgate, while pockets of extreme poverty persist in areas like Bow and Stepney Green. Health inequalities remain a critical concern, with life expectancy outcomes improving for males and females between 2011 and 2020, yet still reflecting a significant gap between the most and least deprived communities.

This section illustrates the stark realities of life in Tower Hamlets, where socioeconomic deprivation persists despite the presence of financial prosperity. For young Black and Asian men, these structural inequalities create systemic barriers to education, employment, and safety, which in turn contribute to cycles of violence and disadvantage. Understanding the borough's complex socio-economic landscape is crucial in contextualising the findings of this study, as it sheds light on how systemic inequalities shape the lived realities of the young people at the heart of this research.

TOWER HAMLETS AT A GLANCE

2.03

The income deprivation index for the borough. This is markedly worse than the average for all London boroughs, which stands at 1. This reflects deep financial hardships faced by many residents

7.2%

Residents identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or other, which is more than double the proportion recorded for England and Wales as a whole (3.1%).
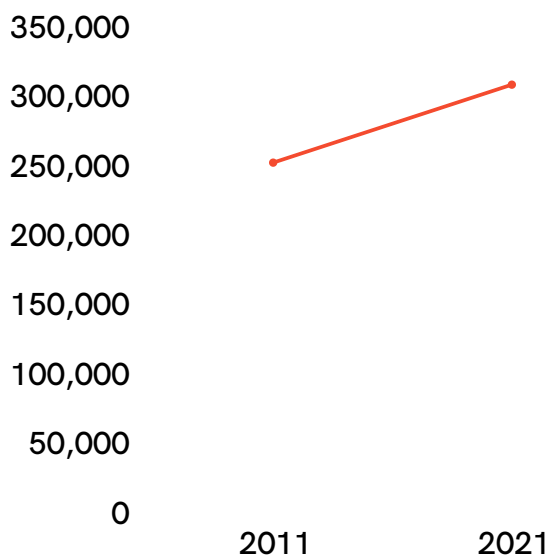
107,333

Home to the largest Bangladeshi population in the UK (34.6% of the total population identifying as Bangladeshi).

59.7%

Females in Employment in Tower Hamlets, significantly lower than the national average of 72%.
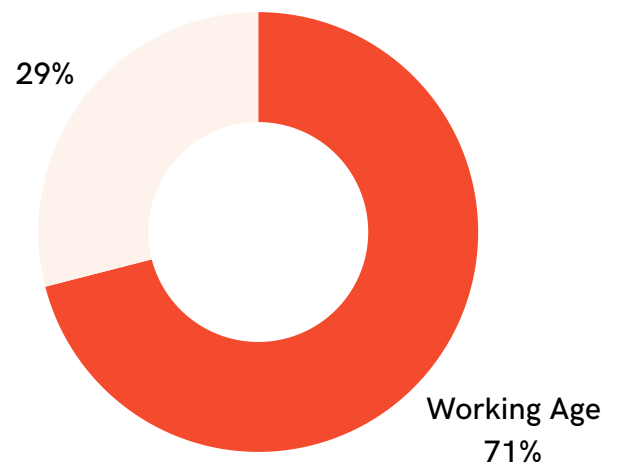
TOWER HAMLETS AT A GLANCE

POPULATION INCREASE 2011-2021

350,000
300,000
250,000
200,000
150,000
100,000
50,000
0

2011   2021

WORKING AGE RESIDENTS IN TOWER HAMLETS

29%

Working Age
71%

BETWEEN 2011 AND 2021, THE BOROUGH SAW A 22% INCREASE IN ITS POPULATION, MAKING IT THE FASTEST-GROWING LOCAL AUTHORITY IN ENGLAND.

NOTABLY, 71% OF TOWER HAMLETS RESIDENTS ARE OF WORKING AGE (20–64), REFLECTING A HIGH PROPORTION OF ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE INDIVIDUALS.

INTERROGATING THE EXISTING LITERATURE

Although deprivation in Tower Hamlets has slightly decreased in recent years, deep-seated socio-economic disparities continue to shape residents' life chances. The borough remains highly polarised, with wealth concentrated in certain areas, such as Canary Wharf and Aldgate, while pockets of extreme poverty persist in areas like Bow and Stepney Green. Health inequalities remain a critical concern, with life expectancy outcomes improving for males and females between 2011 and 2020, yet still reflecting a significant gap between the most and least deprived communities.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

The concept of social determinants of health (SDH) has emerged as a key explanatory model in public health and epidemiology, providing a framework for understanding how socio-economic factors influence health outcomes. Social determinants of violence, as a subcategory, refer to broader societal factors such as poverty, inequality, limited access to education and healthcare, systemic racism, and discriminatory policies, all of which increase the likelihood of violence occurring. These determinants shape individuals' exposure to violence, their capacity to navigate violent environments, and their access to protective structures.

Marmot's work on the Whitehall Studies is particularly significant in advancing this field, demonstrating that social and economic hierarchies directly impact health outcomes. The Whitehall Studies established that individuals lower in the occupational hierarchy experienced worse health outcomes, not solely due to material deprivation but also because of stressors linked to social status and control over life circumstances. This research underscores how disparities in power and resources can translate into health inequalities, reinforcing the need to address socio-economic factors as part of public health interventions (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1998).

While the social determinants of health model has been influential, its approach to violence remains limited. The concept often treats violence as a downstream consequence of socio-economic disadvantage rather than interrogating the systemic mechanisms that normalise and perpetuate it. Moreover, much of the literature on SDH has emerged from a public health perspective, lacking an intersectional approach that considers how multiple axes of oppression—race, class, gender—interact to produce unique vulnerabilities to violence.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Structural violence, first introduced by Johan Galtung (1969), provides a more explicit framework for understanding how systemic inequalities perpetuate harm. Galtung differentiates between personal/direct violence, where there is a clear perpetrator, and structural/indirect violence, which is embedded within social and institutional arrangements. Structural violence manifests through systemic racism, economic deprivation, inadequate healthcare, and legal structures that disadvantage marginalised groups.

Paul Farmer later expanded on Galtung's framework, applying structural violence to global health inequities. Farmer's work (1996) highlights how poverty and social exclusion are not merely unfortunate by-products of economic systems but are actively produced and maintained by policies and institutions. He argues that structural violence is a key determinant of health disparities, yet it is often rendered invisible because it operates through bureaucratic and systemic means rather than through overt acts of aggression.

Despite its analytical power, structural violence remains a nebulous concept with no clear metric for measurement. Unlike social determinants of health, which have been integrated into quantitative public health models, structural violence lacks an operational definition that can be systematically applied in research and policy-making. This limitation reduces its effectiveness as a policy tool, as it remains primarily an explanatory framework rather than a mechanism for measurable intervention.

THE INTERSECTION

Both SDH and structural violence provide critical insights into how inequalities shape health and violence outcomes, but they operate along distinct disciplinary tracks. SDH has been widely adopted in public health and epidemiology, leading to policy recommendations and interventions.

Structural violence, in contrast, remains largely within the domain of medical anthropology and critical sociology, with less traction in mainstream policy discourse. A key point of convergence between the two frameworks is their shared assertion that social inequalities produce preventable harm. Both concepts posit that adverse health outcomes and experiences of violence are not random or inevitable but are structured by economic, political, and social forces.

However, while SDH focuses on identifying risk factors and proposing policy interventions, structural violence emphasises the deeper systemic roots of these inequalities. The Marmot Review (2010) represents one of the few attempts to operationalise SDH within a UK policy context. The review underscores the social gradient in health, demonstrating that those with lower socio-economic status experience worse health outcomes at every level of society. Yet, even within this framework, the concept of structural violence is largely absent. The focus remains on ameliorative measures rather than challenging the systemic conditions that create health inequalities in the first place

TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SYSTEMIC TRAPS

One of the core limitations of both SDH and structural violence is their lack of an operational definition that captures the lived experiences of marginalised groups in the UK. While these frameworks highlight systemic inequalities, they do not provide a concrete mechanism for measuring or addressing how individuals become ensnared in cycles of disadvantage and violence. From the primary research conducted in this study, it is evident that young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets experience violence not as isolated incidents but as part of a broader system that constrains their opportunities and mobility. This has led to the development of a new conceptual framework: Systemic Traps. This term describes the intersecting economic, social, and institutional barriers that prevent marginalised individuals from escaping cycles of disadvantage.

Systemic traps differ from structural violence in that they emphasise the feeling of entrapment—how young people perceive their lack of agency within oppressive structures. While structural violence remains an abstract concept, systemic traps capture the concrete ways in which young people experience marginalisation in education, policing, employment, and community life. For example, exclusionary school policies push young Black and Asian men into PRUs, where they are more likely to be criminalised, reinforcing their entrapment in the criminal justice system. Similarly, the lack of economic opportunities in Tower Hamlets limits their ability to escape these cycles of disadvantage.

The advantage of systemic traps as a concept is its ability to provide a more targeted analytical framework for understanding how structural violence operates in specific socio-political contexts. Unlike SDH, which focuses on broad policy interventions, systemic traps highlight the need for structural change that directly addresses the mechanisms of entrapment.

This includes challenging exclusionary education policies, reforming policing practices, and investing in economic opportunities that enable young people to break free from systemic constraints. The social determinants of health and structural violence have both been instrumental in shaping understandings of health inequities and systemic harm. However, their limitations—particularly their lack of intersectional analysis and operational definitions—necessitate the development of new frameworks that better capture the lived realities of marginalised communities. The concept of systemic traps provides a novel approach that foregrounds the experiences of young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets, offering a way to both understand and challenge the structures that perpetuate violence and disadvantage. By shifting the focus from broad structural explanations to the specific mechanisms that entrap individuals, systemic traps provide a more actionable framework for addressing systemic inequalities.

METHODOLOGY

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to ensure the protection, dignity, and confidentiality of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to their participation in the research. For participants under the age of 18, consent was secured from a legal guardian. Data anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the study, with no personally identifiable information collected, stored, or shared. Ethical guidelines, including those outlined by the British Sociological Association (BSA), were followed to safeguard participants from harm, distress, or coercion.

Study Design

A mixed-methods approach was employed to comprehensively explore the structural factors contributing to violence among young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets. The research consisted of two primary components:

01 Quantitative Data Collection: Surveys designed to capture statistical trends regarding experiences of violence, institutional support, and social determinants.

02 Qualitative Data Collection: Focus group discussions aimed at providing deeper insights into the lived experiences of participants.

This dual approach allowed for both breadth and depth of understanding, ensuring that findings were not only statistically robust but also contextually rich and nuanced.

Survey design and distribution

Four surveys were designed and piloted to ensure clarity, accessibility, and cultural appropriateness. The survey questions were structured to be easily comprehensible, avoiding technical jargon or ambiguous phrasing. The surveys were disseminated between 10th and 14th February 2025 using both online and offline methods to maximise participation and inclusivity. Participants were recruited through youth organisations, schools, and community networks within Tower Hamlets. The survey respondents comprised 100 young people from racialised backgrounds, specifically aged 13 to 18, with an average age of 15. The survey instrument captured key indicators related to:

- Experiences of violence (physical, emotional, and institutional)
- Perceptions of policing and community safety
- Educational experiences and school disciplinary practices
- Social and economic opportunities

Focus Group Discussions

To complement the survey data, six focus groups were conducted between 17th and 21st February 2025. Each session comprised between 12 and 20 participants, all of whom were young males from racialised backgrounds, aged 13 to 18. The discussions lasted approximately 60 minutes and were structured to explore:

- Individual and collective experiences of violence
- Institutional responses to youth vulnerability
- Perceptions of systemic barriers and entrapment (systemic traps)
- Aspirations and perceived opportunities for social mobility

A semi-structured approach was employed, allowing for guided discussions while ensuring participants had the freedom to articulate their experiences organically. The facilitator ensured that all participants had an opportunity to contribute, creating an environment conducive to open and honest dialogue.

Data Handling and Analysis

All qualitative data from the focus groups were anonymised and transcribed to prevent the identification of any individual participants. Responses were systematically coded and categorised to identify recurring themes and patterns. Thematic analysis was conducted to extract key insights, ensuring alignment with the overarching research objectives. Quantitative data from the surveys were processed using Excel, where responses were aggregated, coded, and analysed to identify statistical trends. Descriptive statistics were employed to quantify the prevalence of key issues, while comparative analysis was used to examine variations across different demographic subgroups.

Limitations

While the study provides a robust analysis of the systemic challenges facing young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

- The sample, though diverse, was restricted to a specific geographical area, limiting the generalisability of findings to broader populations.
- Self-reported data are inherently subjective and may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability bias.
- The study focuses on male participants, meaning that the gendered dimensions of systemic violence remain underexplored.

Despite these limitations, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies ensures that the findings provide a comprehensive, empirically grounded understanding of the structural factors shaping youth experiences of violence.By integrating both survey data and focus group insights, this study presents a detailed examination of how systemic inequalities contribute to the entrapment of young racialised men in cycles of violence. The methodological rigor applied ensures that the findings are both statistically sound and contextually meaningful, offering critical insights for policymakers, educators, and community organisations working to address systemic violence.

Violence: The Systemic Trap of Exposure and Normalisation

Violence, in its many forms, is a pervasive reality for young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets. This study reveals the extent to which violence is not only an individual or community-based issue but a systemic one—embedded within social structures that disproportionately impact racialized youth. By examining both quantitative and qualitative data, this report explores the multi-dimensional impact of violence, how it is perceived, and the far-reaching consequences it has on mental health, education, and social development.

The survey results indicate that violence is an overwhelmingly common experience among the young people surveyed. **Nearly all participants, 98.8%, reported experiencing violence in some form**, whether emotional, physical, or verbal. A significant portion, **65.6%, identified violence as a pressing issue within their community**, while **71.8% believed that it affected their daily lives.** Additionally, **43.8% of respondents stated that they felt somewhat close to violence on a daily basis**.

99%
of respondents reported experiencing violence in some form, whether emotional, physical, or verbal

72%
of respondents believed that violence affected their daily lives.

44%
of respondents stated that they felt somewhat close to violence on a daily basis.

31%
of respondents indicated that both the community and the police contributed equally to the presence of violence

When asked about the sources of violence, the majority, **31.3%, indicated that both the community and the police contributed equally to its presence.** These findings underscore the normalisation of violence in the lived experiences of young people in Tower Hamlets. The focus group discussions provide a deeper understanding of how young people define and experience violence. Many participants spoke of gang violence as a persistent threat, with one young person describing it as "the biggest obstacle I face every day. Every time I leave my house, it's about survival." Others expanded on the definition of violence, emphasising that "violence should include racism and discrimination." Another participant stated that "violence is always linked to Black people because of stereotyping," illustrating the role of racial bias in shaping perceptions of violence.

Several participants spoke about the criminalisation of Black youth, particularly through policing practices. One individual expressed frustration with racial profiling, explaining that "if you wear a hoodie because you're cold and you're Black, the police will automatically assume you're a criminal." Institutional violence was also highlighted within the education system, with one participant commenting, "it is violent the way they rush to kick us out of school." Others pointed to the unsafe nature of their neighbourhoods, explaining that "gangs try to recruit you" at a young age. These statements highlight the expansive and structural nature of violence in the lives of young people. Violence is not only experienced through direct physical confrontations but also through institutional policies, racial profiling, and social marginalisation.

The findings illustrate that violence is experienced in multiple interconnected ways —through community interactions, law enforcement, education systems, and broader socio-economic conditions. This redefinition of violence aligns with the concept of systemic traps, wherein young people are placed in environments that perpetuate harm, limit opportunities, and reinforce cycles of disadvantage.

The high prevalence of gang violence affects young people's ability to socialise freely and safely, restricting their movement and access to public spaces. Exposure to institutional violence in schools, rather than providing safety, reinforces feelings of exclusion and systemic neglect. The perception that both the police and the community contribute equally to violence indicates a breakdown in trust with law enforcement and institutions meant to provide protection. Exposure to violence during formative years has extensive and long-lasting effects on multiple aspects of a young person's life. These impacts extend beyond immediate physical harm and manifest in mental health struggles, academic difficulties, and future economic and social instability.

Experiencing violence significantly raises the likelihood of developing anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Many young people struggle to identify, express, and manage emotions, leading to emotional dysregulation and withdrawal. Exposure to violence disrupts the development of secure attachments, making it harder to form and maintain healthy relationships. Continuous exposure fosters a sense of worthlessness and erodes trust in institutions and individuals. As a coping mechanism, many at-risk youth turn to substance abuse, further exacerbating cycles of harm. Violence disrupts concentration and learning, leading to lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates. Many students internalise violent behaviours, increasing aggression and delinquency. Those who disengage from school are at higher risk of criminalisation, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline. Furthermore, early exposure to violence increases the likelihood of engaging in or falling victim to further violence later in life.

Long-term exposure to stress and violence is linked to chronic illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes. Children exposed to violence may suffer from physical injuries and long-term health complications as a result of direct harm.

Young people exposed to violence often struggle with interpersonal relationships due to attachment difficulties and mistrust. Violence perpetuates itself intergenerationally, as those who experience it are more likely to engage in violent behaviour in future relationships and parenting. The effects of childhood violence extend into adulthood, impacting not only the individual but also future generations. Violence in Tower Hamlets is not an isolated issue but a systemic one, deeply intertwined with structural inequalities, institutional neglect, and socio-economic deprivation. Young Black and Asian men face violence not only in their communities but also through policing, education, and exclusion from opportunities. This creates systemic traps—conditions that make it exceedingly difficult for individuals to escape cycles of harm and disadvantage. To address this issue, interventions must go beyond traditional crime-reduction strategies. Solutions must focus on dismantling structural inequalities, improving institutional trust, and providing alternative opportunities for young people. Recognising violence as a systemic issue rather than an individual failing is the first step towards meaningful change.

Education: Systemic Barriers and Racialised Experiences

The findings from this study highlight the ways in which young Black and Asian men experience systemic barriers in the education system. **A significant 55.2% of respondents believe that either they or someone they know has given up on school**. **The perception that young Black and Asian men are more likely to be criminalised or punished in schools is shared by 51.7% of participants**, reflecting widespread concerns about racial disparities in disciplinary practices. Furthermore, **82.7% of respondents feel pressured or somewhat pressured by academic success**, indicating the immense strain that students face in navigating the education system. Among those who have been tested for special educational needs, **75% do not feel they were provided with adequate support**, demonstrating a failure of the system to accommodate diverse learning needs. Additionally, **58.6% of participants believe that their race influences how they are treated in the school environment**. Despite these challenges, **65.5% still recognise the importance of education for their future**, suggesting a strong aspirational outlook despite systemic inequalities.

Schools are meant to provide a safe and supportive environment for young people, yet the experiences detailed in this study suggest that for many, this is not the case. If students do not feel safe or supported, their ability to reach academic success is severely compromised. This failure perpetuates cycles of violence and systemic disadvantage, as disengagement from education increases the likelihood of involvement in harmful environments. If a child feels they have given up on school, the consequences can be severe. Disengagement often leads to declining academic performance, missed assignments, and an overall lack of motivation, ultimately resulting in lower educational attainment.
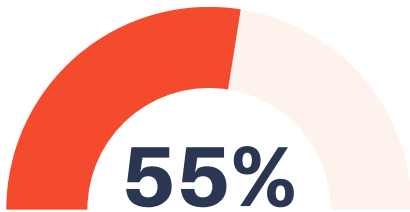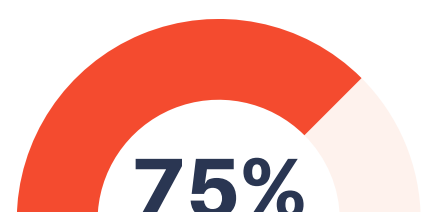
55% of respondents indicated that both the community and the police contributed equally to the presence of violence
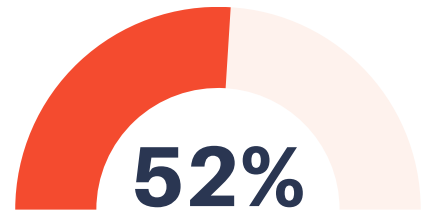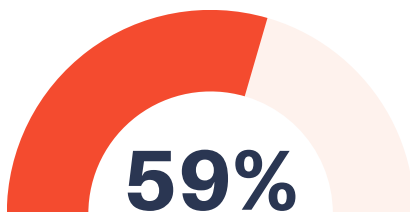
52% of respondents believe young Black and Asian men are more likely to be criminalised or punished in schools
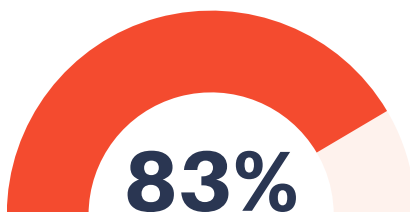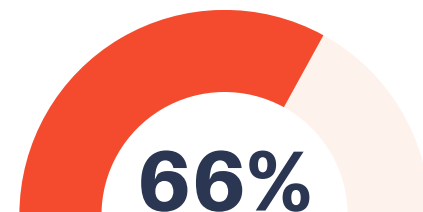
83% of respondents feel pressured or somewhat pressured by academic success

75% of those who have been tested for special educational needs do not feel they were provided with adequate support

59% of participants believe that their race influences how they are treated in the school environment

66% still recognise the importance of education for their future

Beyond academics, school serves as a primary social environment for children. When students feel excluded or unsupported, they may withdraw from social interactions, leading to isolation, loneliness, and difficulty forming relationships. This social disconnection can have lasting effects, impacting their emotional development and ability to navigate professional and personal relationships later in life. These findings illustrate the pressing need for systemic reforms in education to address racial disparities, improve support systems for students with special educational needs, and create a school culture that prioritises mental well-being and inclusivity. Without these changes, young Black and Asian men will continue to face structural barriers that limit their opportunities for success and reinforce cycles of marginalisation.

The PRU-to-Prison Pipeline: Structural Failures and Systemic Criminalisation

The findings from this study illustrate significant concerns about the role of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in the education system and their link to long-term criminalisation. A majority of **37.9% believe that PRUs are ineffective in supporting young people who struggle with traditional schooling**. More than half, **51.7%, believe that young Black and Asian men are disproportionately criminalised or punished in schools**. The strongest indicator of systemic failure is that **62.1% of respondents believe there is a direct link between PRUs and the prison system**, with **58.6% expressing concerns that young people are being funnelled from alternative education settings into the criminal justice system**. These statistics highlight a deep mistrust in the PRU system and its ability to rehabilitate or support students effectively, reinforcing the idea that PRUs may be functioning as a mechanism of exclusion rather than inclusion.

38%

believe that PRUs are ineffective in supporting young people who struggle with traditional schooling

62%

of respondents believe there is a direct link between PRUs and the prison system

59%

expressed concerns that young people are being funnelled from alternative education settings into the criminal justice system

The focus group discussions further illuminate the lived experiences of young people within these alternative education settings. One young person stated, **"It is easier to be punished in school than to be rewarded,"** illustrating how school environments often prioritise punitive measures over support. Others voiced frustration with the overrepresentation of racialised youth in PRUs, with one participant stating, **"Things need to change in my school as too many racialised young people are being sent to PRUs."** Another participant noted that **"PRUs are very bad, but so is isolation. That really affects mental health,"** suggesting that exclusionary disciplinary practices not only remove students from mainstream education but also cause significant psychological distress. There was also a recurring theme of premature and inappropriate placements in alternative education.

One participant remarked, **"You see 13 or 14-year-olds being sent to college. What do you learn from a college?"** indicating that young students were being placed in educational settings that were neither age-appropriate nor conducive to their academic development. Others highlighted the racial disparities embedded in these processes, with one young person stating, **"The Black kids are not even treated like children,"** reinforcing the notion of adultification—where Black youth are perceived and treated as older and less innocent than their white peers. Another participant lamented, **"There is no one standing up for us,"** indicating a profound lack of advocacy and institutional support.

> **THE BLACK KIDS ARE NOT EVEN TREATED LIKE CHILDREN**

> **THERE IS NO ONE STANDING UP FOR US**

Concerns over the PRU system extend beyond its immediate educational shortcomings and into its long-term consequences. Many respondents expressed that PRUs fail to provide meaningful educational opportunities, with one participant stating, **"PRUs are not very effective as not everyone is going to pass."** Others suggested that PRUs act as holding spaces rather than rehabilitative educational environments, with one young person commenting, **"By the time someone has gotten to a PRU, they are lost."** Another participant noted, **"Most young people who go to PRUs end up going there to chill,"** suggesting that instead of receiving the necessary support to transition back into mainstream education, students are often left in a stagnant, unstructured system that does little to promote long-term success.

The failures of the PRU system can be understood within a broader critique of alternative education as a site of exclusion, criminalisation, and institutional neglect. One of the primary concerns surrounding PRUs is the stigma attached to them. Many young people find themselves segregated from mainstream education, which damages their self-esteem and significantly reduces their chances of reintegration into traditional schooling. Research has shown that PRUs often function as environments where negative behaviours are reinforced rather than corrected. The normalisation of swearing, violence, and substance use in these settings further compounds the risk of long-term disengagement from education and subsequent entanglement in the criminal justice system.

> **BY THE TIME SOMEONE HAS GOTTEN TO A PRU, THEY ARE LOST**

Another critical issue is the lack of empirical evidence to suggest that PRUs improve academic outcomes or behaviour. Many students who enter these alternative settings do not experience any measurable improvement in their educational attainment. Instead, studies indicate that young people who have attended PRUs are at a heightened risk of imprisonment, mental health struggles, suicide, drug addiction, and long-term unemployment. Care-experienced young people are particularly overrepresented in PRUs, making them even more vulnerable to structural disadvantages that impede their transition to stable education, employment, or training. The structural deficiencies of PRUs are also evident in the inadequate facilities and resources available to students. Many alternative education settings lack the infrastructure necessary to provide a high-quality learning environment.

Furthermore, the lack of rigorous monitoring and curriculum development in PRUs exacerbates the existing disparities between mainstream and alternative education. Without consistent academic oversight, many PRU students do not receive a comprehensive education that equips them with the skills needed for future success. Reintegration into mainstream schools is often difficult, as schools may be reluctant to accept students back due to behavioural concerns, further pushing them towards the margins of the education system.

The challenges faced by PRU students are also compounded by a lack of adequately trained staff. Many PRU educators do not receive sufficient training in trauma-informed teaching practices, making it difficult for them to effectively support students who have experienced significant adversity. Additionally, the absence of strong collaboration between PRUs, mainstream schools, and further education institutions limits opportunities for young people to transition successfully into stable academic or vocational pathways. The overwhelming perception among respondents is that PRUs are failing in their fundamental purpose.

Instead of serving as rehabilitative spaces designed to support young people in overcoming educational and behavioural challenges, PRUs are often seen as the final step before complete educational disengagement or entry into the criminal justice system. The findings from this study indicate that without substantial reform, PRUs will continue to act as a systemic trap that disproportionately affects Black and Asian youth, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation, criminalisation, and social exclusion. Addressing these issues requires a fundamental restructuring of how alternative education is delivered, ensuring that PRUs function as sites of genuine support rather than spaces of exclusion that push vulnerable young people further into precarity.

# Lack of Opportunities: Systemic Barriers to Social Mobility

The findings from this study indicate a widespread sense of disillusionment among young people in Tower Hamlets regarding their access to opportunities. A significant **63.2% of respondents do not believe that authorities, including the police and NHS, are doing enough to support their communities**. The lack of institutional engagement is further reflected in the fact that **84.2% of young people surveyed had never heard of the Tower Hamlets Safer Hubs initiative**, highlighting a disconnect between policy interventions and the people they are intended to serve. When asked about their educational aspirations, the responses were evenly split on whether they believed they would attend university, illustrating the uncertainty that many young people feel about their future prospects. Furthermore, **68.4% of respondents believe that better opportunities exist outside of Tower Hamlets**, reinforcing the perception that the borough does not provide the necessary infrastructure for upward social mobility.
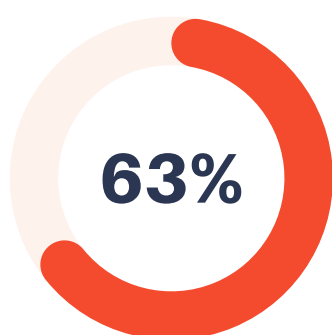
63%

of respondents do not believe that authorities, including the police and NHS, are doing enough to support their communities.

84%

of young people surveyed had never heard of the Tower Hamlets Safer Hubs initiative

68%
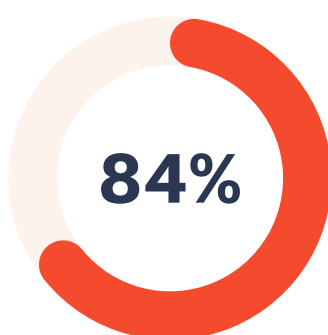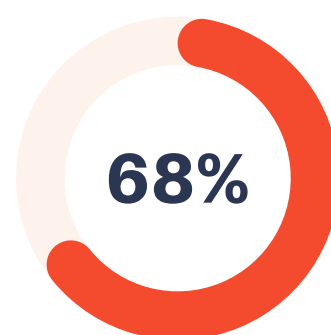
of respondents believe that better opportunities exist outside of Tower Hamlets

The focus group discussions further reveal the lived experiences of young people who feel constrained by their surroundings. One participant expressed frustration, stating, **"I need to get out of Tower Hamlets,"** reflecting the desire to escape what they perceive as a cycle of disadvantage. Others echoed similar sentiments about the lack of recreational and developmental opportunities, with one young person saying, **"There is nothing to do for teenagers."** Another participant emphasised the financial barriers that prevent engagement in extracurricular activities, explaining, **"I can't afford to do any of the activities."** This highlights the intersection of economic deprivation and limited access to structured youth engagement, further exacerbating the sense of exclusion.

Several participants pointed to broader structural inequalities, with one stating, **"It is like there is a hierarchy in society,"** indicating a perception that opportunities are not equitably distributed. The uneven investment in different parts of the borough was a recurring theme, with one participant's observation, **"The government invests in Canary Wharf and Aldgate, but other areas like Bow and Stepney Green are forgotten."** This disparity in investment reinforces feelings of marginalisation, as young people see wealth and development concentrated in certain parts of Tower Hamlets while their own communities remain underfunded. The Safer Hubs initiative, intended to improve safety and engagement, was also met with scepticism, with one participant questioning, **"Why do we need safer hubs? We should be dealing with the root causes of the problems."** This response reflects frustration with surface-level interventions that fail to address the structural issues driving youth disengagement and disenfranchisement.

> **I NEED TO GET OUT OF TOWER HAMLETS**

The findings suggest that young people in Tower Hamlets experience a profound sense of restriction, with limited pathways for social and economic advancement. The lack of opportunities has direct psychological and emotional consequences, leading to low motivation and disengagement. When young people feel that their environment does not support their aspirations, they may lose interest in education, extracurricular activities, and personal development. This disengagement can contribute to declining academic performance, with students missing assignments, failing to meet expectations, and ultimately falling behind in their studies.

Beyond academic implications, the perception of limited opportunities can severely impact self-esteem. Young people who feel constrained by their environment may develop a sense of inadequacy, believing they are not capable of achieving their goals. This can contribute to anxiety and depression, particularly when they see their peers in other areas accessing opportunities that they feel are unavailable to them. The feeling of entrapment can lead to social withdrawal, as young people disengage from social interactions and retreat into isolation, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and marginalisation.

The consequences extend into behavioural patterns as well. Frustration over the lack of opportunities may manifest in behavioural problems, with young people becoming argumentative, defiant, or withdrawing from structured activities altogether. This frustration can translate into a lack of discipline in educational settings, increasing the risk of school disengagement and, in some cases, criminalisation. Young people who perceive no viable future for themselves may struggle with the transition to adulthood, feeling unprepared to make key decisions regarding their careers, education, or place in society.

The absence of clear pathways for personal and professional development further entrenches cycles of deprivation, limiting the ability of young people to break free from systemic disadvantage. The overarching theme emerging from these findings is that young people in Tower Hamlets are not only facing a lack of opportunities but are also deeply aware of the structural inequalities that shape their lives. Their disillusionment is not simply a product of personal frustration but a reflection of a broader system that has failed to provide equitable access to education, employment, and recreational resources. Addressing this issue requires more than superficial interventions; it necessitates a fundamental restructuring of investment priorities, ensuring that resources are directed towards community development, accessible youth engagement programs, and long-term strategies for economic and social mobility. Without these systemic changes, young people will continue to view their environment as a barrier rather than a platform for growth.

Institutional Trust and Perceptions of Authority

The findings from this study reveal a significant disconnect between young people in Tower Hamlets and the institutions that are meant to serve them. A striking **84.2% of respondents had never heard of the Tower Hamlets Safer Hubs initiative**, indicating that key community interventions are failing to engage or reach their intended audience. Trust in authorities appears to be particularly low, with **63.2% of young people believing that institutions such as the police and NHS are not doing enough to support the community.** This lack of confidence extends to law enforcement, as **62.5% of respondents believe that the police only sometimes solve crime effectively.** More concerningly, **46.9% of young people do not believe that the police treat them fairly**, and an **equal percentage report feeling discriminated against by law enforcement due to their race and background.**

Despite widespread scepticism towards the police and local authorities, public health institutions appear to retain comparatively higher levels of trust. A majority of **68.8% of respondents expressed confidence in public health bodies and the NHS within their communities.** However, the relationship between young people and the local council is more ambivalent.
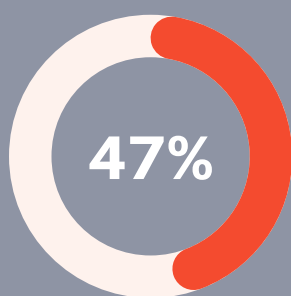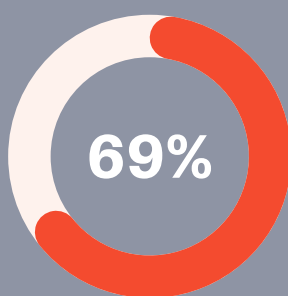
47%

of young people do not believe that the police treat them fairly

69%

of respondents expressed confidence in public health bodies and the NHS within their communities

56%

feel that the council is only sometimes supportive of their need

While **59.4% of respondents view their relationship with the council as neutral, 62.5% believe they have been treated unfairly by the council because of their race and background**. Additionally, **56.3% feel that the council is only sometimes supportive of their needs**, highlighting inconsistencies in the way local governance is perceived by young people from racialised backgrounds.

The focus group discussions provide further insight into these strained relationships. One young person stated, **"Residents in neglected areas feel a certain way towards authorities, such as not trusting them as well as being stereotyped by the police because of the colour of their skin and what they wear."** This statement reflects the deep-seated mistrust between young people and law enforcement, particularly among those from marginalised communities. The notion that individuals are judged and targeted based on their appearance rather than their actions reinforces a sense of alienation and systemic bias.

Another participant emphasised the need for a cultural shift in how institutions engage with young people, stating, **"People need to understand empathy and be human."** This sentiment underscores the perception that interactions with authorities are often impersonal, transactional, and lacking in genuine concern for the well-being of young people.

The findings suggest that systemic distrust in institutions is not just a product of individual experiences but rather a reflection of long-standing structural inequalities. When young people feel ignored, stereotyped, or discriminated against by authorities, it reinforces a broader narrative of exclusion.

The fact that many respondents were unaware of community safety initiatives like the Safer Hubs project suggests a failure in outreach and engagement strategies. If institutions genuinely aim to build trust with young people, they must go beyond superficial engagement and actively involve communities in the decision-making processes that affect them. The lack of faith in law enforcement is particularly troubling, as it suggests that many young people do not see the police as a source of protection but rather as an institution that perpetuates discrimination. This perception is reinforced by data indicating that nearly half of respondents believe they are treated unfairly due to their racial and ethnic background.

Such findings align with wider research on over-policing and racial profiling, demonstrating that young Black and Asian men are disproportionately subject to law enforcement scrutiny, often without just cause. This creates a cycle where young people are less likely to report crimes or cooperate with the police, further deepening the divide between communities and law enforcement.

At the local government level, the mixed perceptions of the council highlight a broader issue of inconsistent support. While some young people view the council neutrally, a significant proportion feel that they have been treated unfairly due to their racial and ethnic identity. The perception that the council is only sometimes supportive suggests that while efforts may be made to engage with communities, they are either insufficient or not applied equitably across different racial and socio-economic groups.

Addressing these issues requires a fundamental rethinking of institutional engagement with young people, particularly those from racialised backgrounds. Building trust cannot be achieved through performative outreach or isolated initiatives; rather, it necessitates systemic change in how institutions interact with, listen to, and support young people.

Police forces must take proactive steps to address racial profiling and discriminatory practices, while local councils must ensure that policies and programs are equitably distributed and responsive to the specific needs of young people in marginalised communities.

Without meaningful change, these institutions will continue to be viewed with scepticism, and young people will remain disconnected from the very systems meant to support them. The findings of this report highlight a fundamental failure of institutions to protect and support young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets. Violence, as experienced by these young people, is not simply a matter of community tensions or individual deviance but is deeply embedded within systemic inequalities.

The education system, through school exclusions and the PRU pipeline, criminalises rather than nurtures. The police, rather than offering protection, are often perceived as a source of violence themselves. Economic deprivation and lack of opportunities further exacerbate these realities, leaving young people with few viable pathways to social mobility.

The concept of systemic traps, introduced in this report, offers a new framework for understanding how young people are caught within cycles of disadvantage. Unlike traditional theories of structural violence, systemic traps focus on the tangible mechanisms that prevent escape from conditions of harm —whether through punitive education policies, racialised policing, or economic marginalisation. Addressing these issues requires more than surface-level interventions; it necessitates a radical rethinking of how institutions engage with and support marginalised youth.

Without meaningful policy changes and structural reforms, the conditions described in this report will continue to persist. The criminalisation of young Black and Asian men, the failure of public services to provide adequate support, and the lack of economic opportunities all contribute to a system that perpetuates harm rather than mitigating it. The recommendations that follow outline key policy measures that must be taken to dismantle these systemic traps and create meaningful change.

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Policy Recommendations

A fundamental redefinition of violence is needed within policy and public discourse, moving beyond the narrow focus on criminal justice responses to address the root causes of harm. Systemic traps must be further developed and recognised as measurable indicators of deprivation and risk, allowing for targeted interventions that address the structural factors contributing to youth violence. A comprehensive review of school exclusion policies must be undertaken to ensure that young Black and Asian men are not disproportionately removed from mainstream education. The expansion of restorative justice practices and in-school support services should be prioritised to reduce the criminalisation of students and provide pathways for educational success.

Investment in youth services and community-led initiatives is crucial to providing young people with safe spaces and opportunities for personal and professional development. Funding must be directed towards grassroots organisations that work directly with affected communities, rather than top-down interventions that fail to engage with local needs. Employment and skills development programs should be tailored to address the specific barriers faced by young people in Tower Hamlets, ensuring that economic deprivation does not continue to limit their life chances.

Policing practices must be critically re-evaluated to address the deep mistrust between law enforcement and racialised communities.

Measures should be taken to reduce racial profiling, increase transparency in police interactions, and establish independent oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability. Community-led public safety initiatives should be supported as alternatives to punitive policing strategies, fostering a model of security that is based on trust and cooperation rather than surveillance and control.

Addressing systemic inequality requires a multi-sectoral approach that integrates education, public health, employment, and justice reforms. Institutions must move beyond performative engagement with marginalised communities and commit to structural changes that actively dismantle systemic traps. This report serves as a call to action for policymakers, educators, community leaders, and law enforcement agencies to recognise their role in perpetuating cycles of violence and to take meaningful steps towards systemic change. Without such interventions, the conditions that entrap young Black and Asian men in Tower Hamlets will persist, reinforcing patterns of harm for generations to come.

CALL TO ACTION

Our report commissioned by London's Violence Reduction Unit has evidenced a stark reality for Black and Brown children in Tower Hamlets. Our call to action is simple, we need a drastic policy and public health led intervention now.

We call on leaders, politicians, commissioners, funders, donors and most importantly community to help us through these 5 key goals -

1 We must recognize that serious violence is a public health issue. Therefore, we need public health interventions rooted in repair, care and to call it what it is, this is a public health emergency. Our communities need to lead on policy creation, young people must be empowered to use their voice and agency and early intervention must be linked to prevention, addressing unmet needs and at specific wards across Tower Hamlets.

2 Alternative schools or pupil referral units are not safe spaces for young people. Too often young people are stigmatized, feel harmed and othered in these spaces. We need to address the low educational attainment and grooming in these places. And we need to help leaders and teachers at the alternative schools to work with families through a culturally sensitive lens. Ultimately, we need to decolonize and reduce these spaces because it is not serving young people.

CALL TO ACTION

3 Our decisions must be data led and young people need to be supported through a human centered lens. We know that specific wards across London need more investment, sustainable family-based care and restorative justice. Funding decisions must follow data and the unmet needs of children.

4 The research has evidenced that we are not supporting young people through an intersecting identities framework. These intersecting factors are what make us multi-layered individuals, as one aspect of our identities influences the other aspects of our identities to paint the full picture of who we are. Our call to action encourages systems to study the difference between intersectionality and intersecting identities and to advocate for and celebrate young people's intersecting needs and identities.

5 Over 100 young people engaged with us and co-produced this work. Often research is extractive and the recommendations are left unattended. We call on leaders to commission more research but to do this intentionally so that outcomes and recommendations are resourced, supported and that young people see that research is effective and not another harmful tool.

Our work in this area is not complete and we will carry on challenging the system to do better and to support young people purposefully. We want to thank London's Violence Reduction Unit and we hope that the children of Tower Hamlets witness change and liberation in our lifetimes.

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