COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Name.Narrate.Navigate

Date Received: 7 June 2024

SUBMISSION TO THE NSW LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LAW AND SAFETY: COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE: NAME NARRATE NAVIGATE PROGRAM[1]

INTRODUCTION

Youth crime is an issue of significant scope and scale in Australian communities. In NSW, 11042 young people aged between 10 and 17 years were proceeded against by Police for criminal matters in the 12 months to December 2023[2]. Violence related matters (including domestic and non-domestic violence related assaults, intimidation, stalking and harassment, sexual offences, abduction and kidnapping and homicide) accounted for 3,189 or 29% of these matters. In regional NSW, the impact of youth crime and violence is particularly pronounced, with the Far West and Orana, and New England and North West regions reporting the highest rates of young people proceeded against for criminal matters. This submission reflects on learnings from delivery of the Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN)[3] program across regional NSW. Established in 2018 at the University of Newcastle, NNN is a trauma-informed and culturally safe intervention developed with and for the community as a preventive intervention for youth violence. Uniquely, the program has a dual focus of working with young people who use and experience violence, and workers who support them. It aims to strengthen self-awareness, self-regulation and skills for connection to support readiness for targeted intervention, and/or self-determined growth toward safer outcomes. NNN was developed and is continuously improved through participatory action research involving over 100 industry and community representatives, including a practitioner working party, steering committee, cultural reference groups led by an acknowledged Aboriginal Elder, and an advisory group of young people with lived experience of violence. NNN is informed by contemporary understandings of trauma and relational practices consistent with Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing. It embraces creative and culturally endorsed methods to prioritise, centre and give voice to young people's experiences to inform more responsive practice. To date NNN has worked with over 200 young people and over 2000 practitioners. Reflections on learnings from NNN were collected with appropriate ethics approval and are shared here for their relevance to the terms of reference of the committee's inquiry into drivers of youth crime and related workforce issues.

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[1] This submission is the work of the authors named at the conclusion of the document. It should not be taken as the position of the University of Newcastle as a whole. Author for correspondence : Associate Professor Tamara Blakemore, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

[2] Youth Crime, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_pages/Young-people.aspx

[3] Blakemore, T., Rak, L., Krogh, C., McCarthy, S. and Stuart, G. (2023) Working with Youth Violence: The Name.Narrate.Navigate Program. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003177883

DRIVERS OF YOUTH CRIME

Drivers of youth crime and violence in regional NSW are complex and multifaceted, stemming from a range of individual, family, community, and systemic factors. Socioeconomic disadvantage, characterized by high levels of unemployment, poverty, and limited access to education and support services, can be a significant contributor to youth offending. Family dysfunction, domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues also play a crucial role in the development of antisocial behavior among young people. For Aboriginal young people, the impact of intergenerational trauma, resulting from the ongoing effects of colonization, dispossession, and systemic racism, cannot be overstated. The loss of cultural identity, disconnection from traditional support networks, and the breakdown of family structures have created a cycle of disadvantage and trauma that contributes to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in the criminal justice system.

Regional and rural communities face unique challenges in addressing these drivers of youth crime and violence. Limited resources, geographic isolation, and a lack of specialist services can hinder the development and implementation of effective prevention and intervention strategies. Addressing these underlying causes requires a holistic, community-led approach that acknowledges the specific needs and strengths of each community. Understanding and addressing the drivers of youth crime and violence is crucial for developing effective, evidence-based interventions. Programs like NNN, which are trauma-informed, culturally safe, and responsive to the unique needs of regional communities, play a vital role in breaking the cycle of offending and promoting positive youth development.

NNN understands youth violence as a contextualised and multi-determined experience. Important to this is recognising how violence is situated in a broader sense including an understanding of the presence and role of violence in community life, noting young people's use of violence rarely occurs in isolation of other violence and offending. It also involves attention to possible gendered differences in motivations for violence. Work by Warton (2020)[4], and Staff and Kreager (2008)[5] suggests disenfranchised young men from areas of less advantage may connect with peers and antisocial behaviours, including violence, for connection and acceptance. This is like the work of Blakemore et al., (2018[6], 2019[7]) which indicates young people's use of violence may intersect with identity, while also having links to community, place, relationality, gender and trauma.

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[4] Warton, T. J. (2020). *The development of a criminal identity amongst adolescent males* (Doctoral dissertation, Monash university).

[5] Staff, J., & Kreager, D. A. (2008). Too cool for school? Violence, peer status and high school dropout. *Social forces*, *87*(1), 445-471

[6] Blakemore, T., Rak, L., Agllias, K., Mallett, X., & McCarthy, S. (2018). Crime and context: Understandings of youth perpetrated interpersonal violence among service providers in regional Australia. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, *2*(5), 53–69.

[7] Blakemore, T., Agllias, K., Howard, A. and McCarthy, S. (2019) 'The service system challenges of work with juvenile justice involved young people in the Hunter Region, Australia', Australian Journal of Social Issues, 54, pp. 341-356. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.69

Working from a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive ethos, the theory of change underpinning NNN recognises that all young people need skills to recognise, regulate and communicate emotions and needs; empathy to respond to others and themselves; an understanding of power, control, and shame; and an opportunity to explore what positive choice might look like in their lives. NNN suggests new knowledge, skills and behaviours and greater confidence, and coping and connection that can improve life circumstances, wellbeing, and safety. The aim of the NNN program is to enhance these factors to drive and sustain change towards better, safer outcomes. Learnings from NNN, highlight how emotional recognition, invalidation, empathy, power and control, shame and choice are experienced as dynamic, interrelated and immediate drivers of youth violence.

Emotional recognition and regulation

Many young people who use violence also experience violence, and the emotional experience of both seem inextricably intertwined. We observe violence as an emotionally laden experience and working with young people who use, and experience violence can likewise feel emotionally laden in complex ways. Some young people we work with are dealing with big, hard, and heavy emotions, some describe being emotionally numb, others seem to oscillate between high highs and low lows without ever achieving a sense of emotional equilibrium. While neuroscience would suggest we are hard-wired for exchanging emotional cues that enrich our everyday lives, the ease and effect of this process is not the same for all of us, in all circumstances. Justice-involved young people, perhaps because of adverse early life experiences in their homes and their communities, often report negative educational experiences, problems with literacy, and often demonstrate a lack of confidence and ability to articulate experiences and feelings.[8] Reflecting on the difficulties young people can experience with recognising and regulating emotions, Ray[9] (a young person who had completed NNN) was keen to share his thoughts on his own and his peer experiences: *"oh yeh yeh they don't know, like they can tell when they're happy or sad but they can't tell what feeling love looks like, (well they can but they don't know it), they can't tell when someone's exhausted or scared, or disappointment or any of that' 'more just happy sad' 'yeh black and white' 'yeh that used to be me'".* How we experience emotions involves us exchanging emotional cues with others and making meaning of these cues. This helps us achieve a sense of predictability and order in our interpersonal interactions. Our perception and understanding of others' emotions is thought to be linked to our awareness and insights into our own emotions[10] Ray's insights into his emotions articulates what studies might suggest about a bias towards anger (hostility bias), explaining he feels anger is like a cycle he can get stuck in. *"like you don't know what you're feeling till it comes again, and if you take notice of it, like whatever you're feeling ends up turning into sadness or anger because you end up getting*

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[8] McNeill, F., Anderson, K., Colvin, S., Overy, K., Sparks, R., & Tett, L. (2011). Inspiring desistance? Arts projects and "what works?" *Justitiele Verkenningen*, *37*(5), 80–101.
[9] Psuedonym.
[10] Bird, G., Silani, G., Brindley, R., White, S., Frith, U., & Singer, T. (2010). Empathic brain responses in insula are modulated by levels of alexithymia but not autism. *Brain*, *133*, 1515–1525. https://www.doi.org/10.1093/brain/awq060

frustrated with yourself without knowing it , it's like a cycle" Often, we assume anger is the primary emotion involved in the use of violence and it is common to hear young people who use violence referred to as *angry*! However, our observations from practice, show a richer picture, reflecting a more complicated and nuanced understanding about the role of emotions in young people's use of violence, as Ray describes; *"When you're angry at the world, you're angry at yourself, when you're angry at the world like, everything you think is about you and what you're thinking, I guess, about the world, but when you're screaming it out you're letting everyone know who you are and what you are, yeh ..."* " *like when you're angry I don't' think you're telling the full truth"* , " *... you sort of lie to yourself and everyone else around it"*

Invalidation

Invalidation is the process by which a person in a position of power ignores or disavows another person's lived experience and communication. Young people too often experience their interests, their hopes, their views, and their concerns not listened to or not taken seriously. What young people think, and who they are, is regularly invalidated. While this can happen at the interpersonal level, within family or with peers, it can also happen within services and systems they engage with. NNN practitioners have heard ways in which invalidation can play a multifaceted role in youth perpetrated violence. It can act as an antecedent to violence and when young people disclose experiences of abuse and trauma, if their experience is met with invalidation, it can intensify the original trauma[11] potentially leading to more violence. Through stories shared, young people in NNN have described their choice to use violence as a form of communication, to be-heard when they felt invalidated by systems. For example, young women reported feeling frustrated with workers who were not hearing or were judging them, such as telling the young women outright that they would they inevitably re-offend, and in response some of the young women would *"go on a riff"*, including actions such as shop lifting/stealing, assaulting someone, or doing a break and enter offence, contributing to the original prophecy of their caseworkers. Young people in NNN have also described using violence as a way of being-like family members and/or peers, and that in these situations their violence was validated and helped to form connections or bonds with others. As practitioners, we have witnessed invalidation playing a strong and evident role in the use of violence in interpersonal relationships for young women, but less so for young men. Young women we worked with commonly described the source of invalidation as other females. Kylie[12] (a young woman who participated in NNN) summarised this in her advice to us, that we should know *"a man will hurt you, but a woman will always let you down"*. Having a sense of being *"let down"* by other females included caseworkers, carers, teachers, family, and kin; however, was most referenced regarding mothers. Often young

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[11] Bollinger, J., Scott-Smith, S., & Mendes, P. (2017). How complex developmental trauma, residential out-of-home care and contact with the justice system intersect. *Children Australia, 42(*2), 108–112. https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2017.9
[12] Pseudonym.

women would describe their mums as being disinterested, unavailable or absent, sharing examples through their stories of being unheard or having their experiences and needs unmet or invalidated. This is in line with the work of Thompson and McGrath (2012)[13], which indicates that young women who use violence in their interpersonal relationships also have poor and broken relationships with a female caregiver, as well as having experienced erratic discipline in childhood. We not only heard and witnessed stories from young people about them not feeling seen and not being heard, as practitioners we directly experienced occasions where their lives were devalued, and their very real concerns about health and homelessness were dismissed and minimised by the workers and service structures put in place to support them. The results of these dismissals were negative, often leading to injury to others as young people reacted, using violence to communicate, and be heard, and often to feel a sense of connection- to their peers or with themselves. The sense of not feeling seen and heard extended to the production of invalidating assumptions about motivations of female violence with some practitioners indicating that female violence is less serious than male use of violence or that it is only ever used for self-defence purposes. While it is undoubtably true that self-defence may be one factor in the use of violence by young women, it is not the only reason young women use violence.

Empathy

A body of evidence consistently finds young people who use violence score lower on indices and tests of empathy than other young people[14] Meta-analysis suggests displaying less empathy may be linked to greater aggression, including violence[15] Robinson et al., (2007)[16], propose lower levels of empathy are associated with cognitive distortions (including hostile attributions and beliefs justifying the use, and efficacy of violence) and emotions (anger) that make aggression more likely. The authors also suggest that lower levels of empathy can interfere with young people finding and forming prosocial connections with non-aggressive peers, forcing them to associate with *antisocial* peers. These associations, often characterised as abrasive and unsatisfying, are argued to increase risk for more frequent and diverse antisocial behaviour. Other research suggests that the role of empathy in youth violence probably relates to

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[13] Thompson, A. P., & McGrath, A. (2012). Subgroup differences and implications for contemporary risk-need assessment with juvenile offenders. *Law and Human Behavior, 36*(4), 345–355. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0093930

[14] Broidy, L., Cauffman, E., Espelage, D. L., Mazerolle, P., & Piquero, A. (2003). Sex differences in empathy and its relation to juvenile offending. *Violence and victims*, *18*(5), 503-516. https://doi.org./10.1891/088667003780928143.

[15] Jolliffe, D., & Farrington, D. P. (2004). Empathy and offending: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 9*(5), 441–476. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2003.03.001

[16] Robinson, R., Roberts, W. L., Strayer, J., & Koopman, R. (2007). Empathy and emotional responsiveness in delinquent and non-delinquent adolescents. *Social Development, 16*(3), 555–579. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2007.00396.x

differences in how young people access and use cognitive strategies known to support empathy[17] . This might be especially true for young men, where it is suggested that difficulties appreciating emotional states of others and taking another's perspective can be associated with more frequent and reactive displays of anger and aggression[18]. One of the first observations we made as NNN practitioners was that young men and women engaged with empathy differently, but not always in the ways we would have expected. The narratives young men have shared in the NNN program indicated they could put themselves in the shoes of another and do reference back to their own experiences to inform their understanding of this (imagined) person's experience. An intriguing new learning for us was that doing so consistently evoked narratives of grief, loss, and sadness for young men. These narratives are often about being left out, left behind, missing out or missing a time when they weren't. We think these findings are important. While Lansing et al., (2018)[19] has reported on the disproportionate experience of grief among justice-involved young men, these findings relate more to bereavements, than cumulative loss associated with historical and intergenerational trauma, disadvantage, and disruptive change. To date, there has been little focus on exploring the role of grief and loss in youth violence. Young women, by contrast, appeared unable or unwilling to engage with activities exploring empathy for others, particularly other females. Our observations of how challenging it was for some young women to sit with and contemplate the experience of another, reminds us that at its core, empathy is a vulnerable making experience[20]. Contemplating empathy as 'putting yourself in someone else's shoes' young women we worked with often countered that *"you can't tell someone else's story,"* and made links between telling someone else's story and 'snitching', a serious social infraction, with real consequences for their safety. For these young women, the act of empathy, even symbolically, presented a personal risk and/or may have required a loosening of their tight hold on power and control in their relationships and interactions with others.

Power and Control

Power and control represent a pervasive context of our work with youth violence. Young people we have worked with in NNN demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the

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[17] Lauterbach, O., & Hosser, D. (2007). Assessing empathy in prisoners - A shortened version of the interpersonal reactivity index. *Swiss Journal of Psychology, 66*(2), 91-101. https://doi.org./10.1024/1421-0185.66.2.91.

[18] Van Langen, M. A., Wissink, I. B., Van Vugt, E. S., Van der Stouwe, T., & Stams, G. (2014). The relation between empathy and offending: A meta-analysis. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 19*(2), 179–189.

[19] Lansing, A. E., Plante, W. Y., Beck, A. N., & Ellenberg, M. (2018). Loss and grief among Persistently Delinquent Youth: The contribution of adversity indicators and psychopathy-spectrum traits to broadband internalizing and externalizing psychopathology. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *11*(3), 375–389. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-018-0209-9

[20] Stout, R., (2019). Empathy, vulnerability and anxiety, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 27* (2), 347-357. http://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2019.1612626

constructs and dynamic of power and control, its use, experience, and outcomes. In our work, narratives shared by young people suggested gendered experiences of power and control exist, underscored by differences in how power and control are discussed, and how the use and experience of power and control are understood. Young women we have worked with have described experiencing gender-based violence involving coercive control, threats, intimidation, and abuse; we haven't heard these same narratives from young men. This is consistent with evidence that suggests an almost unidirectional use of control and surveillance by young men toward young women. While young women recognised dynamics of power and control in gendered violence involving sexual coercion, these same dynamics were less recognised and less meaningful to young women as they related to financial coercion. For example, we observed some young women we worked with to be routinely 'hum-bugged' (the concept of what's yours is mine) or harassed by family members for cash on 'payday'. We did not observe this for young men. While noticeably annoyed by the intrusion on their time and space, young women appeared unsurprised and largely unperturbed by these frequent requests and insinuated obligation to share their money. Discussion indicated that from the young women's perspective, giving away money was an accepted reality where they also rarely got the money back. When practitioners reflected the difficulty of this situation, we were met with shrugs and comments like *"That's just the way it is"*. These findings resonate with Storer et al.'s (2020)[21] observation that young people can find it hard to distinguish between more subtle types of coercive control, but importantly and consistent with Edwards et al., (2022),[22] young people use cultural scripts to construct boundaries about what behaviours are permissible and, in turn, what constitutes 'real' violence or abuse.

The importance of cultural scripts in defining what is labelled (or mislabelled) as acceptable acts of power and control was similarly made apparent to us as practitioners as we witnessed female 'policing' of other women's behaviour in the community. On one occasion, practitioners, and young women on a photovoice excursion encountered a group of young men of a similar age. One of the young women, swore at the young men and told them in no uncertain terms to leave them alone. The young men hurried away, and between the incident occurring and the following week, they had shared details of the exchange with their female cousins, sisters, and friends, who sought out the young women, threatening retribution if they spoke to the young men in the same way again. This incident seemed to present as the monitoring of actions that could be described as

[21] Storer, H. L., Talan, A., Swiatlo, A., LeSar, K., Broussard, M., Kendall, C., & Madkour, A. S. (2020). Context matters: Factors that influence African American teens' perceptions and definitions of dating violence. *Psychology of Violence, 10*(1), 79–90.
[22] Edwards, C., Bolton, R., Salazar, M., Vives-Cases, C., & Daoud, N. (2022). Young people's constructions of gender norms and attitudes towards violence against women : A critical review of qualitative empirical literature, *Journal of Gender Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2119374.

staying or not staying in one's lane. Currie et al., (2007)[23], explains that within female peer culture, power comes from being able to invoke unspoken 'rules' that police the boundaries of what's acceptable behaviour and that young women's agency comes from a culturally mandated conception of girlhood or femininity. Among the many things that were interesting about this incident was that the young men knew that they could rely on the females in their lives to deal with female related interactions. Fine (1988)[24] perceives this as cultural duplicity, pointing out that while it may be young women who police the boundaries of what's deemed acceptable behaviour for other young women, they do so through a male gaze.

While it was apparent that young men undoubtedly benefit from this absolution of role and responsibility in female peer-on-peer violence, it was unclear to what extent they enacted active agency in this process. Indeed, the experience of working with young men on power and control and its role in youth violence was one of perplexing contrasts and contradictions bound up in complex intersections of heteronormative[25] and hegemonic masculinities[26] and contested dualities between having been exploited and exploiting others[27]. We note that young men we have worked with sometimes display outwardly negative gendered behaviours in group or more public settings that seem at odds with their behaviours in one-on-one interactions. This included graphic swearing and derogatory language toward women or comments that normalised violence toward women, like "*I'd hit her if she didn't do as she was told*" or group talk about it being ok for men to cheat on their partners but not for women to do the same. Yet, in one-on-one discussions one young man disclosed that loyalty was very important to him, disclosing how he could never cheat on this girlfriend, and many talked protectively and respectfully about their mothers, grandmothers, and sisters.

Shame

In our work in the Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) program, we see shame as a motivator for young people's use of violence, an impact of the experience of violence, and a form of violence in and of itself. In this way, shame, and responses to shame can be a compounding and cyclical experience for individuals and communities. Across the shame-related literature there is agreement that not all shame is the same. This can be

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[23] Currie, D.H., Kelly, D.M., & Pomerantz, S. (2007). The power to squash people: Understanding girls' relational aggression, *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 28* (1), 23-37. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690600995974.

[24] Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: the missing discourse of desire, Harvard Educational Review, 58(1), 29–53.

[25] Totten, M. (2000). *Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse,* Broadview Press.

[26] Barter, C. (2009). In the Name of Love: Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Dating Relationships, *British Journal of Social Work, 39,* 211–32

[27] Ringrose, J., & Renold, E. (2011). Boys, Girls and Performing Normative Violence in Schools: A Gendered Critique of Bully Discourses, in C. Barter and D. Berridge (Eds.), *Children Behaving Badly? Peer Violence Between Children and Young People,* (pp 158-197). John Wiley & Sons

boiled down to a difference between feelings a person has about what they have *done*, compared with feelings about who they *are*. In our work with both young women and young men, it has not been uncommon to hear them recount actions that place them at risk of harm or serious legal consequences, to avoid shame or 'loss of face'. Often this involves stepping up or stepping in to defend others, demonstrate allegiance and define their identity as 'part of' or 'like'. The repercussions of this for young people we've worked with can be involvement (or escalation of their involvement) with the justice system, which can then be associated with further stigma and shame. Practice experience with NNN has helped us to see important parallels between young men's and young women's relationship with shame, as well as some significant differences. For both young men and young women that we have worked with culture and contexts of marginalisation and disadvantage commonly frame the words used as weapons of shame. While some young men referenced sexualised slurs as known and familiar ways of enacting shame, this was more common for young women. Almost all young women we have worked with report their first experiences of shame as either a sexual slur, or a combination of a racial and sexual slur. Young women reported that they experienced these from the time they started school. Connected with crime, but with a heavier gaze toward notions of betrayal or cowardice, young women consistently report that the worst word used to enact shame is "snitch". Even symbolically the idea of snitching was serious and threatening and associated with significant (anticipated) shame.

Concerningly for us we also saw systems and supports use shame to connect notions of criminality with young women's identity. We saw both untrained and highly trained practitioners openly make witnessed comments to young women about their future actions linked to either their past justice-involvement or that of their family e.g., "*Oh don't worry, next time you get charged you'll have me again*" (intimating a future likelihood that the young woman would get charged again) ... or "*at least you're doing better than your mum, by the time she was your age*" ...). What was more troubling was that these examples, which amount to shaming, were enacted by women, in relational ways. In both instances (and there were other examples) the relation between the young woman and the practitioner was inferred and referenced familiarity with the young woman's history and likely future. This (false) relationality conferred mixed messages for the young women, with it being common for them to not see this as problematic and as genuine affection or positive regard. At face value these findings sit at odds with other reflections that young women we have worked with are hypersensitive to perceived potential for threat from other women. Yet we wonder, if perhaps they also reflect the power of perceived connection, and how powerful this can be in the context of unmet needs for female support

The vast majority of young people we have worked with identify that shame stops them from doing things, trying new things, joining with others and communicating their feelings, needs and desires. In conversations with Ray a young man involved with NNN, he reflected deeply on the role shame plays in young people's anger and violence, noting "*when you're angry at the world, you're angry at yourself, when you're angry at the world like, everything you think is about you and what you're thinking, I guess, about the world,*

but when you're screaming it out you're letting everyone know who you are and what you are, yeh" "like when you're angry I don't' think you're telling the full truth" , "you sort of lie to yourself and everyone else around it" He continued …. *"People can feel the shame in what they wear, how they act, how other people act, what other people wear, they can feel shame in a lot of things" "Mainly, like you feel shame when you're either angry with yourself, or arguing with someone, you realise it but, yeh, no you have more shame and like the anger is pushing that out. It's like the shame you see not anger".*

Choice

Our work in NNN has given us a lot of pause to contemplate how we've come to understand the interconnection between choice and change. Choice is a particularly powerful notion in work with youth violence. Despite a growing understanding of the multiple, dynamic, and contextualised factors that contribute to youth violence, the underpinning narrative of violence as a conscious and directed choice remains persuasive. This framing of youth violence has been suggested to have its roots in the general theory of crime and remains persuasive perhaps because it supports discrete, rather than diffuse, attributions of blame for what is a deeply troubling phenomenon. There's a sense of certainty, predictability and safety in a worldview built around such attributions, but the inevitability of associated scapegoating can raise tricky questions about how we tackle choice in our work with youth violence, especially when we recognise that young people who use violence, have often also experienced violence. If we consider our work with youth violence to be motivated by goals of desistance, and we assume that involves change, then ultimately, we are challenged to consider, "How do people change?", and relatedly, "What is the role of choice in change toward desistance?"

NNN, like all interventions for youth violence, at their core, hopes to stimulate change and assist young people to move toward more adaptive (and socially acceptable) ways of being and doing. Stein and Markus (1996)[28], suggest that successful and sustained change usually involves a corresponding change in our sense of self and our identity. Understandings of young people's identity tend to conceptualise it as a dynamic process involving conceptions of our current self, what we were like in the past, and our hopes and fears about what we will be like in the future, shaped by feedback from our interactions with others and with the systems and structures of society. Adolescence is a critical period for the contemplation of *possible future selves*, or ideas about ourselves in the future, reflecting our aspirations, expectations, and concerns. Possible selves are thought to motivate us toward change and growth. Studies have found justice-involved young people report fewer possible selves and are less likely to endorse positive possible

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[28] Stein, K.F., and Markus, H.R., (1996). The role of the self in behavioral change. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 6*(4), 349-384.

selves compared to non-justice involved peers[29]. Reasons for this may relate to whether justice-involved young people perceive they need to change and how central the use of violence is to their identity[30]. If youth violence is central to a young person's self-concept, changing the problem means restructuring of the identity as well, if on the other hand, youth violence is not seen as central to the young person's self-concept then they may change the problem without changing their identity .Whether young people perceive violence as central and/or a problematic aspect of their identity may also reflect the messages they receive through feedback from social interaction. Any possible or alternative selves we envisage for ourselves will be shaped by the perceived value of alternative identities, and the probability of achieving them according to what we've learned in our social world. In this way, social contexts can either be empowering or undermining of aspirations, growth, and change such that where possible future selves feel too far away, or too out of reach they are less likely to motivate people's actions toward change.

Young people in NNN have shared with us rich narratives of their experiences that refute stereotypes of youth violence as a homogeneous or unitary construct. These narratives also generally reject notions of young people's use of violence as typically mindless, unthinking, or unconsidered. Reflecting on work with young men in detention, there was uniform agreement with the idea that it is a choice to use violence. For some young people, their use of violence and/or their subsequent justice-involvement has sat uncomfortably with their sense of self or how they wish to be perceived by others. When mapping the words commonly described as the first worst and last to occasion shame for these young men, criminal was listed as the worst and last (most recent) by many. These observations of contradictory behaviour and shifting presentations of self - align with ideas of how we can enact different 'selves' in various situations, and how the situated self is shaped by and toward the different situations we find ourselves in. We observe young people we work with who have made changes toward desistance have often done so in the context of different relationship choices involving distancing or disassociating themselves from peers involved in criminal activity. There has been both loss in the gain and gain in the loss. One young woman who had gone on to find independent accommodation, complete educational qualifications, enter the workforce and start a family, lamented often missing the connections she once had and was noted by her former caseworkers to still 'call to check in'. While the identity shift to partner,

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[29] Oyersman, D., & Fryberg, S. (2004). The possible selves of diverse adolescents: Content and function across gender, race and national origin,. In C. Dunkel & K. Kerpelman (Eds.), *Possible selves: Theory, research, and applications* (pp. 17-39). Nova Science Publishers.
[30] Dunkel, C.S., Kelts, D., & Coon, B. (2004). Possible selves as mechanisms of change in therapy In C. Dunkel & K. Kerpelman (Eds.), *Possible selves: Theory, research, and applications* (pp. 187-204). Nova Science Publishers.

worker and mother for this young woman seems outwardly complete, there were ties to her former life that seemed to offer reassurance and without which her new identity may have seemed less stable. This observation gave us pause to consider the tension between narratives of connection and independence for young people in transitioning to new identities. The desire to be seen as self-made, self-reliant, and self-determining was common among many of the young people we have worked with, and striking out independently was common in their achieving desistance. Yet, we reflect that the human need for connection is also critical in sustaining change and, wonder how practice best supports not only possible future selves, but also possible future connection.

WORKFORCE ISSUES

The NNN program was informed by pilot research[31] involving conversations with practitioners across sectors of health, justice, policing, education, out of home care, mental health, youth work, Aboriginal led services, and housing. This work identified practitioner concern that youth violence was increasing, and that needs for available, accessible, and appropriate responses went unmet, especially in regional, rural and remote communities. A corresponding unmet need was also reported for training to support trauma-informed and culturally responsive work with young people who use and experience violence.

The implications of a lack of service offers, and gaps in workforce support is perhaps experienced, with the greatest intensity in regional, rural and remote schools. Violence used by young people accounts for upwards of 40% of harm occasioned to children and young people. In 2022, NSW Police laid charges against 2964 young people aged 10-13yrs, most commonly for violence related offences. Young people from regional, rural, and remote areas and particularly Aboriginal children were charged more often at younger ages and with more violent offences than urban peers. The vast majority of these children had also experienced violence themselves. Almost 90% received no intervention, returning to schools without appropriate training and support to deliver interventions to meet their complex needs, exacerbating the risk of them being disengaged from education. School-based interventions for violence among young people include respectful relationship education and life skills programs. While associated with promising outcomes these programs lack responsivity to experiences of developmental, intergenerational, and cultural trauma. Further, because they are delivered by external staff, they typically do not achieve the cultural shift in knowledge and practices necessary to address the known pipeline from disengagement with school to the criminal justice system.

Our observation is that when practitioners talk about their work there is a palpable sense that young people who use and experience violence were at once known and unknown. While, research and practice knowledge about young people who use violence is

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[31] Ibid #6, #7.

extensive, it still strikes us, that we know little from the perspectives of these young people themselves and that often our systems of service and support so often silence their voices. This seems quite different to how policy and practice has engaged with consumer led responses to mental health and addiction, and we wonder whether this relates to a growing awareness that youth violence is too complex to categorise as an illness or disorder. What has become clear to us in our work with justice-involved young people is that they often feel invalidated in their interactions with practitioners, systems, and structures where apriorist agendas regarding crime and prevention preclude them from being seen for who they are, what they know and what they need[32]

We see this discord mirrored by youth violence interventions that seek to build young people's capacities for empathy, with limited reference to empathy-led, connection-based design. In our practice we observe connection as an often a fraught experience for justice-involved youth, frequently marred by interpersonal and intergenerational trauma as well as structural and systemic disadvantage and disengagement. We see empathy as a bridge between how young people see and think about themselves and how they see and think about others in relation to themselves. Yet, we don't often see this reciprocated in practice approaches seeking to bolster empathy. Our hunch is empathy in the lives of young people who use violence deserves a much richer narrative that captures the intersubjective experience of both knowing and being known.

Our learnings from NNN highlight that practice with youth violence is complex. We think contributing to this complexity is the fact that the challenges faced by practitioners seem to exist almost symbiotically with experiences of young people who use and experience violence. Just as violence entered the lives of young people long before they ever used violence against others and the legacy of traumas, they live with are never far from the surface. We think that this may well be the case for us as practitioners too. That is, practitioners may have had their own life experiences with violence, trauma, and vulnerability and may experience their own voices silenced in many contexts, their own options limited, and their own actions controlled. Despite being well intentioned and invested, skilled and experienced, practitioners' narratives show signs that this work takes its toll. This is sometimes articulated as cynicism, detachment and despondency about the experiences and likely outcomes for young people. We wonder in these contexts whether practitioners experience secondary or vicarious trauma in their work, or whether what we are observing is an almost parallel process for practitioners and their clients, with both wanting to be heard yet lacking an authentic and safe common language.

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[32] Fasulo, S. J., Ball, J. M., Jurkovic, G. J., & Miller, A. L. (2015). Towards the Development of an Effective Working Alliance: The Application of DBT Validation and Stylistic Strategies in the Adaptation of a Manualized Complex Trauma Group Treatment Program for Adolescents in Long-Term Detention. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 69(2), 219–239. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2015.69.2.219

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We found have that a shift in practice approach and perspective is important, recognising the limited effectiveness of existing programs and the need for a new ethics in practice. The NNN way of working intentionally merges the neuroscience of trauma with reflexive and relational practice, grounded in an ethic of care, shared power, and reciprocity, consistent with Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing. Key to this the indivisible nature of trauma informed and culturally safe practice, especially when working with Aboriginal young people. In our experience there is both a need for, and good engagement with, the prospect of working in this way. Practitioners, services, and interventions are working hard to integrate understanding of trauma and culturally competent practice, as well as to have culturally informed adaptations of programs available.

We see that there is an appetite for extending, improving, and deepening practice in these areas to more fully realise the power of these approaches. We hope the NNN makes a contribution in this domain. Integral to the development and continuous improvement of NNN is that Aboriginal knowledges and ways of doing are respected and foregrounded in the program, for *all* young people, not just those of Aboriginal heritage. Sitting alongside this is a broader body of work that has focussed on how we strengthen self-awareness, self-regulation, and skills for connection in practice to increase capacity for work that is relational, reciprocal, and balanced in power. Our work with practitioners in this regard has taken the form of intensive, immersive, short- and longer-term training scaffolding trauma awareness, the NNN way of working with youth violence and latterly, managing the impacts of working with and alongside violence, abuse, and trauma. There is more work to do in this space. We look forward to expanding delivery of the NNN program across regional NSW to meet the needs of young people who demonstrate harmful sexual behaviour, culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBTQIA+ youth, young people with a disability and parents, carers and kin impacted by experiences of violence, abuse, and trauma.

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