

Executive Summary

Multi-agency working: a mixed-method pilot study of the relationships between road traffic collisions, accidental dwelling fires and youth unemployment



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The aim of this pilot study was to explore the relationships between road traffic collisions (RTCs), accidental dwelling fires (ADFs) and youth unemployment among young people, aged 16-24. The study was conducted over three-months in the Birmingham electoral wards of Washwood Heath and Sheldon and Elmdon in Solihull. The Future Melting Pot led the research in conjunction with Birmingham City University, Birmingham City Council, West Midlands Fire Service, West Midlands Police, KPMG, RoSPA, RBS, Jaguar Land Rover and Talent Match. The study relied on an action research approach and mixed-methods data collection, which included questionnaires, semi-structured and focus group interviews and community listening events. The backdrop of the research was to lay the foundations for a broader study across the West Midlands.

The study found that challenging youth behaviours associated with RTCs, ADFs and patterns of youth unemployment required approaches that embraced young people's cultural identity, forms of self-expression and flexible enforcement practices. At present, there appears to be a one-size-fits-all model for tackling RTCs, ADFs and unemployment among young people, but this was having only limited success. RTCs continue to be the biggest killer of young people, aged 16-24, and youth unemployment has become entrenched on average doubling the UK's unemployment rate. Moreover, each fatal road accident costs UK taxpayers an estimated £2,005,664 and even a slight injury accident is put at £24,194 (Department for Transport (DfT) 2016). Latest figures show each fire related fatality was estimated at £1.65m and each serious injury cost around £185,000 (Department for Communities and Local Government 2011). Each young person, who experiences a period of NEET (not in employment, education or training), was estimated to cost the economy around £50,000 over the course of their lifetime (Impetus Private Equity Foundation 2014). With such staggering human, health and financial costs, reducing the burden of RTCs, ADFs and youth unemployment is an on-going critical objective of government and statutory agencies. Although policies are primarily determined by national government, their operation is often localised with responsibilities falling on agencies such as the police, fire service and local authorities.

Studies show that the underlying causes of RTCs, ADFs and youth unemployment were rooted in poverty and social deprivation (Maguire 2013, Thompson and Wales 2014 and Hastie and Searle 2016). However, this pilot research finds that these factors were being heightened by contributory causal factors such as young people's cultural identity, their desire to express themselves and rigid enforcement regimes operated by statutory agencies. The findings indicate that the car and driving have become ingrained in the cultural fabric of some West Midlands' communities with youths becoming addicted to driving from as young as nine. By 15 they had been transformed into hardened street racers motivated by the bravado and thrill portrayed in films such as the street racing series '*Fast & Furious*'. For some, being chased by the police was a rite of passage. Desperate to live-up to onscreen fantasies, many were prepared to '*ride or die*' to

emulate the film's epithet.

In the Washwood Heath area of Birmingham, the problem appears particularly pronounced. The ward has more than three times as many RTC casualties compared to areas such as Sheldon and Edmdon. The district accounts for nearly half of the 165 RTC casualties in the Hodge Hill constituency over the year ending November 2016. The majority of the people involved were young Asian males. While people from all backgrounds are involved in RTCs, research has shown that people of BME origin in low socio-economic areas, particularly Asian British, report relatively high casualty rates (Christie et al. 2010, RoSPA 2012 and Steinbach et al. 2016). Eighty seven per cent of locals in Washwood Heath are of BME origin (Pakistanis account for 57 per cent). The entire population lives in the 20 per cent most deprived areas in England and 90 per cent live in the five per cent most deprived districts in the country (Birmingham City Council 2015).

The Washwood Heath driving statistics bolster wider research, which showed that the Hodge Hill constituency has one of the highest casualty rates for RTCs in Birmingham (Birmingham City Council 2016). Moreover, it substantiates the prevalence of risky driving behaviours in the district. Of the 98 drivers with motor racing type MS50¹ DVLA endorsement on their licence in Britain, five are in the B8 postcode covering Washwood Heath and Saltley, the highest of any postcode in the UK. The over-representation of young Asian males in RTCs in places such as Washwood Heath reinforces evidence of the increasing portrayal of the car and driving as representations of social mobility, consumption and cultural markers in the community among particular groups. This can be seen at weddings, one of the most pre-eminent activities in the Asian community, which have become occasions to showcase flash cars and braggadocious driving. Moreover, research participants suggest there was pressure to have drivers in Asian families. However, while this convergence of the car and driving, particularly with Muslim identity, was seen as contributing to an increase in RTC casualties among young Asian males, there was limited recognition of this cultural dimension in road safety measures and campaigns.

Such efforts include the Department for Transport's (DfT) (2011) £6 million pound 'Streets Ahead on Safety' traffic-calming scheme covering parts of Washwood Heath. The DfT has admitted that this project did not have the desired effect due to ineffective community engagement, particularly with hard-to-reach groups, and limited cultural awareness of local people and their concerns (ibid 2011). At the same time, enforcement frameworks such as West Midlands Police's 'Fatal 5' are based on 'excess speed, dangerous driving, use of mobile phones/electronic devices, failure to wear seatbelts and drink or drugs'. However, cultural factors or the diverse communities served by the force are not represented. Similarly, Birmingham Road Safety Partnership,

¹ Penalty for MS50 DVLA motor racing on the highway endorsement is 3-11 penalty points, which stays on driving records for four years and makes car insurance more expensive.

which operates a 'safe system' approach, borrowed from countries such as New Zealand, conceded that people from BME backgrounds living in deprived inner city areas of Birmingham, were at a higher risk of being involved in an RTC (Birmingham City Council 2016). However, the partnership does not record data in relation to ethnicity, which means there was little evidence of the extent of the problem in those communities disproportionately affected by RTCs. Studies have shown that the unavailability of such data limits understanding of the factors that influence the safety behaviours of BMEs (Christie et al. 2008).

Correspondingly, ethnicity data was only recorded for fire injuries, but not for fire incidents. The findings of this show that White Northern Europeans were the minority population in Washwood Heath, yet have the highest number of ADF casualties. The study argues that anomalies such as these might be missed if ethnicity was not recorded for casualties and incidents. Dean et al. (2016) have argued that cultural group specific data can inform community and fire prevention approaches aimed at the particular types of fire injury risk that is apposite to each group.

Although unemployment among young people in Washwood Heath was decreasing, the numbers as a percentage of the population was higher than for Elmdon and Sheldon, and almost twice the national average. Pettinger (2012) has argued that youth unemployment was often highest among deprived areas where there was pessimism over job prospects. Moreover, young people who have a history of broken families, drug use or criminal record often found it difficult to find work. The findings of the study indicate that a number of young people had gained criminal records in relation to car crimes in particular. Moreover, in the study's survey responses, a higher proportion of unemployed young people admitted driving above the speed limit and driving without insurance than their peers, who worked full and part time or were students.

In line with previous research, this study supports calls for tailored interventions that were appropriate to each specific group of young people facing issues relating to RTCs, ADFs and youth employment. This should be aided by data collection methods that reflect the cultural identity of young people and include measures that preference their interpretation of the problems they face. Moreover, it argues that cultural appropriate ways and means of communicating should be incorporated into fire and road safety campaigns and practices so that all groups are reached and ADFs and RTCs can be addressed in a systemic way by organisations responsible for fire and road safety. Furthermore, there should be greater consideration of organisations such as The Future Melting Pot in playing a bridging role as part of a multi-agency approach to establishing and implementing measures to overcome youth unemployment, ADFs and RTCs.

While the relative sample size of the research lessened its statistical significance, the study nevertheless offers indications and directions that may yield further insights. Moreover, limited resources and time constraints meant restricted data collection, which could have produced more information and therefore greater scrutiny of the

problems faced by young people in Elmdon and Sheldon compared to those in Washwood Heath. For example, it would have been interesting to have conducted a community listening exercise in the Elmdon and Sheldon areas. However, the information provided by this pilot study can inform and, perhaps, consolidate the work of the various stakeholders involved in road and fire safety provisions and those working to alleviate youth unemployment. More significantly, it is hoped the research findings will encourage greater consideration of factors such as ethnicity in data collection, community engagement and partnership working. This could make an important contribution, not only in terms of data sharing and best practices, but also, in an age of budget cuts, could lead to a more proficient use of resources.

Recommendations of the study

- Information about ethnicity should be recorded for fire injuries and fire incidents and for RTC KSIs to help inform more targeted interventions.
- Cultural appropriate ways and means of communicating should be incorporated into fire and road safety campaigns so that all groups are reached and ADFs and RTCs are addressed in a systemic way by organisations responsible for fire and road safety.
- Further research to explore the relationship between ethnicity, ADFs and RTCs risks within the fire service, police and local authority command areas to better inform decision making processes.
- Greater support for schemes such as graduated driver licensing programmes and use of digital technologies such as driving simulators, which are aimed at reducing RTCs involving young people.
- Wider use of exercises such as community listening so that the views of young people, communities and groups can be incorporated into the development of interventions to tackle youth unemployment, ADFs and RTCs.
- Greater consideration of organisations such as The Future Melting Pot in playing a bridging role as part of a multi-agency approach to establishing and implementing measures to overcome youth unemployment, ADFs and RTCs.

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STATEMENT OF SUPPORT – THE FUTURE MELTING POT

I would like to thank and encourage The Future Melting Pot for attention to the issue of safety among disadvantaged youth. As a road safety researcher for the past two decades, I notice the field is quick to highlight decreasing trends in the involvement of youth in road crash fatalities over this time, but the reality is that this decrease is much skewed.

Looking in-depth at the statistics in Sydney and the state of New South Wales in Australia, it became clear that the downward trend was only found in urban areas, not regional and rural areas, and that there was no gain in closing the gap between the much higher level of road trauma experienced by lower socioeconomic youth compared to higher socioeconomic youth. I suspect the same is likely in other jurisdictions and countries as we focus on the “average” majority of drivers and crash problems.

Road safety is multifaceted and complex and while education alone will not reverse all crash problems, it is an important piece of the puzzle. Meaningful analysis of good quality data can help us to identify key issues to prioritise for attention and subgroups of youth who might be most at-risk. Detangling complex contributors to behaviour, intentional and unintentional, can help guide support programs for prevention.

Engaging and involving the wider community in prevention programs, not just youth, offers a promising approach to reducing road trauma. Community members have an important role simply by modelling safe driving and therefore establishing safe driving choices as community norms. In reality, the most common types of crashes involving young drivers are not that different to those of more experienced drivers. The difference is that more experienced drivers are better able to anticipate and avoid crashes or respond in time to reduce the severity of unavoidable crashes – by virtue of their experience. Therefore, many community and road initiatives that target young driver crashes can also further reduce experienced driver crashes.

I wish The Future Melting Pot all the best in their endeavours to improving youth and community road safety and safety more broadly.

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