~~No knives~~
Better lives

Imagine a Man:

What is it like to be a boy or young man in Scotland in 2021?

#ImagineAMan

YouthLink Scotland
The national agency for youth work

Contents

Executive summary 3

About No Knives, Better Lives 5

About the research 6

What are the stereotypes and assumptions about being a boy or young man in Scotland? 10

Prevalence of risk-taking behaviour 15

Routes to positive masculinity through community and relationships 19

Support for boys and young men to explore masculinity 21

Support for practitioners working with boys and young men 25

Ideal future for boys and young men in Scotland 26

Conclusion 28

Recommendations 30

Annex 1 – Information about young people in the focus groups 31

Executive summary

In 2021 as part of the **No Knives, Better Lives** programme, **YouthLink Scotland** explored what it is like to be a boy or young man in Scotland today. The purpose of the research was to develop and deepen our understanding of how young people feel about masculinity and growing up.

Lots of young people took part in our research and we were a little surprised at the high level of interest. This showed us that this is an important subject and young people really wanted to talk about it.

A total of **1230 young people across Scotland completed a survey, 25 young people took part in focus groups and 5 adult practitioners** (adults who work with young people) **were interviewed**. The themes explored included stereotypes and expectations, risky behaviour, community and relationships, ideal futures and support needed to explore masculinity.

1230
Total Survey Participants

25
Focus Group Participants

5
Practitioners Interviewed

Because violence is predominantly a male experience (as they are much more likely than women to be both perpetrators and victims of violent acts) we wanted to find out when, where and who could make a positive intervention. We also wanted to find out, from boys and young men themselves, how they reflected on the pressures to conform to gender stereotypes and how this impacted on them as individuals. Therefore, this report addresses, primarily, the male experience of violence and analyses their understanding of risk and protective factors.

Based on existing evidence we expected boys and young men to tell us that their experiences were a story of conforming to negative stereotypes, feeling inhibited about asking for support, which might show them up as being 'weak' and of anger management and risk-taking behaviours escalating due to peer pressure. We were 'mostly' wrong.

The story we heard, from all genders, was a much more positive and complicated one. It is true that boys and young men do feel cultural and societal pressures to conform to stereotypes, but they are very aware of this. In our survey, boys and young men, from very diverse backgrounds were able to reflect on their experience and demonstrate a really deep awareness of what constituted undue 'negative' pressure.

Boys and young men demonstrated that they placed great value on what in the past have been considered to be 'feminine' traits, such as being caring. They were also aware of pressures to behave negatively and what constituted these pressures.

The survey showed that **boys were more likely than girls to engage in risk taking behaviours** that could be seen as pre-cursors to an escalation to violence. **However, many did not**. Culture change and social norms are inextricably linked and the signs there are very encouraging.

Boys and young men demonstrated a willingness to talk about their feelings but, they were often thwarted in this by lack of space or relevant people willing to create and facilitate this space. Practitioners shared with us their lack of knowledge and confidence in talking about masculinity, but acknowledged that it was necessary and important to their work. This seems to indicate that there is a gap to create practitioner resources to help practitioners feel more confident in discussing masculinity.

This research prompts us all to change the way we frame discussions about masculinity and its relationship with violence. We hear a lot about a version of problematised masculinity sometimes referred to as 'toxic' masculinity. This is not the way we want to start the discussion about behaviour and gender stereotypes and, falls into the negative trope of seeing men as a problem to be fixed.

From our discussions with all young people from all genders, the problem is not with individuals but with a lack of space, place and person to talk through these things. Growing up without these discussions and with antisocial behaviour as the cultural norm at home and in the community, is where things get trickier for boys and young men. It's there where we need practitioners to hold these discussions about what constitutes a positive masculinity and create those safe spaces to talk openly to young people.

In summary, here's what we can conclude:

What it's like to be a boy or young man in Scotland in 2021 is more positive than expected, because:

- Though some gender expectations existed, boys and young men on the whole were not defined by them and were reflective about their impact
- Just over half of boys and young men were taking part in risky behaviour but did not feel pressured by their friends to do so
- The majority would share their worries with an adult in their life.

For a positive future for boys and young men:

- They were seeking stability and security for their futures through owning their own homes, gaining financial stability and having a partner or being married
- They would like everyone to be equal and not to have stereotypes about what it is to be a boy or young man in Scotland.

Creating a culture for masculinity to flourish would include:

- Safe spaces for young people to explore and understand masculinity
- A move away from binary notions of gender to viewing gender on a spectrum
- Sharing more positive stories of masculinity
- More funding for youth work as a safe space to have these discussions
- Adult role models for boys and young men to learn about positive masculinity including from women in their lives.

About No Knives, Better Lives

The No Knives, Better Lives programme is funded by Scottish Government and delivered by YouthLink Scotland (the national agency for youth work in Scotland).

No Knives, Better Lives is a knife carrying prevention programme that explores and responds to the causes of knife carrying and violence in Scotland. Their approach to prevention is informed by the principles and values of youth work and a public health approach to violence prevention. This means they focus on supporting young people to understand and deal with risk, and to make positive life choices.

For more information visit noknivesbetterlives.com

About the research

No Knives, Better Lives wanted to better understand what it is like to be a boy or young man in Scotland. The reason for this, was to develop and deepen our understanding of how young people feel about masculinity and growing up.

The research took place between April 2021 and December 2021. The questions we wanted to explore included:

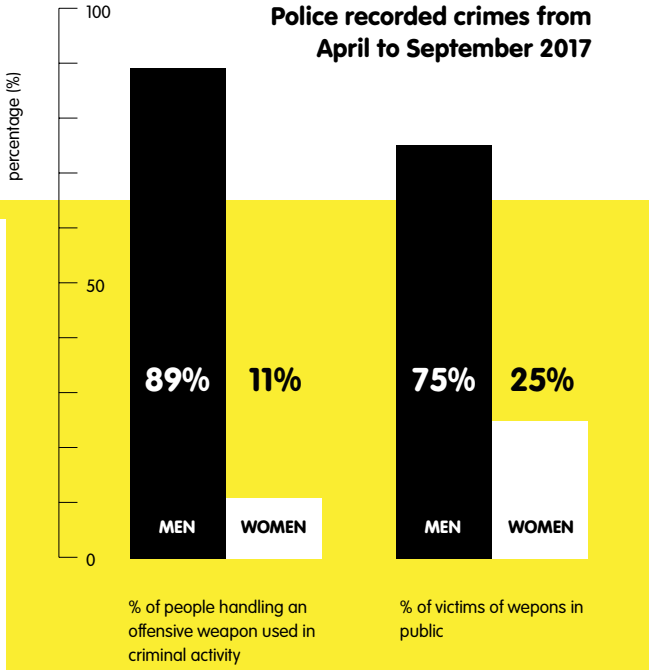
- What are the stereotypes and expectations about being a boy or young man in Scotland?
- How prevalent is violence and risk-taking behaviour amongst boys and young men?
- What does an 'ideal' future look like for boys and young men in Scotland?

Through exploring these questions, this research aims to move away from viewing boys and young men as a problem, to exploring the route to positive masculinity. Looking at an 'ideal' future will help us to understand some possible ideas and solutions to support boys and young men to be their best selves. This is important to ensure that boys and young men contribute positively to their communities.

What do the experts say?

What we know is that men are more likely to be both the perpetrators and victims of violent acts, including knife crimes. In 2017, **89% of people handling an offensive weapon which was used in other criminal activity, were men**. We also know that men are more likely to be victims of knife crimes. Again, in 2017, **75% of victims of weapons in public were male**. So, men are more likely to carry knives and be the victims of it.

This is also true for boys. Research, as part of The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, found that knife carriers were more likely to be male at aged 13 (74%) and aged 16 (70%)[1]. Another study of 12 year olds, as part of Growing Up in Scotland in 2019[2], found boys were more likely than girls (40% compared with 21%) to self-report that they have been involved in at least one of the activities listed as being anti-social behaviour (e.g. carrying a knife, using force, threats or a weapon to get money or something else from somebody, hit, kicked or punched someone with the intention of hurting or injuring them etc.).



An obvious question is, **why are boys and young men more likely to carry knives, and take part in other risk taking behaviours?** The answer is not so straightforward. Studies such as The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime[3] suggest some factors might include lack of parental guidance, feeling socially isolated, poor self-esteem and risk of self-harm. Poverty and deprivation are also acknowledged as underlying factors that need to be tackled in any intervention strategies. Research called The Man Box[4] which took place in the US, UK and Mexico in 2017 found that too many young men believed being a 'real man' included binge drinking, dangerous driving, and putting themselves and others at risk.

1. McVie, S. (2010). Gang Membership and Knife Carrying: Findings from The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime. https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/237487/SMcVie.pdf
2. Scottish Government. (2019). Growing Up in Scotland: Life at Age 12. Growing up in Scotland: life at age 12 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
3. McVie, S. (2010). Gang Membership and Knife Carrying: Findings from The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime. https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/237487/SMcVie.pdf
4. Heilman, B, Barker, G and Harrison, A. (2017). The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK and Mexico. Promundo.

This idea of being a 'real man' is also connected to the idea of **toxic masculinity**. Toxic masculinity involves the pressure some men face to act in harmful ways[5]. This includes being tough, anti-femininity (not showing emotions or asking for help) and seeking social and financial power. Research has shown that men who buy into traditional views of masculinity had a more negative view of seeking mental health support[6].

We also shouldn't underestimate the impact that trauma can have on boys and young men. Ross Deuchar[7] talks about this in his book about gangs and spirituality in 2018. Men in Scotland shared during interviews that loss, bereavement, abusive relationships with alcohol/drug dependent and vulnerable parents had led them to being in care (p. 125). Research explored by Deuchar (2018, p. 125-6) shows the connection between young people growing up in care and becoming involved in crime.

Work with boys and young men

It's clear that there are some links between masculinity and taking part in risky and criminal behaviour. But, what work has been happening to address this?

In 2021 Police Scotland launched the **'That Guy'**[8] campaign which aimed to urge men to take responsibility for ending sexual violence. The advert, which featured in the campaign, aims to appeal to men to 'don't be that guy' and to take responsibility for their language and actions to help create a culture change in tackling sexual violence against women.

There are other good examples such as the **Bystander Approach**[9], which aims to change social norms and call out sexist behaviour. **The Good Lad Initiative**[10] also promotes positive masculinity. It encourages boys and young men to contribute to improving gender relations.

The No Knives, Better Lives programme has been really successful in helping to reduce serious violence. They do this through raising awareness of the negative consequences that violent behaviour had on the victim and their family and friends. But, Holligan and McLean (2018[11]) point out that No Knives, Better Lives has not really included "non-violent kind of masculinity, containing pro-social values of citizenship" (p. 12). This is what we wanted to try and address through this research.

What we did?

Past research clearly shows concerns about boys and young men's risky behaviours. In our research we wanted to look at the issues slightly differently. The focus of No Knives, Better Lives is prevention and so we wanted to better understand why boys and young men become involved in risk taking behaviour. To do this, we explored what it is like for boys and young men in Scotland today in terms of stereotypes and expectations, risky behaviour and community and relationships. We also wanted to explore what a positive future for boys and young men in Scotland would look like.

To explore these issues, a Researcher from YouthLink Scotland led on conducting the research. This involved inviting experts including young people to join a Steering Group that would provide advice on the different stages of the research.

Members of the group included:

- **Dr Amy Calder** – YouthLink Scotland (The Researcher)
- **Vicki Ridley** – YouthLink Scotland, No Knives, Better Lives
- **Professor Ross Deuchar** – University West of Scotland
- **Sue Brookes** – Scottish Prison Service
- **Colin MacFarlane** – YMCA
- **Dr Emma Davidson** – University of Edinburgh
- **Gavin Crosby** – Young Scot
- **Abdul Mirza** – Young Person
- **Callum O'Brien** – Young Person

Our approach to exploring gender

Our approach to the research has been to try and be as inclusive as possible. This included using language such as 'grown up male' when advertising for young people to join our steering group who could provide their personal perspective of masculinity. The survey questions were worded to ensure that all young people could share views and could self-identify their gender. In the focus groups we heard from a diverse range of young people's voices. This report reflects the diversity of the voices. We are grateful to LGBT Youth Scotland for providing advice and support during this research.

5. What is Toxic Masculinity? https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-toxic-masculinity-5075107
6. Yousaf, O., Popat, A., & Hunter, M. S. An investigation of masculinity attitudes, gender, and attitudes toward psychological help-seeking. Psychology of Men & Masculinity. 2015;16(2), 234–237. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036241
7. Deuchar, R. (2018) Gangs and Spirituality: Global Perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Police Scotland. (2021). Police Scotland launches new campaign urging men to call time on sexual crime. https://www.scotland.police.uk/what-s-happening/news/2021/october/police-scotland-launches-new-campaign-urging-men-to-call-time-on-sexual-crime
9. https://www.mvpstrat.com/the-bystander-approach/
10. https://www.goodladinitiative.com/our-mission-1
11. Holligan, C and McLean, R. (2018). Violence as an environmentally warranted norm amongst working-class teenage boys in Glasgow. Social Sciences, 7 (207), 1-14.

Survey

A survey was used to try and hear from as many young people from across Scotland aged 11-25 as possible. 1230 young people completed the survey. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the young people who completed the survey. Its shows how many young people completed based on their gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, disability, deprivation levels where they live, care experience and criminal justice experience. Every question in the survey was optional. So, not every young person chose to share this information. Table 1 shows all of the young people who chose to share their demographic information.

ScotCen Social Research helped to develop the survey and analysed the results. Their ethics committee also gave guidance on the best way for the survey to be shared with young people to keep them safe and supported. It was decided that under 16s should be supported by a responsible adult (e.g. youth worker or teacher) to complete the survey. The young people and their parents/guardians were given an information sheet with more details about the survey. It also provided contact details for the Researcher and support organisations.

Link to survey information leaflet

Table 1 –

Demographics of young people who completed the survey

		Boy/Man	Girl/Woman	Other	All
Gender	-	51%	46%	3%	100%
Sexuality	Straight	89%	77%	3%	79%
	LGBTQ+	11%	23%	97%	21%
Age	11-15	82%	82%	85%	81%
	16-24	18%	18%	15%	19%
Ethnicity	White	94%	92%	91%	93%
	BAME	6%	8%	9%	7%
Disabilities	Has a long-term illness or health condition	19%	26%	56%	24%
	No long-term illness or health condition	81%	74%	44%	76%
Area Deprivation	1 - Most Deprived	24%	18%	23%	20%
	2	23%	25%	46%	26%
	3	25%	28%	15%	27%
	4	9%	11%	8%	10%
	5 - Least Deprived	19%	18%	8%	17%
Care Experience	Ever been in care/ looked after	17%	13%	25%	16%
	Never been in care/looked after	83%	87%	75%	84%
Experience of Criminal Justice	Any experience of criminal justice or contact with police	35%	25%	10%	29%
	None	65%	75%	90%	71%

Note: In the survey young people could identify their gender as 'Boy/Man', 'Girl/Woman' or 'Other'. If they identified as 'Other' they could write in a text box their identity. Only 3% of young people identified as 'Other' and they identified as 'Gender Fluid' and 'Non-Binary'. As only a small amount of young people identified as 'Other' there is not enough data for us to make any conclusions, so we have not included this data in the report.

Focus groups with young people

Focus groups were used to hear in more depth from young people with different characteristics. These included:

- Young men who are justice experienced
- Younger boys from a youth work organisation (aged 7-11)
- Young people who are trans men and gender fluid
- Boys and young men from the black and minority ethnic community
- Young men with disabilities
- Young women from a youth work organisation

25 young people took part in total (see Annex 1 for more info on the young people who took part in the focus groups).

All of the young people were asked to give written consent for taking part and for the focus group to be recorded. Under 16s also needed their parents/guardians to give their written consent. Each young person was provided with a £10 voucher for their participation[12].

Links to focus group questions, info sheet and consent form.

Interviews with practitioners

Five practitioners (professional adults who work with young people) took part in interviews. This was an opportunity to hear what practitioners thought about what it is like to be a boy or young man in Scotland in 2021. They were also asked about what support is in place or they would like to see in place for young people and practitioners exploring these issues. The practitioners included a police officer, pupil intervention officer, 2 youth workers and a worker who works with ex-offenders. They were based in Edinburgh and the Lothians, Glasgow or Perth.

All of the practitioners were asked to give their verbal consent which was recorded before the interview began.

Links to interview questions and info sheet.

Analysis

Four of the focus groups with young people took place in person and two took place online using Zoom. One of the interviews with practitioners took place in person and four took place online also using Zoom. All of the focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed (audio recording was made into a written copy). These were then coded, which includes drawing out the key themes. They were then analysed using the key themes to better understand what it is like to be a boy or young man in Scotland.

Limitations of the research

It is important to say that all research has some limitations. This research used different methods including a survey, focus groups and interviews. The focus groups and interviews produced qualitative data. This basically means words rather than numbers. Analysing the words of others is down to the interpretation of these words by the Researcher. This can mean that there is some bias, depending on the views of the Researcher. In this research, we have worked with the Steering Group and met with other organisations to help with the interpretation of the data.

Another limitation was hearing from as many young people as possible. We tried with this research to speak to as many young people as we could, from different demographics. We did manage to speak to a diverse range of voices (as shown above), but we were limited by the amount of time and resources we had. To try and address this, we are going to continue the research in 2022 and 2023 to hear from more young people and practitioners. One group in particular we are keen to hear from, is boys and young men from poorer communities, who are taking part in risky behaviours. This is because, we would like to learn about the kind of support that could be put in place to help them explore masculinity.

12. This research adhered to YouthLink Scotland's research ethics policy https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/6606/youthlink-scotland-research-ethics-policy-final-approved-version.pdf

What are the stereotypes and assumptions about being a boy or young man in Scotland?

Background

Stereotypes are fixed ideas or beliefs that people have about a group of people that might not be true or only partly true[13]. Research studies show that there are stereotypes about what it is like to be a boy or young man. This includes how boys and young men are expected to behave.

In this research we wanted to understand if young people in Scotland felt stereotypes and expectations still existed because of their gender.

We know from other studies that there is still pressure on young men to act in certain ways. For example, Zero Tolerance[14] explored young people's attitudes towards pornography, sex and relationships. They found that there was a pressure for males to follow heterosexual (straight) male usual behaviour. Not doing so led to them being viewed as 'not adequately masculine'. LGBT Youth Scotland[15] explain that language and jokes around school can create a 'climate of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia which indirectly excludes, threatens, hurts, or humiliates young people'. For example, using the word 'gay' to mean being 'uncool' or 'bad' is damaging regardless of the intention.

A study in the US, UK and Mexico looks at 'The Man Box'[16] which is a set of beliefs by families, peers and society that puts pressure on men to act a certain way. This includes men acting tough, being heterosexual, aggressive and physically attractive.

Most important qualities in a boy or young man

Our survey of 1230 young people across Scotland wanted to explore some of the stereotypes and expectations that exist for boys and young men in Scotland today. The most important qualities to young people did not vary very much across boys/young men and girls/young women.

The qualities that young people felt were most important for a boy or young man included:

- **51%** being confident
- **49%** caring
- **43%** working hard at school/college/university
- **40%** funny

The top 3 qualities of being confident, caring and working hard were the same qualities that young people felt were most important for a girl and young woman (just in a different order):

The qualities that young people felt were most important for a girl or young woman included:

- **63%** being caring
- **49%** confident
- **48%** working hard at school/college/university
- **36%** being clever

When young people were asked which qualities they have, the top quality was being funny:

- **58%** boys/young men
- **54%** girls/young women

13. https://kids.kiddle.co/Stereotype
14. Zero Tolerance. "He's the stud and she's the slut" Young people's attitudes to pornography, sex and relationships https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Hes-the-stud-and-shes-the-slut.pdf
15. LGBT Youth Scotland (2020). Addressing Inclusion: Effectively Challenging Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia. Addressing Inclusion - print new.cdr (lgbtyouth.org.uk)
16. Heilman, B, Barker, G and Harrison, A. (2017). The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK and Mexico. Promundo.

"A massive buff guy"?

As part of the list of qualities, young people were also asked about physical appearance (being muscular and being thin). Only 20% of young people thought it was important for men to muscular. Slightly more young people believed men should be tough (23%). This is an interesting finding, as it shows that young people do not value some of the stereotypes of men being muscular and tough above them being caring, working hard, being funny and confident.

The survey, however, does contrast with the focus groups where boys and young men discussed some of the pressures they felt in their physical appearance.

For the black and minority ethnic boys they felt a pressure to be "strong", "tall" and "buff".

> " They expect men to be bigger and stronger and braver (FG1)

> " If you're not 6 foot everyone just banters you (FG1)

> " They always expect us to be very tall, very strong, like very confident (FG1)

> " A massive buff guy (FG1)

Being physically strong was described alongside being "brave" and "confident". For the young people identifying as gender fluid, they felt a pressure to be "protective" and "strong" to be accepted and safe in their masculine identity.

> " I'm gender fluid as well but I lean towards like more being masculine and there's like an expectation you have to be protective and you have to be strong… I'd say definitely like places like in public or at school there's more of an expectation…I guess like more of a defence mechanism to be more masculine whereas with friends and stuff it's easier to be yourself a bit more (FG2)

> " I'm gender fluid so sometimes I am very feminine and sometimes I'm masculine. However, when I am feeling quite masculine I feel the expectation that I have to be extremely masculine so I have to like be very strong and not look the way I do (FG2)

One of the focus groups was with boys aged 7-11. When asked to draw what a man looks like one of the boys drew a muscly man who goes to the gym a lot.

> " I chose him because he looks like somebody who actually works out and actually goes to the gym a lot (FG6)

"We get looked at as we have to be so soft and delicate and lady like"

In contrast to boys and young men feeling pressure to be muscular, there was more expectation for girls and young women to be thin (4% thought boys/young men should be thin compared with 16% believing girls/young women should be thin).

Young women in the focus group shared that they felt a pressure to be "petite", "delicate", "lady like" or they would be seen as "gay" or a "tomboy" which was seen as negative.

> " Yeah boys have to act so solid and we get looked at as we have to be so soft and delicate and lady like. Really petite and all that stuff whereas they can be…women that are plus size, they're not petite, women that are solid, stick up for themselves we would get looked at as gay or a tomboy if we were to stick up for ourselves" **(FG5)**

In the LGBT Youth Scotland report 'Addressing Inclusion[17]' they describe this kind of behaviour as 'prejudice-based bullying'. This is where young people experience bullying because others think they are LGBT or do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes.

Young people in the focus groups agreed that there was a difference in the expectations on girls and young women to focus on how they look. This quote highlights how that can lead to double standards in how girls and young women are treated compared with boys and young men.

> **Interviewer:** "Do you think there's more pressure on women and girls to look a certain way then?"
>
> **M:** Yeah it depends on what society wants from them, they have to abide
>
> **M:** It depends on what topic you're actually focusing on, women it's usually about dresses and like hair and stuff, for men it's actually their body.
>
> **M:** Double standards.
>
> **M:** Yeah. If you call a girl fat that's body shaming –
>
> **M:** Call a man fat its banter" **(FG1)**

17. LGBT Youth Scotland (2020). Addressing Inclusion: Effectively Challenging Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia. Addressing Inclusion - print new.cdr (lgbtyouth.org.uk)

Gender expectations on boys and young men

To better understand some of the stereotypes and expectations that do or do not exist about gender today, young people were asked about subjects/careers and sports.

- **37% believed there were subjects or careers they were expected to do because of their gender**
- **43% thought there were certain sports they expected to play because of their gender**

Boys were more likely than girls to agree that there were certain sports they were expected to play because of their gender (48% vs 39%). This was something that was discussed by some of the young people in the focus groups. In the focus with young men with disabilities, one of the young men shared the pressure they had felt to like football to be a "proper lad".

> " I was'nae like into football, I was'nae a proper lad in my younger days, I was fat and hairy, I was into a different kind of interests and I was…they would look at me as if I was the weirdo, the odd one out which I still feel to this day" (FG3)

Other expectations that young people think exist for boys and young men include:

Have sex – "Chasing chicks" (FG3)

Be brave – "They just say boys go first because they're brave but we're scared, kind of scared inside I suppose because we try to be brave" (FG1)

Be a gentleman – "Be a gentleman… It's basically just being a good man… It's usually associated with a man being nice to a woman most of the time, like be a gentleman to this woman or something" (FG1)

Be the man of the house – "Yeah all that stereotypical bullshit in'it? You have to be the man of the house and bring in all the money" (FG4)

Be a ned – "You have to be in a gang, you have to do drugs, drink alcohol, basically what people say is you have to be a ned" (FG3)

Stand up for yourself – "Not to be a gimp in'it?...Not to let people take the piss out of you and that in'it?...Stand up for yourself" (FG4)

Powerful – "That less people will come up and interact with me and potentially cause bother if I'm more masculine….I don't know how to describe it, like a stronger stance and you walk with power. You know exactly what you're doing and where you're going. You're not hunched over or anything like that" (FG2)

Not be a snitch –

M: "If you're getting bullied and you're a man you're always expected to deal with it yourself.

M: Yeah and if you speak out you're a snitch" (FG1)

Where do these expectations come from?

Both the survey and the focus groups with young people highlighted the expectations faced by boys and young men to conform to stereotypes of masculinity. But where do these expectations come from? Who decides that boys and young men need to be strong, powerful, brave and stand up for themselves without relying on others (or snitching)?

Generally young people told us that these expectations come from:

> " **Society**" (FG1)

> " **Family expectations** - "My mum always told me if someone hits you once hit them twice" (FG4)

> " **School peers** - "Just the general public I suppose especially I don't go to school anymore but people at school. It's a pretty toxic environment" (FG2)

> " **Media** – "When you look at newspapers of when a man commits a crime they make them look very very aggressive but when a woman commits a crime it's actually not that…like they don't make it out as that bad." (FG2)

> " **Experiences growing up** - "The shit you see when you're growing up and that" (FG4)

Where boys and young men grow up was also seen as a factor in what is expected of them, as one young man explains:

> " It depends…it just depends on your background and that done it, if you're fae a nice area…but if it's a bad area as they call it, they've got a premeditated opinion of you. So that could play a part in what the expectations are, he's fae there don't fuckin' expect much from him. Then again somebody else will come in, he'll be good he's fae there so it differentiates the expectations on people" (FG4)

There is also a concern that being "troublemakers" is just how young men are viewed, which leads them to think that they are "always the problem". This is known as a self-fulfilling prophecy and can lead to young men committing more crimes.

> " I think probably like a lot of society views young men as like a bit of a nuisance, like troublemakers whenever there's a group of people which can be quite harmful for people if they grow up thinking that they're always the problem and that they're sort of inherently violent or that" (FG2)

In Summary...

There is a mixed picture about the stereotypes and expectations on boys and young men.

- Approximately half of young people thought boys and young men should be caring and confident
- Boys and young men in the focus groups felt a pressure to be physically "strong", "tall" and "buff"
- The majority of young people don't think there are subjects, careers or sports they are expected to do because of their gender
- Boys and young men believe the expectations come from different parts of their lives. Family, friends, media and 'society'; more generally all have a role in setting expectations for men to be "brave", "powerful", to "stand up for themselves", "be a gentleman" and "have sex".

Prevalence of risk-taking behaviour

Background

Following on from the stereotypes and expectations that exist for boys and young men, we wanted to understand the types of risky behaviours they are engaging in and why. By risky behaviour we mean, actions which may cause harm to themselves or others.

Research about being a young man in the US, UK and Mexico called The Man Box[18] found that:

> " Too many young men associate being a "real man" with binge drinking and dangerous driving, putting themselves and others at risk when they try to measure up to this harmful standard" (pg 47)

This is discussed by Holligan and Deuchar (2014[19]) who explain that hanging around on the street, recreational substance abuse as well as football and cars are public symbols of masculinity. This is a way of young men coping with their "troubled inner worlds" (pg 11).

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime[20] of 4300 young people over time found that boys are more likely to use violence than girls. This is due to gender stereotypes on the street, where boys are more likely to use violence to retain their status with their peers (pg 75).

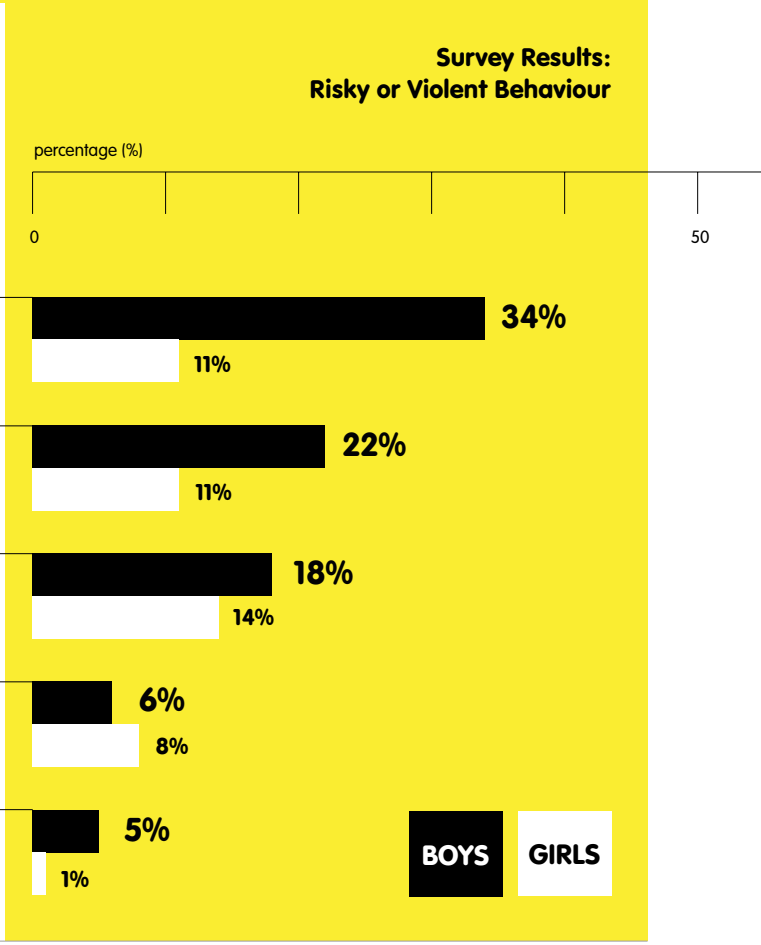
It is clear in past research that young men taking part in risky and criminal behaviour is connected with gender expectations, but is this the case for boys and young men in Scotland in 2021?

Types of risky behaviour

We wanted to explore what risky behaviour boys and young men were taking part in.

The survey results shows that 51% of boys and young men were engaging in risky behaviour and only 26% of girls and young women.

- 34% of boys and young men reported that they had hit, kicked or punched someone with the intention of hurting or injuring them (compared with 13% girls/young women);
- 22% of boys and young men reported they had threatened someone (compared with 11% girls/young women);
- 18% of boys and young men reported harassing or bothering someone via mobile phone, email or social media (compared with 14% girls/young women);
- 6% of boys and young men said they had sent pictures or spread rumours about someone via phone, email or social media (compared with 8% girls/young women);
- 5% of boys and young men said they had carried a knife or weapon in case it was needed in a fight (compared with 1% girls/young women).



18. Heilman, B, Barker, G and Harrison, A. (2017). The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK and Mexico. Promundo.
19. Holligan, C and Deuchar, R. (2014). What does it mean to be a man? Psychosocial undercurrents in the voices of incarcerated (violent) Scottish teenage offenders. Criminology and Criminal Justice 1-17
20. McAra, L and McVie, S. (2016). Understanding youth violence: The mediating effects of gender, poverty and vulnerability. Journal of Criminal Justice 45 (71-77).

The survey results shows that just under half of boys and young men are not taking part in risky or violent behaviour. But, they are more likely to have hit, kicked or punched someone than girls and young women. They are also more likely to have threatened someone. However, they are less likely to have sent pictures or spread rumours.

In the focus groups we were able to explore boys and young men's understandings and experiences of risky behaviour, including:

Drinking, smoking, taking and selling drugs

" Like drinking a lot maybe… I feel like also drugs as well" (FG2)

Peer pressure

Taking risks for others, gangs, trying to impress friends, hanging about with people who can cause trouble.

" Hanging a'boot with idiots is risky bhaviour because especially in my case fuckin'…the boys a fuckin' idiot and he stabbed somebody in front of 9 people and that's both of us boof right away done, nae chance" (FG4)

Risky sex

Including unprotected sex and being pressured to have sex or lose your virginity

" Yeah sometimes they're being pressured to lose their virginity as well by maybe their friends, like oh you need to do it and all that, they just do it really because yes I'm a proper man. I can shag who I want to and all that kind of thing" (FG3)

Self-harm

Starving themselves, over exercising, cutting themselves, not seeking mental health support when it's needed

" Maybe this is more specific but I know there's…it's a bit more triggering but I know a lot of young men it's not as talked about but especially transmen can fall into eating disorder habits of like having to have the perfect masculine body and like overworking out and stuff" (FG2)

Carrying knives

" Most people I know do carry knives and like I said someone did carry scissors at one point as well because they didn't know that was like against the law until they did actually pull out their scissors and they got into trouble for it" (FG2)

Dangerous driving

driving without a licence and dangerous driving

" You don't think anything is going to happen, if I overtake him I'll get by, nothing is going to happen and you end up head on some cunt dead" (FG4)

Self-protection

standing up to bullies, fighting, snitching

" Snitching, what they would call snitching, like telling on someone, telling on someone that's really like maybe like bullying someone in a racist way, if you snitch on them they can kind of…it can kind of get even worse, they can get violent" (FG1)

" I'd had enough of this kid who was bullying me right, I had to do this because I…Like I did punch him…So it's basically just self-defence. He was annoying me and he was like…I know its not the answer but then like a week later he got his friends on me who brought knives and stuff" (FG1)

Spending time in risky places

Being out late at night, going to a scheme where you have issues with others (territorialism), being at parties where issues might come up.

" Aye you cannae go that scheme because you've got a problem with someone in that scheme… I'll go the long way thank you!" (FG4)

" I chose to be there in a situation which I thought was fine… hoose party that should'nae be a situation that should involve taking risks should it to pick somebody up fae a hoose party. So to my knowledge I did not put myself in a risky situation. But 5 minutes later I realised oh fuck this is a risky situation" (FG4)

Anti-social behaviour – vandalism

> " Most of the time like committing crimes like vandalism, bullying I guess" (FG1)

The young people were all aware of risky behaviour and its impacts on themselves and others. This included the young men in Polmont, the young offender's institute, who were all serving sentences for knife related crimes. They could certainly recite the No Knives, Better Lives messages, for example:

> " If you're carrying a knife there's a 50% chance you're going to use it. So the risk of stabbing somebody or getting it took aff you and stabbed with your own knife" (FG4)

> " There's a big risk of you getting nicked especially if you've got a big knife, where are you going to hide that man? If you're running with it, running with it, if you chuck it then of course they're going to find it" (FG4)

As is shown in the last quote, risk for the young men in Polmont is not just about harm to themselves and others, it's also about being caught by the police. As one young man shared in relation to drug dealing "As long as you do it right it's no' risky" (FG4).

These risky behaviours were also familiar to the boys aged 7-11 (FG6) as shown in their list below. This highlights that the boys had an early awareness of risk-taking behaviour.

"My friends don't really pressure me"

It is clear that boys and young men can identify many types of risky behaviour that they may engage in.

Despite the number of risky behaviours, on the whole they didn't feel pressured by friends to engage in very risky behaviour.

> " My friends don't really pressure me, like they try and convince me but normally like I say…they try and convince me, they ask me twice and when I…after that final no they leave me alone so they tend to like…you know leave us alone" (FG2)

This was consistent with the survey where only 15% of young people felt pressured a lot or quite a lot by friends to be tough or hard. Around half of respondents (48%) said they did not feel at all pressured by their friends to act tough or hard. A further third (35%) said they felt pressured a little. Only 5% of boys or young men felt a lot of pressure and only 9% felt quite a lot of pressure.

It is encouraging to know that the majority of boys and young men are not feeling pressured by their friends to act tough or hard. That is not to say that pressures do not exist outside of friendship groups, through the media, social media, community, family expectations and so on. As we saw earlier in the report, one young man in Polmont shared "My mum always told me if someone hits you once hit them twice" (FG4). Another young man with disabilities talked about the societal pressure to be tough:

> " I would probably say to be a proper tough lad….What I mean is you're taught to toughen yourself up, you're expected to even dress a certain way as well…I don't know like probably just an actual T-shirt with a hoodie and proper actual jeans or… joggers" (FG3)

Peer pressure to cause trouble or get into fights

Connected with being 'tough' or 'hard' is the pressure for boys and young men to cause trouble or get into fights. 65% of young people did not feel at all pressured by their friends to cause trouble or get into fights. 21% said they felt pressured a little, and only 10% said they felt pressured a lot or quite a lot. Only 3% of males felt a lot of pressure (2% for females) and 9% felt quite a lot of pressure (5% females). 12% of young people growing up in the most deprived communities (SIMD 1) felt quite a lot of pressure to cause trouble or get into fights compared with only 2% in the least deprived (SIMD 5).

The young men in Polmont did share about the pressure they felt to fight both in and outside of prison.

> " You see nowadays, like see if you back down from a fight and that, social media and that that's going to be everywhere now, this guy didn't do this, this guy didn't do that. It will eventually come back to you in'it, why didn't you fight" (FG4)

> " Obviously the people that weren't fighting they'd get the piss taken out of them all the time in'it?" (FG4)

> " **About being in Polmont** - "A lot of peer pressure and that. A lot…Fuckin' pressures to fight and that and fuckin' take drugs" (FG4)

Peer pressure to get drunk and take drugs

The survey showed that the majority of boys and young men did not feel any pressure by friends to take drugs or get drunk. 81% of boys and young men did not feel at all pressured by their friends to take drugs and 72% did not feel pressured by friends to get drunk.

Feeling peer pressure to take drugs (a lot/quite a lot or a little) was more common for those who had experience of the criminal justice system or contact with the police (28% vs 14% who had not) and those who had ever engaged in risky or violent behaviour (25% vs 14% of those who had not). Certainly, the young men in Polmont also shared the pressure to take drugs in prison.

> "A lot of peer pressure and that. A lot…Fuckin' pressures to fight and that and fuckin' take drugs" (FG4)

Experience of criminal justice system

- 30% of boys and young men in the survey shared that they had been stopped on the street and talked to by the police (compared with 23% of girls/young women).
- 11% of boys and young men had been stopped and searched by the police (compared with 5% of girls/young women).
- 4% of boys and young men had been arrested by the police (compared with 1% of girls/young women)
- 5% of boys and young men had been convicted of a crime but did not go prison or a young offender institute (compared with 2% of girls/young women)

The survey results show that boys and young men were more likely to have experience of the criminal justice system compared with girls and young women. It is worth noting that the vast majority of boys and young men did not have experience of the criminal justice system.

Another finding worth highlighting is that young people from the most deprived communities (SIMD 1) were more likely (35%) to have been stopped on the street and talked to by the police than in the least deprived communities (SIMD 5) (19%).

Escalation of violence

We wanted to understand about where the lines are in aggressive interactions on the street. Young people who completed the survey were given scenarios in which a young man named Paul was shouted at, then shoved by another young man named Andy, who he did not know.

- 34% of boys and young men thought it was not wrong for Paul to shout back if he was shouted at by Andy (compared with 22% of girls/young women).
- 16% of boys and young men thought it was not wrong for Paul to shove Andy, if Andy had shouted at him (compared with 7% of girls/young women).
- 39% of boys and young men thought it was not wrong to shove Andy, if Andy had shouted and shoved Paul (compared with 23% of girls/young women).
- 14% of boys and young men thought it was not wrong to punch Andy, if Andy had shouted and shoved Paul (compared with 6% of girls).

These findings seem to show that boys and young men believed that the reaction by Paul was okay to match Andy's but not go further. So, for example, it was less acceptable for Paul to shove Andy, if Andy had only shouted at him. It was also less acceptable for Paul to punch Andy, if Andy had shouted and shoved Paul. 23% of boys and young men believed it was very seriously wrong to punch Andy (compared with 34% of girls/young women).

In summary...

- Just over half of boys and young men are taking part in risky or violent behaviour.
- They are more likely to have hit, kicked or punched someone than girls and young women. They are also more likely to have threatened someone.
- Boys and young men are less likely to have sent pictures or spread rumours than girls and young women.
- Boys and young men in the focus group identified the types of risky behaviours we might have 'expected' such as drinking, smoking, drugs, dangerous driving, carrying knives, anti-social behaviour and sex. But, they also talked about self-harm such as starving themselves, over exercising, cutting themselves and not seeking mental health support when it's needed.
- The majority of boys and young men said they did not feel pressured by their friends to cause trouble, get into fights, get drunk or take drugs.
- Boys and young men were more likely to have experience of the criminal justice system than girls/young women.

Routes to positive masculinity through community and relationships

Background

So far, we have explored some of the stereotypes and expectations that exist for boys and young men in Scotland and risk-taking behaviour. Now, we will look in more detail at some of the routes to positive masculinity, starting with community and relationships.

We know from other research studies that men sometimes find it hard to talk to people about problems or worries they might have. We also know that the majority (71%) of people who died by suicide in Scotland in 2020 were men[21].

The idea that boys and young men need male role models to develop a 'correct' gender identity is up for challenge. Research has shown the importance of young men having positive relationship with their mothers and having strong female influences in their lives[22].

Who to talk to when you have problems

One stereotype that exists is, that boys and young men keep problems to themselves. But, this survey shows a different perspective.

- 85% of boys told us it was somewhat or completely true that there is at least one adult they trust and can talk to if they have a problem.
- 49% of boys and young men would talk to their parents
- 48% would talk to a friend
- 34% would talk to another family member

A concern is that boys and young men keep worries to themselves but only 19% of boys and young men said they would keep it to themselves if they were worried about something. This is less than girls and young women (24%).

"Oh my god man up"

The boys and young men in the focus groups could identify some of the stereotypes that exist, that men "can't really be emotional" as that is seen as a weakness. One young person from the LGBT community explains:

"Men can't really be emotional, they're not really seen as emotional and if they are emotional they're stereotypically seen as angry or aggressive and that's the only emotion that stereotypically they can show but they can't be sad or anything like that so like strong has got to be like you're practically mentally stable" (FG2)

This exchange between boys and young men from the black and minority ethnic community highlights the pressure on men to not be depressed and to "man up".

> **M:** Like for other people they would just say oh my god man up like emotionally stop being depressed.
>
> **M:** Put on a front.
>
> **M:** You're a man, you're a 6' 0" man" (FG1)

Despite some of these pressures on men to be "mentally stable", on the whole the boys and young men discussed that they would turn to friends and family members if they worried about something.

> "Mostly my friends. My friend group is like a wide…it's really weird my friend group is like set people so you have the people that are the problem solvers, you have the people that cheer you up, you know we're all a very mixed group so it's like I know who I can go to and who's a good idea to go to rather than who I shouldn't go to" (FG2)

21. https://www.publichealthscotland.scot/publications/suicide-statistics-for-scotland/suicide-statistics-for-scotland-update-of-trends-for-the-year-2020/
22. Robb, M, Featherstone, B, Ruxton, S and Ward, M. (2015). Beyond male role models: gender identities and work with young men. The Open University BMRM_report.pdf (open.ac.uk)

One young man in Polmont shared that it's his Mum who would know if something was wrong.

> "My mum and that, no you're no' fine.'You're no' fine what's wrang with you?' She can just tell by my voice" (FG4)

Encouragingly some young people also shared how they had helped friends and even helped prevent friends taking their own lives.

> "I've had friends turn to me because they've felt that their life wasn't good enough, they shouldn't be here and all that and I just took some time out of my day to reassure them that their life does matter and they're a beautiful person themselves" (FG3)

In the focus group with the black and minority ethnic boys who had experienced bullying, including racist bullying, they had compassion for the issues facing those who bully. Issues such as parents fighting, divorce and abuse; they felt that might lead them to become bullies.

> **M:** And also bullies usually…they usually have problems in their lives so that's why they bully.
>
> **Interviewer:** What kinds of problems do you think they have?
>
> **M:** Their parents fight.
>
> **M:** Parents.
>
> **M:** Divorce.
>
> **M:** Divorce, yeah depression and stuff like that.
>
> **M:** Child abuse.
>
> **Interviewer:** Do you think that kind of stuff might lead to them becoming bullies themselves?
>
> **M:** Yeah" (FG1)

"It makes things worse"

The boys and young men have shown compassion for themselves, for their friends and even for bullies. But, they still identify some barriers to sharing their worries with others.

The black and minority ethnic boys had experience of sharing their concerns about bullying with teachers and it making the situation worse.

> If the help is not good enough if you're getting bullied and you try to tell the teacher but the teacher doesn't do enough about it and then it makes things worse, like you're on like one level with the bully but then it gets worse because you tried to snitch on the bully" (FG1)

The girls and young women believed that boys only share their worries with one person due to the concern that they would be "made fun of".

> I think the only reason a lot of boys would have…this could be maybe very stereotypical but I think one of the reasons why boys would like turn to just one person is because if they were to turn to like say their boys they would get maybe made fun of and then one of them maybe wouldn't be able to keep it…then it would go around all of them and then it would go around the school" (FG5)

In summary...

- In contrast to some of the stereotypes that exist, 85% of boys and young men felt there was a least one adult they could trust if they have a problem.
- Just less than half of boys and young men in the survey would talk to their parents and friends if they had a problem.
- Young people in the focus groups identified expectations on boys and young men to not be emotional and to "man up" but on the whole they would share their worries with family and friends.

Support for boys and young men to explore masculinity

Background

This research has explored some of the stereotypes and expectations faced by boys and young men, risk-taking behaviour, and the role of community and relationships in moving towards more positive masculinity. Now we will look at what support is in place for boys and young men to discuss and explore masculinity, and what more needs to be done.

Many of the programmes that support masculinity stem from traditional youth work organisations and boys clubs, often with a focus on sports and sportsmanship. The emphasis of these programmes is on team work rather than social and emotional development.

Pockets of targeted 'boys work' can be found in Scotland's youth work sector. These are often driven by passionate individuals who see the worth of such work or more often than not as a 'reaction' to community based problems i.e. gangs and violence.

We tend to find that the most extensive therapeutic work around 'toxic' or 'problematic' masculinity tends to happen within youth justice or in the 'at risk' category of pre-offending behaviour. Therefore community-based youth work organisations might offer support to schools (through the Pupil Equity Fund) to do work on masculinity-driven behaviours. There are numerous examples i.e. Granton Youth in Edinburgh or the G20 in Glasgow.

Work with young fathers (Dad's Rock for example) offers some support for challenging stereotypes and looking at the emotional and social skills needed to be a good father. This is not consistently on offer throughout Scotland and only kicks in as young men are faced with the prospect of parenting.

Across Scotland there are very limited opportunities to explore masculinity in a pro-active way within either formal or informal settings.

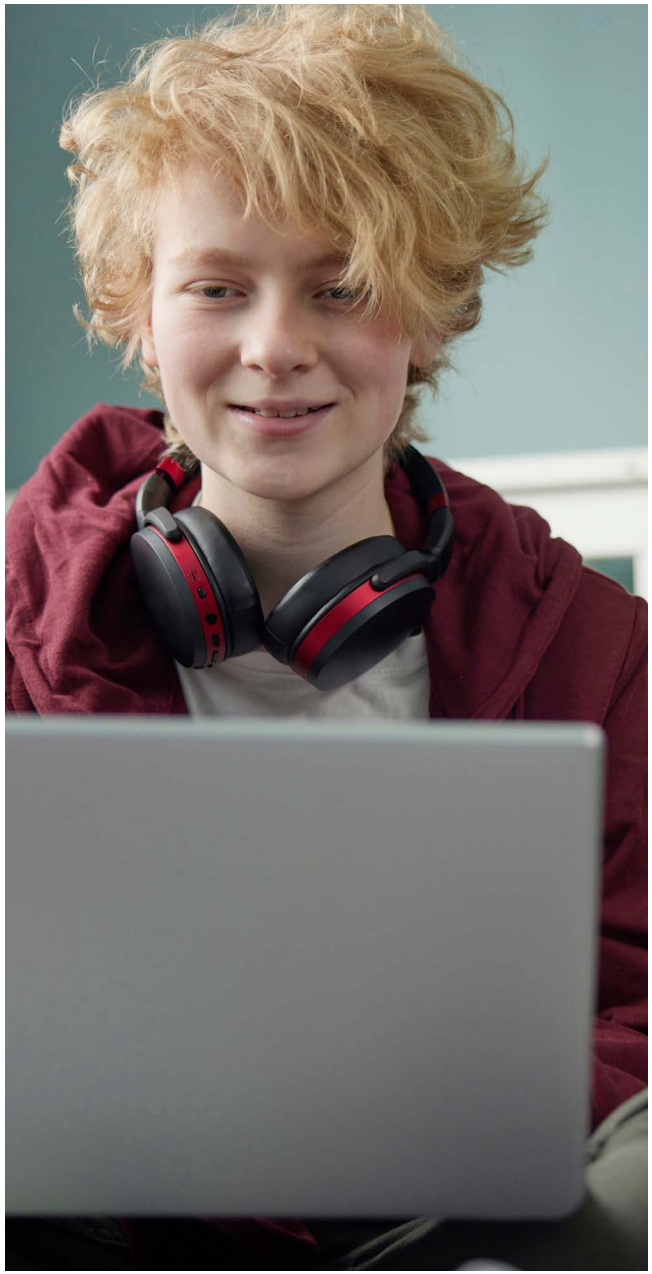
"None. There's none, none"

The 5 practitioners shared their views about a lack of support specifically for boys and young men to explore masculinity. The practitioners explain that there is women focused work happening, but not men focused work. To be very clear, these practitioners are not suggesting that women focused work is not important and essential, just that there is a lack of focus on men and masculinity.

> " None. There's none, none, this is why we're doing this because we need to create this, we need a preventative army of people who are wanting to go in and educate" (In1)

> " Have I seen much of it? No I mean what we have seen is again maybe on the back of the rise of more support for females" (In5)

"You'll be able to tell by the fact that I'm thinking. [Laughter] No I don't think there is and again I think that's quite historical that we do kind of focus on young women and how we empower young women and there are some great projects in Edinburgh in particular and I think they're doing some amazing work" (In2)



"Biological education"

So, we know that these practitioners think there is not enough boys and young men focused work happening currently. We asked them what support they would like to see put in place for boys and young men.

One of the suggestions was a focus on "biological education". Part of the thinking behind this is to help boys and young men understand what is happening inside their bodies, as explained by this practitioner:

> " But what is physically going on in your brain…But yeah I just think to be able to do some kind of session about the science behind it. Just in a very sort of light way just to say right take the male body and this is what is going on you know?" (In3)

Another reason to help boys and young men explore the workings of their brains and bodies, would be to help them process trauma. Exploring trauma with boys and young men could also help to prevent them in engaging in risky behaviour.

> " The most chaotic you'll find will come from backgrounds of bereavement and loss and trauma…But if you educate that to young people about trauma, you get to educate about how the brain operates and how the brain releases the stress hormone cortisone into the body and how we need stress and how that works for us but too much of anything is no' good for you…So the education, the biological education should be right across the board on prevention" (In1)

"Gender is on a spectrum"

An important point that was raised by a practitioner is that gender is on a spectrum. Gender spectrum is a way of describing gender which does not conform to gender binary (male and female). This means gender is seen as a continuum, where masculinity and femininity do not need to be viewed as the opposite of each other. For example, gender spectrum can help with the understanding that, if you identify as male it does not mean you need to conform to stereotypes of being hyper masculine and that it is okay to have feminine traits. The World Health Organization[23] explain that rigid notions of masculinity can negatively affect boys and young men's health and wellbeing.

The findings in this report show that some young people are aware of traditional stereotypes, but often find them unhelpful and restrictive.

One practitioner believed it was important to support boys and young men to understand gender on a spectrum.

> " I think it's a positive like the LGBTI community but I think like I say there's…some people think its girls and boys and there just doesn't seem to be that any more. This is where I suppose there's confusion and its almost I suppose…we're actually on a spectrum now, gender is on a spectrum, its not so clear cut and I think a lot of our young people need to understand that as well" (In3)

"We really need to work on positive stories"

Part of supporting boys and young men to explore masculinity, is having positive stories which help them to find their place in their community and be their best selves.

> " Toxic masculinity which I think is a term that I'm not comfortable with anyway. It's almost stigmatising what are guys for these days? What are they? And I've had those questions with youngsters who say well…with some expletives in the sentence what am I for? So I think we need to look at…we really need to work on positive stories, we need to work on positives" (In5)

23. World Health Organization. Gender and Health. https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1

"Youth Work is better positioned to do that"

Youth work was viewed as being in a good position to support boys and young men to explore masculinity. This however, would require funding to complete youth work with boys and young men.

"I do think that supporting young boys and young men through that, that Youth Work is better positioned to do that than the education system because it's taking place out there in the community in the stream of life rather than in the artificial vacuum of the school setting and I certainly know that while I see a variety of kind of funding opportunities for targeted work of a nature different nature that actually targeted work for young boys is something that went out of fashion a long time ago" (In4)

This exchange between young men in Polmont highlights the impact that youth work can have on boys and young men's lives in early intervention.

M: It depends what you class…there are always going to be people that go to jail, there's always going to be people that stab people, there are always going to be people that drive with'oot a licence, it's always going to happen. There's nae quick fix to it.

M: That's exactly what I was thinking.

M: Its always going to be a thing so its just trying to get the numbers doon in'it but the only way to do that is to fuckin' interfere at a young age before they make the fuckin' mistakes and take the risk.

M: More opportunities when you're a little kid in'it?

M: Especially in fuckin' deprived areas.

M: When I was little we used to have football people from the local team, from the local football team would come and set up tournaments and that and youth clubs and that. Then everything just stopped, we had to do something else in'it?

Int: So it all stopped and then you think that led to more issues then?

M: It's happened everywhere hasn't it like, its stopped, like no youth work, nothin', no youth club I meant. No youth club, none of that in'it, there's fuck all going on.

Int: So do you think then if they had all of that in place do you think that that would have a positive influence then?

M: Possibly.

M: Aye in some aspects but I don't think it would…forever, some people are always going to get into trouble man but it's just about minimising that in'it, minimising the risk and just making sure they've got all the information before deciding to drive a motor with'oot a licence" **(FG4)**

"It's not about what sex you are, it's just how they treat you and that"

An important part of supporting boys and young men to contribute positively to their communities and be their best selves, is having role models to look up to. In 2015 The Open University[24] explored the role of gender in relationships between young men using support services and the adults who work with them. They found that identifying with staff along gender lines is important. However, effective work with young men seems to depend on personal qualities, relationships, mutual care and respect (pg 31). This is similar to what was found in the focus groups with boys and young men. As one young man in Polmont shared:

> " It's not about what sex you are, it's just how they treat you and that, how they speak to you…speak to you with respect and have a laugh with you…if you're cheeky, or…confront you and that" **(FG4)**

24. Robb, M, Featherstone, B, Ruxton, S and Ward, M. (2015). Beyond male role models: gender identities and work with young men. The Open University BMRM_report.pdf (open.ac.uk)

One of the practitioners also shared their view that it's important for boys and young men to have both males and female role models.

> " It's important that they've got positive male role models but also positive female role models and somebody who can bring that female perspective as well and try and help the young men understand their behaviours around women and how they treat women and all that sort of thing" (In2)

Female family members - Many of the boys and young men identified their Mums, Grans, Aunties, Sisters as being the people they looked up to and who cared for them.

> " My Mum…Because it was just me and my ma and my wee sister for a wee bit so my ma was the only person…like adult" (FG4)

> " The person that I looked up to and I still look up to is my auntie because I felt she always believed like I could achieve stuff in life, especially being a disabled person and my sexuality and that and she pushed me to this stage like where I am at the minute, my own house and that" (FG3)

Friends - Friends were also important people in the lives of young people, particularly trans and gender fluid young people.

> " I would definitely say my friends were the most important because they were the ones that helped me realise who I am to this day" (FG2)

Famous people - People in the public eye such as singers and footballers have also been influential to boys and young men. The following two examples, show that it is the personal qualities of the Singer Dan Reynolds and Footballer Marcus Rashford that the boys and young men look up to.

> " Dan Reynolds, the lead singer, Imagine Dragons, he's helped me a lot and even still to today it still opens my eyes to the music that he does and the meanings of certain music that he's done on how like he's struggling with depression, mental health issues that he didn't open up about, he done the music to actually help other people and to show them that like yeah life can be a bitch, it will be shit but there is a place for everybody in here, in the world and you should never as he explained it, you should never end your chapter of the story because everybody's life is a chapter of the story and you want to make an impact on people's lives and you could be an inspiration to someone else's life" (FG3)

> " Marcus Rashford because he's always nice to people, all the donations of food in England and trying to get free school meals for everyone, not just how he plays well because he's a great footballer…how he like shares his kindness to the community that he lives in. So I look up to that and try and be kinder" (FG1)

This quote from a boy from the black and minority ethnic community highlights their understanding of the importance of having role models with positive qualities.

> " I used to also look up to football players but then that football player that I looked up to when I was growing, I realised that he was a bad person so then I started looking up to my parents because they raised me and taught me well" (FG1)

Experiences rather than gender matters - It's also identified, that it's important to have support from people who have had similar experiences "without being judged".

> " If there's a problem like GDA [Glasgow Disability Alliance] does make you feel you want to open up without being judged and that's what I feel like as well because we're all going through different barriers and you know you need people and that and that helps you. We can all be together and talk about our experience and people's similar experiences as well, that's what I've noticed as well and especially an organisation that is run and led by disabled people you know, the special link for everybody and how people understand about what other people are going through you know and that's how I would'nae open up to somebody who's not had the experience or doesn't understand you know?" (FG3)

This is a view also shared by a practitioner who feels that boys and young men can relate to him because they have grown up in similar areas and "share vocabularies".

> " I mean I think like…notions of kind of authenticity are really important I think in the context of youth work…There are aspects increasingly where I feel that I have to kind of do a bit of mimicry to…because my life is no longer the same as the lives of the young people that we work with but certainly having like similar reference points to draw from, being able to yes share vocabularies and stuff like that as well is very important" (In4)

In summary...

- There is a lack of support for boys and young men to explore masculinity.
- Suggestions for support include biological education to explore brains and bodies, and exploring and processing trauma.
- Importance of moving away from binary notions of gender to viewing gender on a spectrum.
- Need to share positive stories of masculinity.
- Positive impact of youth work in supporting young people to explore masculinity but need funding.
- Women are important role models for boys and young men, including youth workers and family members.

Support for practitioners working with boys and young men

Background

The focus so far has been on understanding boys and young men's experiences and how they can be best supported to explore positive masculinity. Part of this support will be making sure that the practitioners who work with them feel confident and comfortable to explore these issues with young people.

As with actual direct support for exploring masculinity, there is little on offer for practitioners to develop their confidence and find discussion tools and activities to help them explore the issue.

Training on offer tends to have a strong focus on gender based violence. This tends to emphasise the 'problematisation' of boys and young men.

A possible exception is bystander type training where the 'boys as allies' theme explores boys using some of their strengths (physicality and loyalty in particular) to help girls.

"It is something that's sadly kind of underinvested in"

Examples were provided of helpful training in issues such as domestic violence. None of the practitioners could think of training or resources that focused on supporting young people to explore issues of masculinity.

> "Do you know what from my knowledge and it's limited, I can't think of anything specific" (In5)

> "It is something that's sadly kind of underinvested in and ill equipped in terms of any training of resources around those type of issues" (In4)

"It's not sexy and attractive enough for these funders"

A barrier to not having boys and young men specific work as well as training and resources for practitioners is a lack of funding. According to this practitioner, it would be easy to get funding if the work with men related to crime, but not if it is about exploring "male identity".

> "Absolutely but I think at the same time that needs to be matched up with ways of funding and enabling that type of work to happen because I mean I do think that for a vast majority of the small grant funders that we're reliant on to support our work a young boys project would not be…it's not sexy and attractive enough for these funders you know, it's not…something that I would imagine them wanting to invest in unless it was linked with crime. It has to be linked with crime, if its linked with crime yeah, if its linked with knives yeah, but if its linked with just concepts of male identity, no that's far too abstract and difficult to understand what the end game is there or what the outcomes and impact would be" (In4)

In summary...

- Lack of training and resources
- Lack of funding

Ideal future for boys and young men in Scotland

Background

This report has tried to shift the conversation from seeing boys and young men as a 'problem' to trying to identify positive routes to exploring and understanding masculinity. As part of this conversation we wanted to understand what boys and young men would like to achieve in the future.

Research was conducted in Northern Ireland about 'Taking Boys Seriously'[25] in 2012 examining adolescent male's school-life experiences. They found that from early to mid-adolescence boys are capable of beginning to consider issues, values and beliefs that are important to their future development as responsible young men (pg 52).

This was certainly seen in this study where boys and young men were able to articulate their future aspirations, which focused on having a positive role in society.

"Hopefully family, house, job"

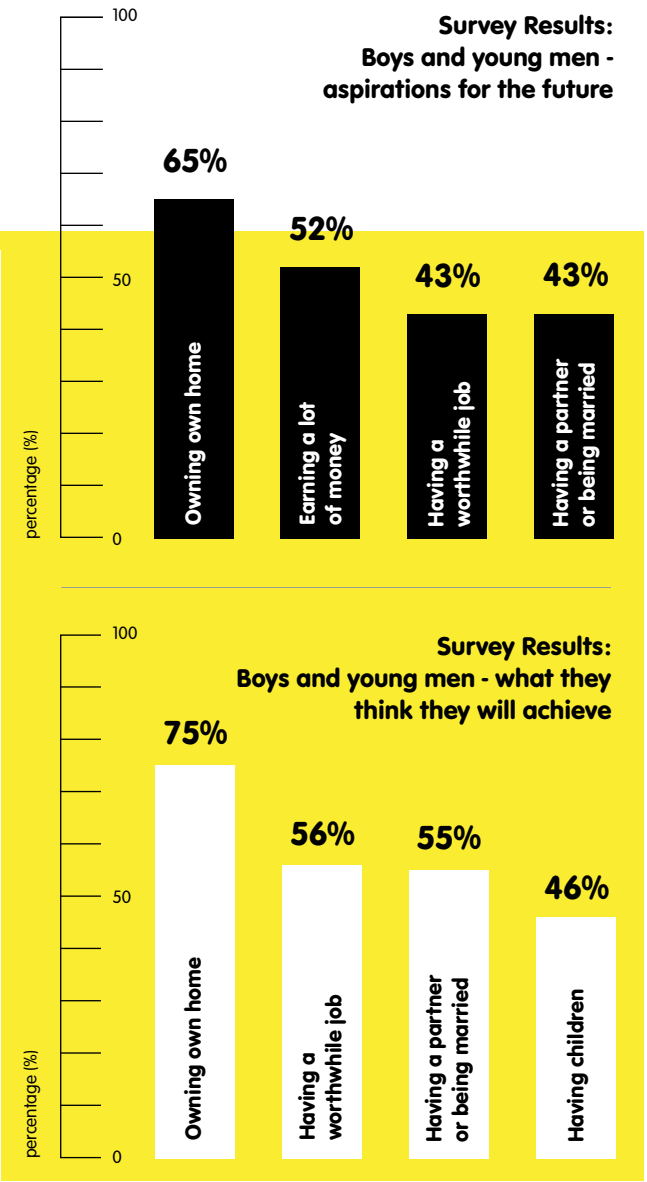
Boys and young men in survey shared their aspirations for their future, this is what they told us they wanted:

- **65%** owning own home
- **52%** earning a lot of money
- **43%** having a worthwhile job
- **43%** having a partner or being married

Interestingly, when asked what they think they will achieve, they told us:

- **75%** owning own home
- **56%** having a worthwhile job
- **55%** having a partner or being married
- **46%** having children

Though **52% of boys and young men had wanted to earn a lot of money, only 41% thought this was realistic**. Having children was seen as being more realistic than earning a lot of money.



25. Harland, K and McCready, S. (2012). Taking boys seriously – A longitudinal study of adolescent male school-life experiences in Northern Ireland. Centre for Young Men's Studies.

This is similar to what boys and young men told us in the focus groups. When thinking about where they saw themselves in 10 years time, they talked about going to university and starting businesses. They also hoped to have a family of their own, nice houses and good jobs.

M: Successful, like having a well paid job, having a nice home.

M: Getting my mum a house.

M: Taking care of your family. Getting treated well.

M: Treating others well too" (FG1)

These aspirations were shared by the young men in Polmont

" Hopefully family, house, job" (FG4)

" Family, fuckin' house in'it and a nice job…selling drugs and all of that don't last forever in'it?" (FG4)

Interestingly, one of the young men in Polmont also discussed the importance of having equality in their relationships and breaking down the stereotype about the "man of the house".

" Its bullshit in'it, see all that stereotypical shit about yeah you have to be the man of the house…50-50 like you can't just be the man all the time, you have to lay it off to someone else. If you and your partner…if someone is really truly your partner you're equals in'it? Both decisions come from both of you in'it" (FG4)

One young man, however, struggled to think about the future, as he will still be in prison in 10 years time.

" I cannae answer that question…I'll still be in the jail" (FG4)

One trans young person also shared that medically transitioning to male will help him to feel more comfortable in himself and to be able to embrace their femininity as well as masculinity.

" I suppose just…it's always the thought of the process of getting more comfortable in yourself, I guess in ten years' time I'd be mostly medically transitioned so I'd be a lot more comfortable in the fact that I'm male and it's always been a thing right now I wouldn't like wear a skirt or whatever but once I'm fully medically transitioned I'd feel a lot more comfortable to be able to embrace the more feminine side of myself. So that's dead cool" (FG2)

" In 2050 in that year hopefully men will know that it's not all about who's better and who's strongest"

Young people shared with us what a positive future for boys and young men in 2050 would look like. There were two main themes to responses by young people in the focus groups, that there is equality for everyone and there are no stereotypes.

" Everyone is equal"

" Everyone is equal, they're no' no' sensitive and they're no' sexist" (FG5)

" Yeah it could be non-binary, you could be that you could be… you're just a person and that's what I see transgender and non-binary people they're just people just like us. I don't think male or female it doesn't really matter, it wouldn't matter" (FG3)

" How like disabled people have often been left out you know and they don't feel included and I hope that that all changes soon as well you know because we're all equal, we're all human beings, no matter who we are and especially as much as we're called disabled people, people need to understand that we are people, we're not called disabled people, we shouldn't be carrying labels, or tags and that just to say this is who we are you know because we're all in the world as it is you know?" (FG3)

"Not to have stereotypes"

" In 2050 in that year hopefully men will know that it's not all about who's better and who's strongest" (FG5)

" Not to have stereotypes. Not the masculine buff man stereotypes. Get rid of them" (FG2)

" Yeah I hope things would be a bit more relaxed in that sense that people can still be masculine without having it be dangerous and effecting others you know? Just the sort of masculine that makes them happy" (FG2)

" I'd like it to be more relaxed on men wearing skirts and dresses and being able to be more feminine and wear whatever you want really without being attacked for it" (FG2)

In summary...

- In their ideal futures boys and young men are seeking stability and security through owning their own homes, earning a lot of money and having a partner or being married.
- Boys and young men would like everyone to be equal and not to have stereotypes about what it is to be a boy or young man in Scotland.

Conclusion

In 2021 No Knives, Better Lives explored what it is like to be a boy or young man in Scotland today. The purpose of the research was to develop and deepen our understanding of how young people feel about masculinity and growing up.

What did we find and did we deepen our understanding of what it is like to be a boy or young man in contemporary Scottish society? Overall, what we discovered was a much more positive story than is typically portrayed. That most boys and young men are positive individuals with everyday aspirations, who can reflect on negative cultural stereotypes. That most boys and young men feel at ease talking about their feelings and behaviours. And that most boys and young men have someone they can talk to about issues. It is, of course, what happens when these things aren't there for our boys and young men that things go badly for them. And perhaps this is where we need to concentrate our finest best efforts. We need a culture with spaces and people who can confidently listen, talk and reflect about a 'positive' masculinity with young people of all genders. A 'positive' masculinity needs to be the 'social norm' in Scotland. This would have a massive impact on that element of Scottish culture that enables violence to proliferate.

A positive future

Contrary to media/speculation boys and young men did not conform wholly to negative cultural stereotypes. Reassuringly, being a boy or young man in Scotland in 2021 is a more positive experience than we might have predicted. The young people we spoke to were reflective about the stereotypes that exist about masculinity and were finding ways to navigate them. They were optimistic for the future and even their realistic expectations showed they thought they would own their own home, have a worthwhile job and have a partner or be married.

Reflection on 'masculine' cultural stereotypes

It is true that boys and young men do feel cultural and societal pressures to conform to stereotypes, but they told us that they were very aware of this. In our survey, boys and young men from very diverse backgrounds were able to reflect on their experience and demonstrate a really deep awareness of what constituted undue 'negative' pressure. There was pressure to look and act a certain way ('a massive buff guy'), but the boys we engaged with knew when this was causing problems at home, school, or in relationships. They valued the space to think about these stereotypes and how they could negatively impact behaviour.

Being caring – not just a feminine trait?

One of the big surprises was the importance of 'being caring' placed by all genders. The qualities that young people felt were most important for a boy or young man included:

- 51% being confident
- 49% caring

Caring is both valuable and valued as a trait for boys and young men. What was once considered a female trait is valued across the gender spectrum and now almost on a par with confidence. It was interesting that being caring was perceived as a strength rather than a weakness.

Risk taking and escalation: Nipping it in the bud

Just over half of boys and young men were taking part in risk taking or violent behaviour. They didn't feel pressured by their friends to do so. Their response to escalating violent behaviour on the whole was proportionate to the situation. But, let's not ignore the fact that boys and young men were more likely than girls and young women to have experience of the criminal justice system. They were also more likely to have threatened someone and hit, kicked or punched someone. So, clearly there is some important work needed to address this on how boys and young men self-regulate their behaviour.

An adult to talk to

Boys and young men were open about their worries and more comfortable sharing them, than we might have expected. 85% of boys and young men felt there was a least one adult they could trust if they have a problem. Just less than half of boys and young men in the survey would talk to their parents and friends if they had a problem. Stereotypes still exist about young men not showing their emotions and needing to 'man up' but our research shows they are more resilient and willing to share their worries than we sometimes give them credit for. These findings highlight the importance of pro-social adults (parents and youth workers) to support young people with concerns they might have and how to navigate their masculinity. These adults don't just need to be men, women play an important role too.

Space to talk

Boys and young men demonstrated a willingness to talk about their feelings but were often thwarted in this by lack of space or relevant people willing to create and facilitate this space. Practitioners shared with us their lack of knowledge and confidence in talking about masculinity, but that it was necessary and important to their work. This seems to indicate that there is a gap to create practitioner resources to help practitioners feel more confident in discussing masculinity.

Relevant Places (a place to talk)

+

Relevant Spaces (creating the time to talk)

+

Relevant People (a pro-social adult of any gender to talk to)

+

Relevant Tools (the tools to talk confidently about masculinity)

=

Relevant Services (embedding a culture of positive masculinity)

Recommendations

Nationally

Creating a culture for positive masculinity to flourish would include:

- Safe spaces for young people to explore and understand masculinity
- A move away from binary notions of gender roles to viewing gender roles on a spectrum
- Sharing more positive stories of masculinity
- More funding for youth work as a safe space to have these discussions
- Adult role models for boys and young men to learn about positive masculinity including from women in their lives.

No Knives, Better Lives

Workforce development

- Positive Masculinity Programme - 6 week programme for young people in receipt of youth work
- Positive Masculinity Programme toolkit and capacity building training for youth workers to increase confidence delivering structured activities and enhance those everyday conversations (brief interventions)
- Positively Challenging (brief interventions) – advice and activities for challenging negatively held beliefs and stereotypes for all practitioners
- Alliance and Community of Practice – space to grow confidence for practitioners, make connections and develop cohesiveness in the development of a positive masculinity national work stream/framework
- Evidence base – continue to evolve our thinking of what helps to create the conditions for boys and young men to develop a positive masculinity through review, evaluation and research.

Direct marketing to young people

- Use social media to promote messaging a 'social norms' modelling its normal to be a caring and kind young man who champions non-violence (the masculine trait of strength as an asset) TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat
- Sharing positive stories of masculinity as case studies and through social media – positive news stories
- Check in with all young people to ensure that our content is fresh, relevant and resonates with the experience of what it is like to be a boy or young man in Scotland.

Annex 1 – Information about young people in the focus groups

Young men who are justice experienced

This focus group included 3 young men aged 16 plus. The young men were serving short and long term sentences for knife related crimes.

Younger boys from a youth work organisation (aged 7-11)

This included 4 boys aged 7-11 attending the YMCA in Leith. The boys attend an outdoor supervised play session targeting areas of multiple deprivation (SIMD1), including a tower block, where 80% of the attendees live. It is open to all primary aged children but all the boys attending the focus group had been referred to the service from a variety of support agencies, including school, social work and the Multi-Cultural Family Base (MCFB). For the attendees to be truly representative of the ethnic make-up of Leith, the YMCA ensure a minimum 20% attendees are BAME.

Referral criteria includes:

- In receipt of benefits
- Single parent household
- Social work involvement
- In receipt of free school meals

Young people who are trans men and gender fluid

This included 3 young people aged 16-19 who attend LGBT Youth Scotland youth group in Tayside. The young people identify as trans men or gender fluid.

Boys and young men from the black and minority ethnic community

This group was made up of 9 black and minority ethnic young people aged 11-17. They all attend the SCORE Scotland youth centre in Westerhailes. Many of the young people face racism and discrimination at school and within their communities. Many of the families which they come from are conservative and religious, including conservative Christian families, as well as Muslim families. Many of these young people do not have space to talk about issues at home which may be viewed as taboo or culturally inappropriate. This is compounded with fear of racism and racial harassment. It can be very challenging for black and minority ethnic young people to have safe spaces to share their concerns/ questions/experiences.

Young men with disabilities

This group included 3 young disabled and gay men aged 16 plus who attend Glasgow Disability Alliance's Young Drivers for Change. This is a network open to all young disabled people aged 14-30. The network brings young disabled people together to build skills and confidence, provide peer support, and enable young disabled people's voices to influence change. Young Drivers for Change develop their talents and ideas through courses and activities such as podcasting and creative activism; online campaigning; peer research; facilitation skills; goal setting; and taking the lead in designing and hosting sessions for other young GDA members.

Young women from a youth work organisation

This focus group included 3 young women aged 13-17 who attend SHE Voices at SHE Scotland. The project aimed to give women aged 13+ a platform to voice their experience on the issue of social media and its effects on women. This was done through group work/discussion based activities and creative means such as poetry, art and drama. Over the six weeks, the women made a short film on social media and their experience of the project.

Many thanks to all
those who took part
in this research or
contributed to the report

#ImagineAMan

YouthLink Scotland
Caledonian Exchange,
19A Canning Street, Edinburgh EH3 8EG

T: 0131 313 2488
E: info@youthlinkscotland.org
W: www.youthlinkscotland.org

No knives
Better lives

YouthLink Scotland
The national agency for youth work

Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

YouthLink Scotland is a Company Limited by Guarantee.
Registered in Scotland No: 164547. Charity Ref: SC003923

scqf Inclusive Recruiter
Living Wage Scotland
OSCR
CYBER ESSENTIALS
Investors in Diversity Award
Achieved. Valid Until January 2024

noknivesbetterlives.org.uk