

Violence Reduction: The role of shame and marginalisation

Findings and implications for policy and practice

Josh's images depicting his mindset around violence and non-violence.



“Before”

“After”

A qualitative study with 11 men with experience of street violence and 12 professional stakeholders in the West Midlands.

Dr Anna Gillions (July 2026)

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Executive Summary

Why this matters

This research suggests that violence prevention should address experiences of shame and exclusion alongside behaviour. Respectful relationships, practical opportunities and a sense of belonging may support alternatives to violence.

About the study

The research involved 11 men (aged 18-35) in the West Midlands, as well as 12 professional stakeholders from police, probation, youth justice, youth services and therapeutic services. It used images created or selected by participants, and 1:1 interviews.

Key Messages

- Shame was often expressed indirectly, through accounts of feeling inadequate, weak, judged or rejected.
- Responses to shame varied. Violence was not the only response, and absence of violence did not necessarily indicate wellbeing.
- Marginalisation appeared to intensify shame and restrict alternatives to violence.
- Feeling valued and belonging to groups without violent norms appeared important in accounts of positive change.

What practitioners could consider

A shame-informed approach means working with an awareness of the possibility of shame (and its behavioural responses) to recognise experiences of humiliation or rejection that may be influencing behaviour.

Practitioners: explore possible shame underlying behaviour and maintain accountability without humiliation.

Managers: review service interactions and environments and support consistent, respectful relationships.

Policy-makers and commissioners: address material barriers and sustain opportunities for meaningful participation and belonging.

Caveat

This report concerns a small-scale in-depth qualitative study exploring shame and shame responses. It is not an evaluation of an intervention.

Full report

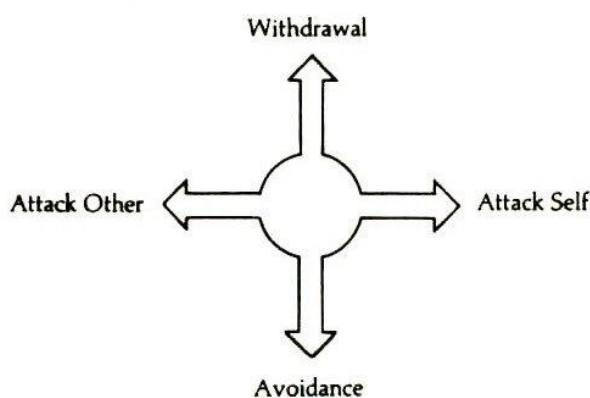
Understanding Shame

Violence continues to be a problem for society, and previous research has drawn attention to the role of shame in relation to violence (Gilligan, 2003).

Shame is a painful self-conscious emotion involving a negative view of ourselves and concern about how others see us. Its purpose is to keep us connected to our social group, ensuring our survival. Shame is a warning sign that those connections are at risk. It is painful, prompting us to take action. Shame is the name of a whole family of emotions including embarrassment, humiliation, mortification, feeling judged or exposed, feeling disrespected, feeling small or not enough. It is different from guilt, which is a reflection on our actions, whereas shame is a reflection on the self.

We all experience shame as part of our daily lives. In an ideal scenario, we would make efforts to repair the relationship and reconnect. In this way, shame can be transformative, enabling us to reflect on the kind of person we want to be. This is healthy shame.

Sometimes shame can become unhealthy. This can happen when there is no safe connection to others, if there are multiple shame events or the events are very severe or traumatic. Shame can build up over time and become chronic (sometimes called toxic shame), resulting in the person believing there is something wrong with them. They do not live in a constant state of shame but may become highly alert to further possible experiences of shame, ready to avoid it. In this way, it can drive their behaviour and their decisions.



The Compass of Shame shows the different behaviours we use to manage or escape the painful feeling of shame. One of these is to Attack Other, which can mean anything from blaming others, lashing out verbally, or physical violence.

Each of these four responses occurs on a spectrum – for example, taking yourself away from a situation briefly can be restorative, whereas prolonged isolation can be harmful.

Compass of Shame - Nathanson, 1992

About the evidence

This research focused on eleven young men (age 18-35) in the West Midlands with experience of using street violence within the last three years. Men were recruited using snowball sampling through formal and informal networks.

The men were asked to take or select pictures to present their experiences. This is a recognised way of enabling people to engage with the emotional side of their experience and approach sensitive issues in a safe and managed way. They then shared the pictures and their experiences in individual interviews (1 hour). Participants names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

12 stakeholders (recruited through professional networks) engaged in interviews (1 hour) to add a professional perspective. They all had experience of working with young men who use violence.

The project prioritised depth, using a small sample size to understand the relationships involved. Pictures and interviews were analysed using visual coding and grounded theory analysis. Emotional content (for participant interviews only) was analysed by noting changes in posture and expression visually and aurally through the interviews.

This study offers detailed insights into this group's experience. It does not establish cause or intervention effectiveness. It concerns men aged 18-35 with experience of street violence in the West Midlands. Transferability to other groups, settings or forms of violence should not be assumed.

Findings

Shame may be present even when people do not name it

Participants rarely mentioned shame directly, but it showed up in relation to violence and to other aspects of life. Anton and Harvi mentioned feeling ashamed when they looked back at some of their violent behaviour and how others might have perceived it. Aaron used the word shame in relation to *not* using violence, feeling that his peers may have judged him. Dan explained how being able to fight meant being accepted into a group of friends and not needing to feel ashamed anymore.



Changes in tone, expression and posture were interpreted in the context of participants' wider accounts as possible experiences of shame, consistent with research identifying shame (Scheff & Retzinger, 2001). Mark spoke more quietly and hesitantly as he said "It wasn't my finest moment, let's put it that way. And yes [pause] I'd rather not go into the rest of that [nervous laugh]. You're gonna make me out to be even worse". Note Mark's concern about how others might see him.

Jas used his image "Trapped" to show how exposed he felt. Shame expressions came up in relation to feeling weak, having been bullied or abused and concern about how others would view them. Stakeholders identified many signs of shame though they didn't use that language:

Jas – "Trapped" (Psychoshadow, n.d.)

The one thing they all say is they at some point they've felt not enough. All say it. Umm, just not enough and they had to find a way to be enough. Which often is taking control of a situation through violence... (S7, police)

Chronic shame, and a sense of a build-up, was also described by many participants. Here, Harvi is describing how an event tapped into his existing chronic shame:

I felt like I actually *shrunk*. I felt like my head was just permanently *weighed down* and it felt like it was just raining on to me, but it wasn't actually raining... .. Just feel *smaller and smaller and smaller* until you just can't, really. And you just wanna *crumble up into a ball*. [italics reflect researcher's emphasis].

This suggests that services could benefit by exploring underlying shame.



Harvi – "Comfort in sadness"

Less violence does not necessarily mean less distress



Anton – “Losing Time”

The study showed that while there were plenty of examples of young men using violence to avoid shame, there were also many occasions where they used other shame defences – either removing themselves to a quiet space (as pictured in Harvi’s image “Comfort in sadness”), attacking the self (with thoughts of self-harm and suicide), or avoiding the self (through substance (mis)use). Anton used his image “Losing time” to depict how vulnerable he was making himself through using alcohol to manage shame.

Some stakeholders had assumed that fewer reports of violence meant that wellbeing was improving. This suggests that services could go further in recognising and working with the different behaviours arising from shame.

Unsafe environments and exclusion can restrict alternatives to violence

The study identified marginalisation in respect of poverty, discrimination, unsafe environments, exclusion and barriers to opportunity. Many times, men told me they needed to be able to use violence to protect themselves in the environments where they lived. Men and stakeholders linked this to the need to avoid being seen as weak – a masculine shame response. Marginalisation also made it harder for men to escape from shaming environments and develop alternatives. As Ryan said:

If you trying to get a crackhead away from crack, you won't put him in a room full of crack addicts. So if I'm trying to get away from that life and I gotta go to a probation office, office full of criminals and wait in a waiting room with people that have probably tried to stab my friends in prison, it's not a good look for me, I'm trying to get away from that.

Ali described the setting in “Paradise” as a “hotbed of violence” where he spent time. Many of the men referred to discrimination, bullying and racism, and not having the resources to manage shaming experiences without violence. This was reinforced by stakeholders. Awareness of the impact of marginalisation is important for services.



Ali – “Paradise”

Feeling valued and connected may support positive change



Ryan – “Waiting Room”

Where chronic shame is often reflected by the thought “I am not enough” or “there is something wrong with me”, healthy shame was often shown by a reflection on the kind of person the young man would like to be, and how they wanted people they cared about to see them. Ryan talked about learning that his Mum had cancer, and reflecting on the kind of son he wanted to be and the need to get out of prison to support her, which affected his behaviour.

Feeling valued and connected appeared important in accounts of positive change. For example, Jas was bullied at work and told by his manager to “just ignore them”. With a history of trauma and chronic shame, and no support network, Jas did not have alternate strategies or support. Ali, however, had found work in an organisation where he felt valued and respected, leading to friendships and a sense of belonging. This led to further skills development. He explained that

I'm quite good with my words and I've noticed, 99% of all fights can be solved before the 1st punch is thrown. I can just talk to you. Why do you feel like we need to fight? Because you're wronged me. I'm sorry for wronging you.

Helping people to build safe relationships and connect to a sense of belonging could support positive change. Supporting reflection should never involve inducing shame. Shame is unpredictable, can be damaging, and people may react in harmful ways

Implications for policy and practice

Below are some actions suggested by the findings:

Group	Actions to consider
Practitioners	Learn to understand and recognise possible shame. Explore the function of people's experiences of withdrawal, avoidance, and self-harm as well as violence. Avoid shaming people further. Help people to explore ways of managing shame without harming themselves or others. Identify trusted relationships and meaningful activities to build on. Access training/briefings on recognising and working with shame.
Managers	Review potentially humiliating service interactions (for staff as well as people using the service). Provide shame-informed reflective supervision and training. Support continuity of relationships and effective referral pathways. Consider appointment arrangements, shared waiting areas or barriers to support that could undermine people's efforts to move away from violence.
Policy-makers and commissioners	Address barriers to housing, education, employment and community participation. Fund sustained opportunities for connection and belonging. Assess wellbeing and engagement alongside violence outcomes.

Police and probation	Youth justice and education
Consider: dignity during enforcement, accountability without humiliation, explanations of decisions, privacy, safe service environments.	Consider: responses to bullying, exclusion and public reprimands, opportunities for trusted relationships and participation.
Mental health, health and social care	Violence prevention projects
Consider: exploring distress alongside outward behaviour, with appropriate safeguarding and clinical responses.	Consider: sustained relationships and meaningful opportunities, building opportunities for participation.

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- Stay True
- Phase Trust
- Catch-22
- Coventry Boys and Girls Club
- British Sociological Association

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Team discussion

Where might our service unintentionally generate shame, and what could we change?

Further Information

Further information about the research is available at [Unmasking Emotion](#).

How might these findings inform your service? To discuss the research, arrange events or share how you have used the report, contact Dr Anna Gillions via the website or email: gillion2@uni.coventry.ac.uk

<https://wp.coventry.domains/unmaskingviolence/>