Getting out for Good: Preventing Gangs Through Participation

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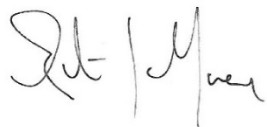# Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Deborah Jump and Rachel Horan, summarising the research evidence on girls and gangs, and how this has been utilised to develop the 'Getting out for Good' (GOFG) project which combines gender-specific mentoring with sporting and cultural activities. The girls and young women (aged 14-21 years) involved in the project were found to be marginalised and increasingly vulnerable, with frequent issues of parental neglect, care experience, school exclusion, drugs and alcohol misuse, and significant mental health and emotional needs. The theory of change for the project was revised over time, encompassing a focus on improving (i) emotional skills and agency (individual level), and (ii) social skills and capital (community level). The need for a bespoke approach (aligning to the need for a personalised approach set out in the inspection standards for youth offending services) was fully recognised, ensuring that girls and young women are enabled and assisted in their own unique journeys, particularly at vulnerable points in their lives.

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Rachel Horan is a Chartered Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. She is an independent consultant, and Director of The Averment Group, providing psychologically informed research, monitoring and evaluation, reform, and practice development support. Rachel has many years of experience as a youth justice practitioner and manager and as a peer reviewer with the UK Home Office Ending Gang and Serious Youth Violence Team, and at HM Prison and Probation Service where she worked with colleagues to develop the Identity Matters Intervention for people convicted of group or gang affiliated offences. Rachel has authored numerous research and evaluation publications with interests in strengths-based approaches to intervention and assessment, and group-enabled violence and offending.

1. Introduction

The problem with finding an effective and relevant response to the dynamic challenge of serious youth violence, gangs and group offending continues. After years of decline, serious violence and violent crime began to rise in 2014, a trend that included a rise in offences involving knives and firearms and shifts towards younger victims and perpetrators (HM Government, 2018). The need for change in both understanding and approach was obvious. In 2018, a Serious Violence Strategy was launched by the UK Government (HM Government, 2018), accompanied by a much-needed reframing of perspectives and a holistic and integrated response that recognises the vulnerability of young people. An angled safeguarding and child protection lens (HM Government, 2021), together with recognition of the prevalence of mental health issues drawing people into gangs and impacting upon individual's mental health (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2020) has developed our response. However, the challenge continues to evolve, as do the current and enduring impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the same time, acknowledgement of the challenges faced by girls involved and affected by gangs and serious youth violence has developed (Khan et al., 2013), but an accompanying understanding is still not clear. The plight of girls and young women associated with gangs is described by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) in its *Girls and Gangs* paper and summarised with a searing conclusion that 'one of the most concerning aspects of girls in gangs is how little we really know' (CSJ, 2018).

Within this policy and practice context, in 2017 Comic Relief awarded three-year funding to a number of international projects in the UK, South Africa and Colombia. This global programme – entitled 'I Define Me' (IDM) – focused on supporting girls and young women (G&YW) affected by gangs and those vulnerable to or being criminally exploited by gangs. Projects in the UK were evaluated and funding was continued for an additional two years. This unique approach enabled projects to develop gender-responsive interventions and responses accompanied by significant learning.

This Academic Insights paper is a timely opportunity to share this learning by describing one of the UK IDM projects, the 'Getting out for Good' (GOFG) project which has been overseen by the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. We will describe the parameters of GOFG, discuss some of the evidence used to design the project and its theory of change, and detail its evaluation, learning and development. We will discuss the most important learning that has emerged; the dominance of presenting emotional and mental health needs of the G&YW. We will then describe how the project developed its focus beyond gangs to an understanding of criminal and sexual exploitation, paralleling the developing evidence base and policy response. Most importantly, it will tell the stories of some of the G&YW involved in GOFG, in their own words, and how the GOFG fits with their individual and unique stories.

2. Getting Out for Good

The Getting out for Good (GOFG) project works with G&YW aged 14-21 years. The project is housed within the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. The overall design of GOFG was developed by the authors.

2.1 The context: what research told us about girls and gangs

At the start of the project in 2017, GOFG sought to engage G&YW who were at risk of, or involved in gangs. Our first hurdle was the inevitable complexity of defining gangs, a contentious issue that needed to be explored in order to identify inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Over the years, there have been numerous definitions and typologies, and reaching a consensus is proving difficult. The 2010 Government report *Safeguarding Children and Young People who may be Affected by Gang Activity* distinguishes between:

- ''Peer Group' – a relatively small and transient social grouping which may or may not describe themselves as a gang depending on the context.
- 'Street Gang' – groups of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity.
- 'Organised Criminal Gangs' – a group of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise). For most, crime is their 'occupation'.

Whilst this is a useful starting point of understanding, the relationship between the three groups is complex and fluid. Importantly, researchers highlight the importance of exploring an individual's own sense of their involvement in collective offending, and avoid labelling and simplistic assumptions about gangs (Harris et al., 2011). Firmin (2009) argued that the male dominated account of gang violence threatened to delay long-term progress in making change. Thankfully, research has now moved away from a previous reliance on male gang members and adult practitioners as the source of information about females (Batchelor, 2009), and more recent research has been conducted through a more gendered lens of girls and young women. Efforts to prevent or address gang association among females clearly need to be gender specific (CSJ, 2018).

Specific evidence was drawn from the 2013 Centre for Mental Health report *A Need to Belong: What Leads Girls to Join Gangs* (Khan et al., 2018). In this comprehensive review of the international literature on girls involved in gangs and an analysis of data collected from more than 8,000 young people, they identified a wide range of risk factors for females to becoming members of gangs. These include:

- severe childhood behavioural problems and mental ill health
- poor maternal mental health, exposure to violence in the home, and experience of trauma
- low academic aspiration and disengagement with school
- association with antisocial or gang-involved peers and peer rejection or victimisation
- feeling unsafe or marginalised in their neighbourhood
- high income inequalities and social influences that devalue female roles.

This evidence allowed us to avoid getting tangled in a 'gang definition' and think about gender-specific risk factors as inclusion and referral criteria. In addition, we identified that projects which empower both young women (and indeed men) to break the cycle of power and control in relationships is essential to supporting young people away from gang life (Eshalomi, 2020). The Centre for Mental Health (2013) report also identifies how preventive measures need to tackle multiple risk factors, for example to support secure attachment in early years, to reduce maltreatment and neglect, to promote positive parenting techniques, to strengthen girls' self-esteem, and to respond quickly to the first signs of mental ill health among children. It also identifies how programmes working with gang members need to be sensitive to the specific requirements of young women, for example:

- to foster respectful, collaborative and empowering relationships to strengthen self-esteem
- to provide safe housing
- to offer positive female role models.

Guided by this literature, GOFG adopted an approach that combined gender-specific mentoring with sporting and cultural activities for the girls and young women referred into the project. Sport can effectively engage young people on the verge and/or at risk of offending, by providing diversionary activities when they otherwise may be involved in anti-social behaviour. The evidence for such schemes is well documented elsewhere, especially regarding sport's ability to engage young people at crucial times, dismantle negative peer groups, and provide non-conventional classroom-based education to those who are currently disengaged (Sampson, 2015). In community and local settings, sport has been effective in attracting young people and improving performance in activities in which they are not normally motivated to engage (Nichols, 2007). Moreover, the method of active learning commonly seen in sport has been identified as a key element in the 'what works' literature on reducing offending (Meek 2018). Sport, therefore, is a valuable resource in motivating young people who are both marginalised, and reluctant to engage in conventional positive activities.

GOFG delivered gender-specific sporting activity in the form of boxing and football – both of these sports can contribute towards a reduction in the need for interventions by criminal justice agencies and police services when delivered correctly (Jump, 2020). Coupled with filmmaking and the mentoring aspect, a bespoke gender-specific programme was devised. By working closely with the mentors, we enhanced the sporting activities for the young women with the intention of contributing towards resilience building, enhancing personal aspirations, facilitating teamwork, and fostering positive peer networks, while simultaneously up-skilling the G&YW for the job market with nationally recognised AQA qualifications awarded by the university.

As part of this bespoke programme, the GOFG team also coupled the research with a more participatory approach to working with young people (see the earlier Academic Insights paper 2021/10 by Smithson and Gray). This approach allowed the young people to have a voice and is grounded in the democratisation of the research process, whereby centralising the lived experiences of the co-researchers and the breaking down of hierarchies and social injustices is paramount. With this in mind, GOFG mobilised the young people to participate in the research process through an amplification of their voices rather than a stealing of their stories. Indeed, this process required a joint approach where young women felt empowered as well as feeling safe enough to express their vulnerability, and in some cases, their reluctance to change. Therefore, the GOFG project aimed to raise aspirations, increase social capital and help young women become more physically fit through a process that empowered them and included them at every level (Horan, Jump and O'Shea, 2019).

2.2 The evaluation

The evaluation of GOFG began with the formulation of a theory of change (ToC) for the project, drawing down from the overarching IDM global ToC. The ToC had several key purposes: (i) developing, (ii) implementing, and (iii) evaluating GOFG. A collaborative exercise was undertaken to formulate the ToC and its goals and the pathway towards its goals, taking care to select the right strategy based on evidence. The formulated ToC provided a descriptive theory of GOFG and informed the development of an evaluation framework, identifying what data needed to be collected to identify whether GOFG was achieving its planned outcomes with information about how, why, and when (Horan et al., 2019).

As a consequence, a mixed methods approach was employed to gather standardised psychometric data and provide depth and understanding through qualitative case studies and focus groups. A number of standardised scales/questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data at several points, while qualitative methods sought to explore the descriptive, narrative and context-specific details which were considered critical to provide a foundation for understanding the environment and context in which GOFG activities took place. We wanted to gain rich descriptions of individuals' experiences whilst they were participating in the GOFG project, while also understanding how their experience and the GOFG project fitted with their lives (Horan et al., 2019).

2.3 Getting out of what exactly? What we discovered

It became apparent quite early on that the young women involved in the programme were not 'gang members' or affiliated to any version of a gang typology. The G&YW experienced gangs very differently, and exploitation and its consequences were much more evident. What was identified clearly supported the gender-specific findings of the Centre for Mental Health report (2013), whereby more specific vulnerabilities such as severe childhood behavioural problems and mental ill health were common, as well as low academic aspiration and disengagement with school.

From the qualitative and quantitative evidence that we were able to gather, we can see that the young women referred into the programme came with a high level of presenting need. The GOFG initial 'gang' based referral criteria quickly evolved in recognition of these presenting needs. The Comic Relief programme widened out to G&YW who are vulnerable to the influence of gangs, abuse and crime, and became known as ' I Define Me'; an empowering, rather than labelling title of the transnational programme.

Table 1: Strengths Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) initial mean scores compared to national average scores

SDQ Subscales	Possible range	Clinically significant range	GOFG			National Average	
			N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Emotional problems scale	0-10	≥ 6	29	6.45	2.08	3	2.1
Conduct problems scale	0-10	≥ 5	36	3.86	1.57	2	1.6
Hyperactivity scale	0-10	≥ 7	36	6.08	1.50	3.6	2.2
Peer problems scale	0-10	≥ 4	36	3.92	1.56	1.4	1.4
Prosocial scale	0-40	≤ 5	36	7.86	1.87	8.5	1.4
Total difficulties score	0-10	≥ 18	27	20.56	4.22	10	5.3
Impact	0-10	≥ 2	14	2.80	1.96	2.36	1.51

Some 78 percent of G&YW involved with the GOFG cohort presented with substantial difficulties and need (classified as 'high' and 'very high'). This compared to 10 percent of a national sample having substantial difficulties and needs. Over time, the G&YW SDQ average score moved from a 'very high' category down to a 'high' category, but remained above the clinical threshold. Looking across the administered questionnaires/ scales, there were many improvements in scores. For example, the GOFG cohort moved from an almost neutral point in terms of life satisfaction to an increasingly satisfied point. However, sample sizes were small, particularly at the end point.

Through analysis of the narrative life story case study approach (Horan et al., 2019), we were able to map a young woman's journey in her own words. Using the case studies and the conversations with the G&YW together with their mentor, the GOFG project was able to respond to each individual and assess whether the programme had any impact upon the G&YW's internalised and evolving narrative. Interviews explored where each participant was in their life, their hopes, dreams, aspirations, and current progress, and then analysed how the GOFG programme fitted in and how the participant was personally experiencing the project. Below is an account of one of the participants and a case study example describing her trajectory and participation in GOFG.
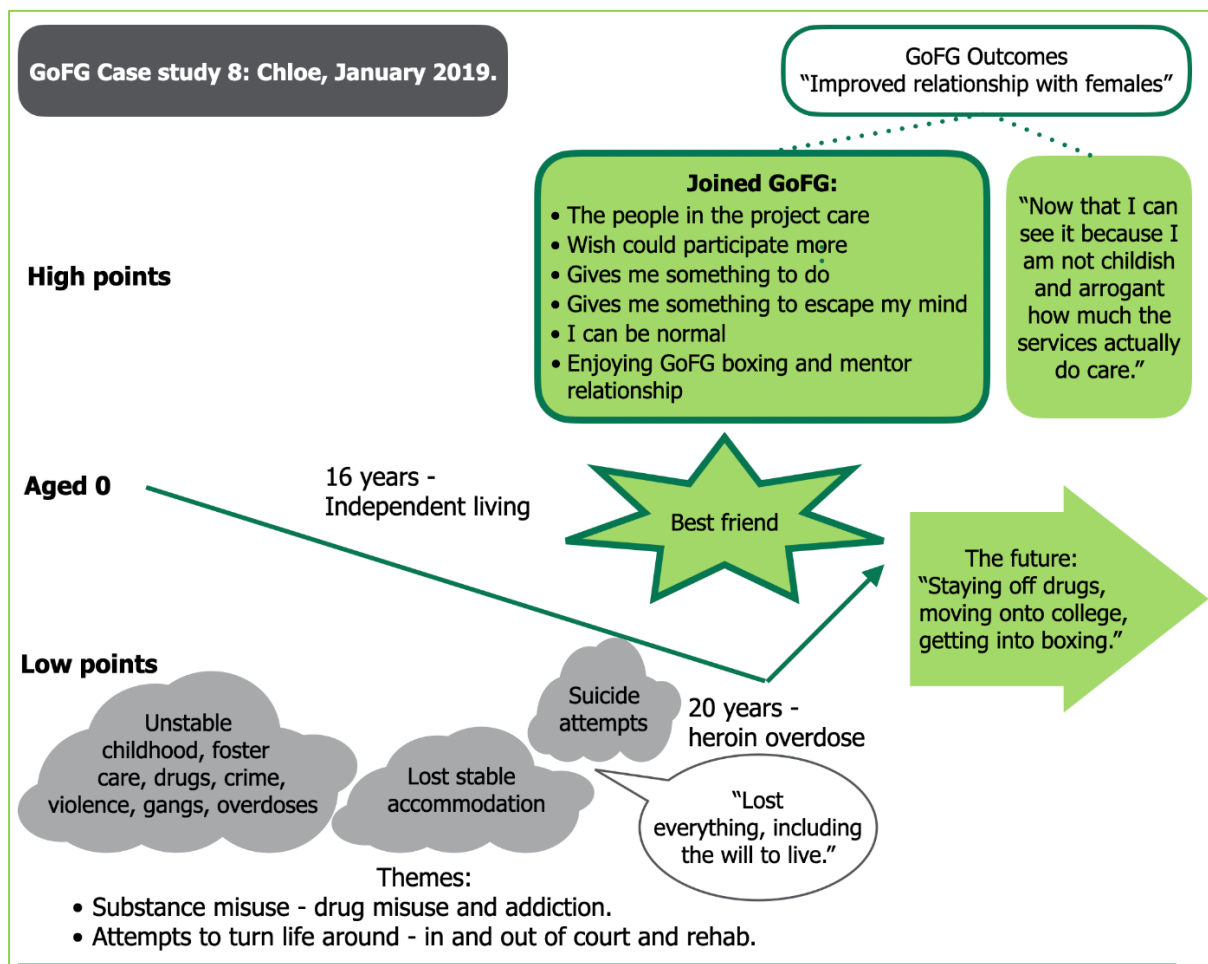
Good practice example: Chloe's story

Chloe was a 21-year-old young woman who had almost completed her engagement with the GOFG project. She recounted a complex life story that began with an unstable childhood that led to drug use, crime, gang engagement and onwards into spiralling drug use and suicide attempts. Chloe identified a significant and enduring friendship as a high point of her life story and that after the most recent overdose, she had reflected upon her life and wanted to make positive change. The GOFG offer had coincided with this turning point, and she engaged with GOFG because it gave her something to do and a place where she could 'escape' and 'be normal'. Over the year the GOFG project had met Chloe's needs and enabled her to improve her relationships with other females and also engage with services and employment. Chloe identified sports activities and her relationship with her mentor as being particularly important elements of GOFG and motivated her engagement and progress towards her sought outcomes, both intermediate and also longer-term outcomes.

2.4 Agile responses to developing findings

Due to the constantly developing findings and the emerging Covid-19 pandemic, the focus of the project changed from one of signposting and various diversionary activities, to a much more individually tailored project that concentrated upon individual harms and personal risk. As well as providing small group work sessions with a focus on increasing positive networks, GOFG supported individuals at key turning points in their lives; this included supporting those who were NEET to find employment and educational placements, as well as advocating for the girls with other services such as CAMHS, social care and youth justice.
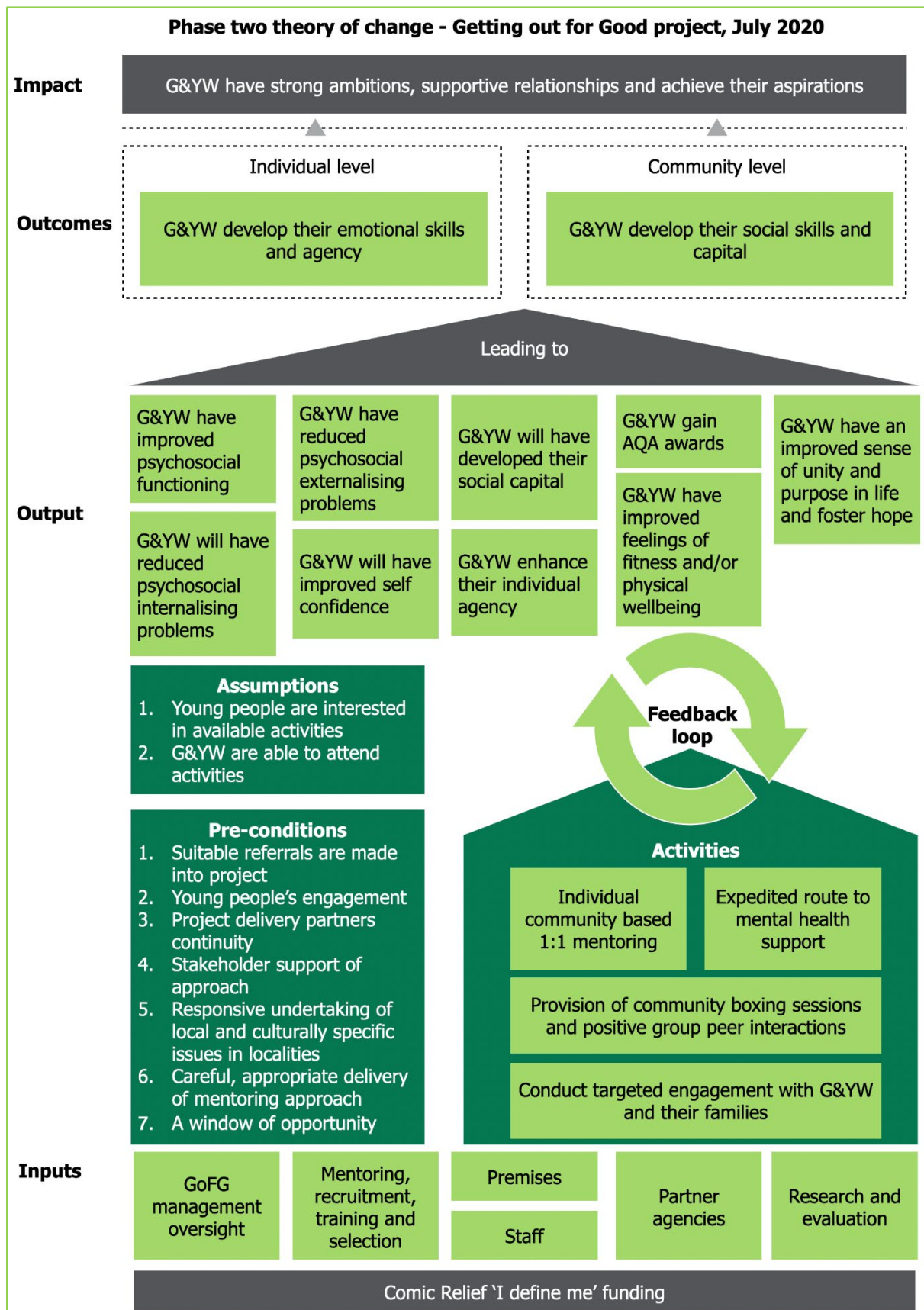
The mentoring aspect was key, and in addition to the mentors staffing the group work and the boxing (the activity the G&YW particularly enjoyed and attended regularly), they had twice weekly contact with each individual to ascertain any needs or presenting issues. Moreover, by the research team working closely with the G&YW using the mixed methods and participatory approaches, we were able to develop their sense of agency and hopes for the future while plotting their upwards trajectory. This aspect was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic whereby previous G&YW returned to GOFG to instigate a peer mentoring programme that worked both on-line and in person to facilitate activities and support during lockdown for those newly referred into the project.

2.5 A revised theory of change

Our emerging findings in 2020 enabled us to reflect upon the first three years of GOFG and understand more about the G&YW and how they had experienced the project. What had become particularly evident was how the G&YW involved in GOFG were marginalised and increasingly vulnerable. They were presenting with frequent issues of parental neglect, care experience, school exclusion, drugs and alcohol misuse, and they very commonly had significant mental health and emotional needs that included low aspirations and low self-esteem.

We revisited the GOFG ToC and integrated our learning into activity revisions and a refocus of sought outcomes. Initially, sought outcomes had been focused around safety, information giving, positive agency, linkages to services, and developing positive relationships. The revised ToC (see figure below) identified clear outputs at individual and community levels leading to sought improvements in emotional skills and agency, together with their social skills and

capital. Learning particularly from the case studies, we were able to understand how GOFG fitted with the G&YW positively, and how this was a consequence of its reflexivity and responsivity.

Phase two theory of change - Getting out for Good project, July 2020

Impact: G&YW have strong ambitions, supportive relationships and achieve their aspirations

Outcomes:

Individual level
- G&YW develop their emotional skills and agency

Community level
- G&YW develop their social skills and capital

Leading to

Output:
- G&YW have improved psychosocial functioning
- G&YW will have reduced psychosocial internalising problems
- G&YW have reduced psychosocial externalising problems
- G&YW will have improved self confidence
- G&YW will have developed their social capital
- G&YW enhance their individual agency
- G&YW gain AQA awards
- G&YW have improved feelings of fitness and/or physical wellbeing
- G&YW have an improved sense of unity and purpose in life and foster hope

Assumptions
1. Young people are interested in available activities
2. G&YW are able to attend activities

Feedback loop

Pre-conditions
1. Suitable referrals are made into project
2. Young people's engagement
3. Project delivery partners continuity
4. Stakeholder support of approach
5. Responsive undertaking of local and culturally specific issues in localities
6. Careful, appropriate delivery of mentoring approach
7. A window of opportunity

Activities
- Individual community based 1:1 mentoring
- Expedited route to mental health support
- Provision of community boxing sessions and positive group peer interactions
- Conduct targeted engagement with G&YW and their families

Inputs:
- GoFG management oversight
- Mentoring, recruitment, training and selection
- Premises
- Staff
- Partner agencies
- Research and evaluation

Comic Relief 'I define me' funding

3. Conclusion

Commencing in 2017, we were able to initiate an emerging evidence-informed approach that has been able to develop over time. We have had the privilege of being able to work responsively and reflexively with G&YW thanks to the support and oversight of Comic Relief who provided meaningful governance and encouraged learning and knowledge transfer across IDM projects. Due to the flexibility and agile response of everyone involved, GOFG was adaptive to the changing needs of G&YW and the services that work with them. By revising our ToC, we devised a bespoke approach at both the community and individual levels that took the needs of G&YW seriously and separate to that of young men.

We identified how it is critical to ensure that G&YW are enabled and assisted in their own unique journeys. We learned how critical mental and emotional health support was to the G&YW in building their agency and capital. We began to understand how each individual G&YW was the author of their own journey; we should not direct their path, but we can help them along their way at such vulnerable points in their stories, to reframe and reconsider their ambitions and provide them with inspiration to achieve what they seek.

This required an approach that took G&YW seriously and recognised that their needs and sense of agency should be developed as part of a holistic approach that was not merely some add-on to a male-centric version of gang prevention. By listening to female voices surrounding serious youth violence and the ways in which it impacts their lives, GOFG was able to chart the deleterious effects of localised and contextual harms the young women experienced. Accordingly, we were able to dislocate this aspect from the wider discourses surrounding gang prevention and youth justice, and locate the project in a person-centred framework that specifically worked with mental health services; arguably enhancing protective factors surrounding criminal and sexual exploitation.

We also conclude by reflecting upon our learning and its contributions towards understanding and responding to Violence and Women and Girls (VAWG). GOFG scraped the surface of the presenting issues concomitant with VAWG. By building upon the previous tried and tested approaches and working within an enhanced safeguarding and child protective perspective, GOFG recognised the vulnerability of G&YW early enough to make meaningful change. As discussed by the Home Affairs Select Committee (2020) and HM Government (2021), the amalgamation of safeguarding and mental health responses is key to addressing the serious youth violence we are witnessing in our communities, and moreover, addressing the harrowing impact of VAWG.

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