“Being from here, it’s not about being famous; it’s about surviving”. An urban ethnographic study of young black men's hegemonic masculinity and knife-carrying in an inner-city London estate.

Brendan King

University College London

Doctor of Education

October 2020
Declaration

I, Brendan King, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed:

Word count: 43,988
Abstract

This qualitative study explores how the masculine performances of young black men inform their knife-carrying on an inner-city London estate. Young men’s narratives describe how their spaces, which contain violent ‘street codes’, shape the idealised, hegemonic, and complicit masculinities of the street, leading some to justify their knife-carrying. The study also examines the role that formal (e.g., youth workers, police) and informal (parents, peers, social media) agents play in young men’s vulnerability and masculine idealisations.

My research uses an interactionist approach within an urban ethnography design. It intersects the fields of gender, criminology and youth studies. Fieldwork took place between February and December 2019. It involved informal conversations and street observations, focus groups, formal interviews, photo projects and community mapping with black males aged between 18-23. During fieldwork, five street-based youth workers also participated in recorded and informal conversations.

Using thematic analyses, findings indicate the presence of two localised masculine hegemonies: one, more established and violent, and one emergent, and more inclusive. The thesis highlights how urban ethnography can enhance understandings of young black men’s masculine performances in inner-city spaces and explores various methodologically creative approaches to engaging ‘marginalised’ participants, including the use of youth workers as gatekeepers. The research has implications for street-based youth work practise: firstly, the findings highlight several risk factors in young men’s lives, requiring mitigation; secondly, they emphasise the importance of street-based youth workers in modelling less violent and more inclusive patterns of masculinity.
Impact Statement

My study of young men’s masculinity, vulnerability and, ultimately, their knife-carrying offers many insights that may be valuable to various stakeholders.

First, my study is relevant for researchers and academics interested in masculinity. Specifically, my research highlights the presence of two localised forms of hegemonic masculinity: one violent and one more inclusive. While, for some, this may confound the landscape of an already complex field, it is a ‘necessary evil’ – especially given participants’ marginalisation in the literature. Moreover, the notions of street codes and street masculinity may enhance the literature on masculinity (and knife-carrying more broadly).

Second, my findings may challenge the pre-conceptions of young knife-carriers and how their masculine identities evolve against a backdrop of SED and violence. Through these perspectives, I hope my work enhances the understanding of how knives become tools for ‘self-defence’. Specifically, my findings aim to fortify the knowledge of the social contexts of knife-carrying by giving a voice to knife-carriers, past and present. My findings may also contribute to the understanding of what leads young men to stop or avoid knife-carrying. In this study, some young men were able to resist (or exit) Maxwell’s violent street code. These findings may inform policies on preventing knife-carrying among at-risk communities.

Third, previous research on inner-city (predominantly black) young men focuses on defining behaviour via an outsider perspective. My research, nonetheless, offers a much closer perspective. My street-level view largely avoids the ‘typical’ epithets of young black males (e.g., gangsterism). Instead, I immersed myself in a community that often finds itself the fringes of society. I thus came to appreciate the social worlds of Maxwell’s young men. Subsequently, I hope that my study debunks some unforgiving stereotypes of inner-city communities, and thus encourages others to explore these underexamined spaces. Moreover, researchers who, like me, are from white ethnicity backgrounds, can gain access to young black male participants. While I leaned on youth workers as gatekeepers during my fieldwork, tools such as researcher disclosure and engaging and creative methodologies were extremely helpful in building rapport.
This research also offers insights outside of the knife-carrying and masculinity literature. For example, if one believes inclusive street masculinities are preferable to violent street masculinities, they should receive the appropriate supporting platform. In this study, I saw the influence that credible and authentic youth workers had on otherwise errant young males. Those practising less violent and more prosocial masculine features offer young men living in high-crime, violent and socioeconomically deprived spaces a masculinity roadmap. The role modelling potential for ‘inclusive black males’ is made more critical given the paucity of positive black males in many young men’s lives. Therefore, youth work organisations (or similar) may wish to focus their recruitment and deployment of those practising inclusive masculine features in a strategic or purposive manner. One can then disseminate these staffing ideas using London-wide or national networks, using presentations and publications to generate knowledge of good practice or funding for further research.
## Contents

Declaration .......................................................................................................................... 1
Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 2
Impact Statement ................................................................................................................ 3
List of Figures and Tables ................................................................................................. 8
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 9
Reflective Statement ......................................................................................................... 10
Chapter 1: Introduction ..................................................................................................... 14
  Rationale ........................................................................................................................... 15
  Theoretical Context ......................................................................................................... 16
  Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 18
  Personal and Professional Positioning ........................................................................... 19
  Thesis Structure ............................................................................................................. 20
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation ............................................... 22
  Knife-carrying Trends .................................................................................................... 22
  Knife-carrying Youths .................................................................................................... 23
  Knife-carrying Black Youths ......................................................................................... 24
  Space, Place and Vulnerability ....................................................................................... 25
    The 'Digital Street' ....................................................................................................... 25
    Vulnerability, Victimisation and Deprivation ............................................................... 27
  Knife-carrying as a Masculine Resource ...................................................................... 30
  Theoretical Position ...................................................................................................... 31
    Street Codes ................................................................................................................ 32
    Hegemonic Masculinity ............................................................................................... 34
    Performing a Complicit Masculinity ........................................................................... 39
  Chapter Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 40
Chapter 3: Methodology .................................................................................................... 43
  Research Design ............................................................................................................. 43
  Ethnography .................................................................................................................. 44
  Urban Ethnography ....................................................................................................... 45
  Ethnographic Site .......................................................................................................... 47
  Methods .......................................................................................................................... 49
    Piloting .......................................................................................................................... 51
    Street Observations .................................................................................................... 51
    Informal Conversations ............................................................................................... 52
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews and Focus Groups</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups and Community Maps</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Recruitment</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Involvement</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeepers</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Process of Analysis</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating Risks</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging Vulnerable Participants</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Insider/Outsider Dichotomy</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Conclusion</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Findings</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azeez</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations of Hegemonic Masculinity</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performances of Street Masculinity</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Codes and Vulnerability</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and Relationships</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankz</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations of Hegemonic Masculinity</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performances of Street Masculinity</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Codes and Vulnerability</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and Relationships</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations of Hegemonic Masculinity</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performances of Street Masculinity</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Codes and Vulnerability</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and Relationships</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Authenticity</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Conclusion</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Background Characteristics and Contexts</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive and Hegemonic Masculinities</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive Masculinity Characteristics and Beliefs</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hegemonic Masculinity Characteristics and Beliefs ................................................................. 136
Darius’s Inclusive Masculinity .................................................................................................. 139
Chapter 5: Conclusions ........................................................................................................... 142
Answering my Research Questions ....................................................................................... 142
Key Findings ............................................................................................................................ 144
Contribution to Knowledge ..................................................................................................... 146
Implications for Personal and Professional Practice ............................................................. 148
Further Research ..................................................................................................................... 149
References ................................................................................................................................ 150
Appendix .................................................................................................................................. 165
1.0 Interview Questions ........................................................................................................... 165
2.0 Participant Information Sheet ............................................................................................. 167
3.0 Community Maps ............................................................................................................... 170
4.0 Glossary ............................................................................................................................. 171
List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Relationships between main theories and young men’ knife-carrying .................... 18
Figure 2: The masculine performances available for Maxwell’s young men.......................... 39
Figure 3: Positioning of the study within overlapping fields .............................................. 43
Figure 4: A typical street within Maxwell’s boundaries ....................................................... 48
Figure 5: One of many dilapidated spaces around Maxwell .................................................. 48
Figure 6: Sampling of primary, secondary and tertiary participants ...................................... 59
Figure 7: Map operationalising a priori themes (orange), emergent themes (blue) and interrelated themes (white) ................................................................. 62
Figure 8: Example community map showing safe (blue) and unsafe (red) spaces.................. 82
Figure 9: Example community map showing safe (yellow) and unsafe (red) spaces .............. 82
Figure 10: Picture of anti-police note (of several) found around Maxwell ............................. 84
Figure 11: Picture of anti-police notes (of several) found around Maxwell ............................ 85
Figure 12: Example scene from drill music videos watched by Bankz ................................. 94
Figure 13: Example scene from drill music videos watched by Bankz ................................. 94
Figure 14: How Bankz would generally appear when around Maxwell .............................. 95
Figure 15: Two examples of social media sites showcasing knives that Bankz was following ............................................................................................................. 98
Figure 16: Example of participant photo projects showing gang graffiti and warning signs near Maxwell .............................................................................................. 116

Table 1: Maxwell population demographics vs. UK population (source: 2011 National Census) ................................................................................................................................. 49
Table 2: Maxwell crime statistics - five most prevalent offences (source: police.uk June 2020) ................................................................................................................................. 49
Table 3: Summary of participant involvement and fieldwork timeline .................................. 50
Table 4: Case comparisons of Azeez, Bankz and Charles - background characteristics and various contexts .................................................................................................................. 128
Table 5: Case comparisons of Azeez, Bankz and Charles - forms of masculine performances and their associative characteristics and beliefs ......................................................... 133
Acknowledgements

I would like to convey my gratitude to those who took part in this study, from Maxwell’s young men to MYP’s youth workers. Without them, this research would not be possible. I would also like to extend a huge thank you to the friends and family supporting my journey through this thesis and the EdD over the last few years. Finally, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Jon Swain and Dr Olga Cara, for their support and feedback. I dedicate this thesis to everyone who thought a young boy from Maxwell would amount to nothing.
Reflective Statement

The Doctorate in Education (EdD) has enabled me to look at my professional life differently. This difference is mainly through the integration of professional and academic knowledge. As Klenowski and Lunt (2008 p.1) note:

[The EdD] provides the opportunity for professionals to develop their capacity for critical, professional agency often achieved [through] reflection for the integration of academic and professional knowledge.

The EdD has allowed me to reflect and observe developments in my professional field. It has enabled me to draw on knowledge and different epistemological lenses that would otherwise be absent. In this way, viewing my professional practice (and the profession as a whole) through different lenses encourages my reflexivity. Subsequently, this helps frame my professional practice and, as Power (2008) notes, the development of a ‘professional imagination’ – which helps to sustain us in our professional lives.

Before starting the EdD programme, I was involved in various research projects within the sport for development and youth work domains – predominantly in the charitable or third sector. The golden thread between these endeavours was the *modus operandi* of the organisations with whom I was working; their focus was on supporting at-risk or vulnerable young people. Through this work, I gained valuable insight and interest in these young peoples’ lives. I saw many parallels with my own time spent growing up in a ‘tough' inner-city community in London.

My assignments on the taught aspects of the EdD programme explored many of the facets of this previous professional experience. These facets were ones I knew well, including the working practices within the charity sector and the dark side of social capital within the sport for development field. Also, during the taught part of the EdD programme, I was able to practice developing research proposals, with an emphasis on a deeper understanding of research methods. The critical feedback I received on this work was significant for the present thesis. It helped me focus on research design and justifying each stage of the research decision-making process. This transparency extends to the complexities of undertaking a research ethics review – a cornerstone of any piece of research with at-risk or vulnerable young people like those in this thesis.
While this undertaking was not a wholly novel process, the deeper level of engagement fostered by the EdD and its tutors gave a fresh perspective.

My assignments during the taught aspect of the EdD programme allowed me to explore a familiar landscape while simultaneously being challenged with new skills and knowledge. Adopting new theoretical positions, and using different conceptual lenses, meant that I could make creative connections between policy and practice. This processes of fostering new understanding also highlighted how I could influence policy in my field. While educational policy discourse, for some, has ‘boundaries’ (e.g., Keep, 2011), there are, nonetheless, ‘policy windows’ (Marshall, 2000) that emerge for one to influence. The various assignments, have, in some way, enabled me to refresh and develop my professional identity in the evaluation field.

The last assignment before this thesis, The Institute Focussed Study (IFS), was arguably the most formative piece of work on the EdD programme. My IFS examined the socialisation of adolescent students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. While I was formally interested in their socialisation within a sport context, I encountered many young men (and women) who those participants in this thesis. While I have left the organisation that was the focus in the IFS, my ‘insider researcher’ position was one that came under closer scrutiny in the present thesis. Adopting this insider position created a certain tension – both for me as an insider researcher and for my colleagues who doubtless felt, at times, ‘under the microscope’. Nonetheless, the tools I acquired (e.g., reflexive distance, journaling and unbiasing data) through the successful delivery of the IFS were immediately transferable. These skills are capabilities that I will retain throughout my professional career.

Having completed my postgraduate degree in 2011, starting the EdD in 2015 meant spending four years outside of educational institutions. In this way, the process of submitting and receiving critical feedback on assignments was somewhat unfamiliar. Nonetheless, the various appraisals I have received throughout the EdD have fostered periods of self-review. These appraisals have also highlighted my strengths and areas for development as a researcher and evaluator of programmes. These experiences, where tutors have modelled good practice in feedback, have informed my professional line management. Thus, the EdD has been, in many ways, an apprenticeship of sorts.

As Carnell (2006) states in her examination of the Institute of Education’s EdD
programme, there are multiple benefits including belonging to a community of practice, communicating complicated theories or concepts and developing as a researcher. Carnell’s work, and my experiences of the EdD, highlight how students can grow (and sometimes strengthen) new identities through the course ranging from learners through to experienced practitioners.

Without doubt, a highlight of my EdD experience has been the opportunity to engage with other professionals from diverse personal and professional backgrounds. This engagement has brought into focus a more rounded, broader perspective on professional practise within education. While my professional field is unique among my EdD colleagues, learning, for example, ethical issues in nursing have given me a deeper understanding of rigour and good practice. Furthermore, the opportunities to engage in conversation with – and to be challenged by – EdD colleagues (many of whom are prominent figures in their respective fields) has improved my communication and dissemination skills. While it is possibly too much to say that I have ‘found my voice’ on the EdD, I have, without doubt, learned to harness my voice in different ways. My voice came to the fore during the many opportunities for developing theoretical positions, creating and applying theory and through the iterative writing-up process.

Unlike many other colleagues on the EdD, the subject matter of my various assignments and IFS have no direct bearing on the subject matter of my thesis. For some on the EdD, the IFS acted as a ‘pilot’ for their thesis. While participants in my IFS bore some similarity to those in this thesis, there are more differences than similarities. Also, in some ways, this thesis feels more of a personal endeavour – linked as it is to events of my youth. My initial thesis sought to examine ‘the roadman’ – a specific character familiar to living life ‘on-road’. However, there was some overlap with others’ work elsewhere (e.g., Reid, 2017), so I changed my research focus. I had also planned for three fieldwork sites (Maxwell, a youth centre and a hospital). However, data generation and collection in the hospital became problematic. Dealing with these events, and the need to reframe my study, required a large amount of flexibility and confidence - skills I honed throughout the taught aspects of the EdD programme. These skills were invaluable in adapting to my new focus. Further, the tools in my researcher reflexivity toolkit came to the fore when deciding to embark on research within my old neighbourhood.
In this thesis, I chose – judging by the topics of my EdD colleagues – a somewhat uncommon issue. By observing, conversing and conducting interviews with young people from an area I know so well, I am writing myself into this thesis. One tool I have used to weave my voice into this work is cases (or vignettes) of participants. Before this thesis, I had written case studies for professional means but not for research purposes. Again, the confidence and flexibility to face new challenges came from what I learned on the EdD. In composing and writing this thesis, I have engaged in many different fields, from criminology to youth studies. The position of my thesis - at the intersection of these various fields - has helped me see the space where my endeavour fits in. It has also helped me locate my own space within the broader interconnected academic network.

Among my EdD colleagues, I am sure that I am not alone in finding the balancing of the EdD with full-time work commitments a challenge. Moreover, having some semblance of social life has proven challenging as evenings and weekends quickly become filled with conducting interviews or drafting versions of papers. There has been a rollercoaster of highs and lows since the start of the EdD in September 2015. There has not been one, in Cunningham’s (2008) words, ‘critical incident’ per se. Instead, there have been several ‘semi-critical’ personal and professional incidents disturbing my equilibrium. Nonetheless, as Cunningham (ibid) further highlights, when analysed critical, such incidents (no matter their perceived severity) may accelerate one’s professional learning.

As I describe above, my challenges and obstacles – from substantial detours at the eleventh hour to revisiting a turbulent youth – have been met confidently. This self-assurance comes from the EdD and the support of my colleagues and tutors. At the end of a five-year journey, I can form robust research questions, challenge with gusto and view my field with a more coherent and consistent evaluative lens.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) young men in inner-city communities are most likely to be involved – as victims or perpetrators – in knife crime (Home Office, 2018). The sense of vulnerability this creates leads many young BAME men to carry knives for ‘protection’ (Brennan, 2018; Harding, 2020). The impact is cyclical: the perceived availability of knives increases the perceived need to carry them (Brennan, 2018).

However, there is a gap in the literature concerning young BAME men’s descriptions of how experiencing vulnerability shapes their knife involvement (McAra & McVie, 2016). I address this deficit by exploring how young men’s performances of an idealised ‘street masculinity’ - against a backdrop of vulnerability - influence their knife-carrying decisions on an inner-city London estate, ‘Maxwell’.¹

While multiple high-profile knife deaths have increased punishments for knife-carrying, for the year ending March 2020, knife crime was the highest on record (ONS, 2020). Of 46,265 knife offences, 34% of them were in London (ibid). Nevertheless, research shows that police rarely catch young people carrying knives (Harding, 2020; Home Office, 2018). While quantitative data can indicate knife-carrying prevalence among London’s young BAME men, there are few explanations in young men’s words (Palasinski et al., 2019). As Bottrell et al. (2010) paraphrase: by ignoring these voices, we neglect those most at risk and with a significant contribution to understanding knife crime.

Almost 25% of males aged 11-16 in Greater London know a regular knife-carrier (Harding, 2020). Despite this, and the frequency of media reporting, knife-carrying research appears theoretically flawed (Palasinski et al., 2019). Such defects infer a lack of input from those close to knife-crime, including professionals working with inner-city young men (ibid). When young BAME men from inner-cities have provided

¹ In this thesis, I have changed the names of all people and places.
a view, their narrative often glorifies violence. My study emerges from these problems and my wish for a better understanding of young BAME men’s knife-carrying.

This chapter is in sections. I first position my research in the knife-carrying literature, thereby locating its rationale. Second, I describe my personal and professional position on knife-carrying. Then, I outline my research questions and objectives before outlining the thesis structure.

Rationale

*Violence does, in truth, recoil upon the violent, and the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (1911, p. 223)

Armed conflict notwithstanding, violence costs the UK approximately £30bn each year in individual, familial and community repercussions (Home Office, 2018). There is also long-standing violence in deprived inner-city spaces (*ibid*). Given the hyperbole surrounding the UK’s ‘knife crime epidemic’, one may consider it a modern phenomenon. However, similar anxieties emerged in the late 1800s. Then, like today, young males congregated in impoverished areas with territorial inner-city gangs brawled for considerable kudos. Gangs were usually misogynistic: women were their property, and encroachment upon them from rivals was an affront requiring retribution. While Victorian gangs used knives, they seldom murdered. Instead, they marked and scarred while scuffling for status rather than monetary gain.

There is a striking point for modern-day society about how Victorian society tackled youth violence. Many successful interventions were, in modern parlance, youth clubs that curbed the supply of young men into gangs. Clubs were so successful that gangs had virtually disappeared by the First World War. The parallels with modern society are stark: a primary conclusion from The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime (APPG, 2020) was that youth club closures are increasing the risk of knife violence for young people.

---

Knife-crime rhetoric often appears through politicised media (Palasinski & Riggs, 2012). One (cynical) view is that some media and public outrages about knife crime lend support to vote-winning agendas. These agendas punish young people and justify increasingly early involvement from criminal justice or social services. This view, Goldsmith (2008) argues, creates a gangsterisation of youth and more castigatory policing where young people (predominantly young men) appear as needing regulation. As I highlight in my literature review, repressive policing often aggravates young men’s vulnerability and fuels their knife-carrying.4

Young men’s knife-carrying often generates a focus on transgression and not their vulnerability (Brennan, 2018; Palasinski et al., 2019). This situation creates a punitive and retributive policy climate that undermines restorative justice (Goldsmith, 2008). The status afforded to knife crime in the UK media has made little impression on improving society’s awareness of young men’s experiences of violence. As Goldsmith (ibid) further states: rather than protect children in the community, the government and the media often promote policies to protect the community from children.

In conclusion, there is a lack of young men’s voices on why they carry knives. Moreover, society often demonises young men in inner-city spaces, who then experience increasingly punitive responses. These factors influence my research design and methodology.

**Theoretical Context**

Some simple statistics aside, little is known about the pressures young men face when making choices about knife-carrying (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018; Harding, 2020; Holligan et al., 2017). As Palasinski and colleagues (2019) note, other knife-crime topics lacking a more in-depth exploration include:

- the relationship between knife-carrying and pressures to ‘perform’ certain masculinities;
- perceptions of knife-carrying among non-knife-carrying young men, and;

---

4 Readers should note that this thesis was written at the apogee of the Black Lives Matter movement. One can only imagine how punitive policing of the BAME community manifest in the future given the recent furore.
- experiences of inner-city young men negotiating communities where knife-carrying is problematic.

These topics inform my research questions, which I discuss below.

I use three theories in this research: ‘street masculinity’ (incorporating hegemonic and inclusive masculinity theory), ‘vulnerability’ and ‘space and place’ (Figure 1). These theories help construct and answer my research questions. Street masculinity supports my understanding of the regulatory conditions informing young men’s knife-carrying. Inspired by Connell’s (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity, street masculinity encompasses young men’s spatial perceptions and the space’s expectations for masculine performances that normalise knife-carrying. While street masculinity may impact knife-carrying in inner-city areas, research shows that normative factors including youth workers, the police and peer-influence are also influential (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018; Palasinski et al., 2019).

For Harding (2020), most knife-carrying is in response to feeling vulnerable – including self-defence and previous victimisation. Marfleet (2008), offers a ‘fear and victimisation hypothesis’ to explain young men’s vulnerability, which I draw upon in my analysis. Marfleet argues that knife-carrying is a defensive behaviour, which possesses value for the knife-carrier despite the risks of being caught, or of hurting and being hurt.

Sometimes, vulnerability relates to spatial appearance, particularly if it possesses symbolic risk (e.g., graffiti signifying gang presence) (Hallsworth, 2011; Patton et al., 2019). A theme in this study is young men’s knife-carrying responses to extant social conditions, namely a violent ‘street code’ (Hallsworth & Young, 2008). Young men may be unaware of the street code’s repercussions; nonetheless, one result is the swift escalation in perceptions of the threat of violence and feelings of vulnerability (ibid). Concisely, young men experience generalised spatial vulnerability and specific space and place-based vulnerability based on their shared subjective definitions of these places.

The three theories emphasise the value of speaking with young men experiencing the inner-city spaces where knife-carrying prevails. I include the evolution of these theories into research activities in my methodology section and augment them in my literature review.
Research Questions

My initial research review considered knife-carrying and gang-affiliated violence. While these are, where appropriate, in my literature review, readers should note the context of my research questions. First, young people (aged 16-24) constitute about a third of all knife-related murders over the last decade (ONS, 2020). Data for 2019 shows that young men saw the largest increase in deaths of any group (ibid). Second, knives are readily available in kitchens and supermarkets. Increases in knife-carrying are, therefore, likely due to something other than increasing availability. Here, one encounters vulnerability in the research and media representation. Protection - from harm and other knife-carriers - being the most cited reason for knife-carrying (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018; Harding, 2020; Home Office, 2018)

These considerations provide three research objectives. First, to speak with young men about their vulnerability experiences in areas where knife-carrying is problematic. Second, to investigate any pressures they feel to carry knives. Third, to examine their broader knife-carrying attitudes. I devised formative research questions and sub-questions (italicised) towards these objectives:
I. What resources and strategies do young men use in constructing their masculine identities?

II. How do young men understand and legitimise knife-carrying, and to what extent does feeling vulnerable in their spaces influence this?

III. What role do informal (e.g., parents, friends) and formal (e.g., youth workers, police) relationships play in young men’s masculine performances, and to what extent do these relationships impact young men’s vulnerability and their subsequent knife-carrying?

I undertook ethnographic research in Maxwell between February and November 2019. My study involved unstructured observations and informal conversations - predominantly with Maxwell’s young men - and a small number of formal interviews with young men and youth workers. I also used photographs and community mapping tools to gauge young men’s vulnerability perceptions. My approach is interactionist, which, as Maruna (2011) states, helps investigate the complex attitudes, emotions and self-concepts of young men’s knife-carrying.

Next, I discuss my personal and professional positioning, so the reader understands my relationship with Maxwell, its actors and my research motivations.

Personal and Professional Positioning

I am a white male, raised on the Maxwell estate. I left Maxwell for university but returned in 2017 to find pockets of gentrification. Still, the estate is a socio-cultural melting pot owing to post-second world war immigration. As a child, I knew Maxwell’s violent reputation, which for many young residents would be a source of pride. Feuds with rival estates were fuelled by several high-profile incidents, including demonstrations from far-right groups, anti-police protests and the racist murders of young black men. While many events occurred before participants in this study were born, the community have prolonged their impact.

After finishing my post-graduate studies, I started working with charities, reasoning that I could help disadvantaged people like those with whom I grew up. After several practitioner roles, I settled on my current position of evaluating the efficacy of
programmes and services. At the time of writing, I work for the ‘Mentoring Youth Project’ (MYP), whom I joined in mid-2017. My colleagues are predominantly youth workers, delivering mentoring and engagement programmes for young people at risk of criminality or violence. MYP programmes run in London schools, colleges and communities and focus on building confidence, self-discipline and empowerment. MYP youth workers are largely street-based but retain administrative buildings including the ‘Maxwell Youth Centre’ (MYC) in Maxwell. Those engaging with MYP are generally male, aged between 15-20, from BAME backgrounds and live in areas of crime and deprivation.

My own knife crime experiences drew me to this research. My ordeal relates to the murder of a friend ‘AJ’, aged 14. AJ’s attacker, ‘Jamie’, 15, cited several reasons for his machete assault. Foremost was his involvement with a notorious gang, who, according to Jamie’s testimony, had ordered his attack on AJ under threat of retribution if he reneged. Knife violence was Jamie’s ‘performance’ for his peers: by using a knife, he was fulfilling their expectations. After AJ’s death I moved to the US for my safety. Upon returning to London, I met youth workers who helped me negotiate my shortcomings and trauma. This study thus has as much personal resonance as a contribution to the literature.

My aim thus far is not to explain the notion of knife-carrying comprehensively. Instead, I want readers to understand its importance. Subsequently, I can segue into the literature and main theories I draw upon. I focus my literature review on studies from the UK and US, as there is a similarity between the two countries’ issues regarding violence and weapon-use among young men. Where possible, I use literature from the last ten years, which reflects the nascent nature of youth violence research. The exception to this rule is in my use of theories.

**Thesis Structure**

The following chapter introduces my literature review and theories. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, including my research design, the process of analysis and ethical

---

5 A pseudonym.

6 I discuss MYP in more detail later in this thesis.
considerations. Chapter 4 presents my findings - via four case studies or vignettes – and discussion. The last chapter describes my conclusion and contributions to the fields of sociology, youth studies and gender.
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation

This chapter focuses on the themes of knife-carrying, masculinity, vulnerability and space and place, which inform my theoretical orientations. Readers should note that relatively few investigations using young men’s voices; therefore, research in my review often includes ‘young people’ rather than young men.

This review draws upon my research questions, the nature of Maxwell’s young men and the estate’s spaces. I begin by delineating age, ethnicity and gender trends in knife crime, with a focus on young black men. I then examine contemporary explanations for knife-carrying and vulnerability. After, I link these explanations to socioeconomic deprivation and violence, which are identity- and vulnerability-forming features of Maxwell’s ecology. Finally, I address several justifications for young men’s knife-carrying.

Painting an accurate picture of young men’s knife-carrying is a Sisyphean task, as official data often underestimate the issue (Eades et al., 2008). The Home Office, for example, reports on ‘fatal stabings’ in England, but rarely by age or gender (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018). Another problem is underrepresentation. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) - the primary reference for knife crime - has issues reaching deprived communities, and, until recently, omitted everyone under 16 years old (ibid). These omissions are significant, as disadvantaged communities like Maxwell experience the highest levels of knife-related violence (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018; Harding, 2020).

**Knife-carrying Trends**

Here, I contextualise some prominent UK knife-carrying trends during the last decade. The ONS (2020) shows a record number of knife offences in England and Wales in the last year, providing a distressing indicator of violence and threat (particularly among socioeconomically deprived (SED) communities, and which correlates with youths’ increased knife-carrying (Densley et al., 2020). The following subsections explore this narrative, probing some of the sociodemographic features of knife-carrying research.
Knife-carrying Youths

Knife crime is a persistent and worrying concern, especially as it impacts ... young people and the disadvantaged. (Holligan, Mclean, et al., 2017)

In general, policy frames knife crime as a youth problem. Indeed, the Home Office (2018) states that most knife victims and perpetrators are young men in their late teens and early twenties. Young people’s self-reported data supports the assertions that most knife-carriers are under 18 years old (Ariel & Bland, 2019; Palasinski et al., 2019).

Researchers (e.g. Bakkali, 2019; Marfleet, 2008) suggest that young men’s immaturity fuels their inappropriate decision-making. In Marfleet’s (2008) study, teen schoolboys in London convicted of knife violence (N=72) took part in focus groups (N=4) and interviews (N=4). Marfleet’s findings were that, while a complicated issue, knife-carrying was heavily influenced by participants’ emotional and decision-making immaturity. Indeed, those predisposed to commit knife-carrying offences were, in Marfleet’s words, ‘the most immature of all’ (p.14).

Lemos’s (2004) review of UK weapon-carrying research argues that young men’s knife-carrying results from social pressures, with knives a cool fashion accessory. Also, Lemos (ibid) suggests that knife-carrying is alluring, irrespective of individuals’ SED, as it exudes a ‘toughness’ that protects them in dangerous surroundings. Knife-carrying also increases the prospect of acquiring material resources by threatening others with a knife.

In sum, data shows that some young men frequently carry knives. Moreover, researchers argue that knife-carrying reflects young men’s immaturity and desire for ‘fashion’ or ‘authenticity’. As Harding (Harding, 2020) explains: ‘those deemed unauthentic, or who fail to demonstrate their authenticity, [are] vulnerable to being identified, revealed, targeted and victimised’ (p.14).

Another prominent association is between young BAME men and knife-carrying. Indeed, young black men often appear prominently in street crime narratives despite little robust evidence (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018). What literature exists is summarised below.
Knife-carrying Black Youths

... we won't stop [youth violence] by pretending it isn't young black kids doing it – Prime Minister Tony Blair (2007)

Exploring ethnicity and knife-carrying is problematic. In general, research underrepresents BAME communities, while their experiences of violence can vary significantly from societal perceptions (Flacks, 2018b; Reid, 2017). Also, an implicit media racial bias often exacerbates misperceptions by only highlighting the ethnicity of the violent perpetrator (Flacks, 2018a, 2018b). Frequently, ‘black culture’ epithets (e.g., drill music or ‘gangsterism’) appear alongside knife-carrying. These associations require a deeper understanding of the drivers of knife-carrying, including the tensions between the police and the BAME community (Eades et al., 2008; Grimshaw & Ford, 2018; Silvestri et al., 2009). While many recent high-profile stabbings involve young black males, Flacks (2018b) argues that such incidents are infrequent and conflated by racial bias. Nevertheless, evidence shows that young black men are more likely than young white men to die because of a knife (Harding, 2020; Home Office, 2018; Thompson, 2019).

The influence of ethnicity on knife-carrying significantly reduces after controlling for SED (Gunter, 2008; Holligan et al., 2017). Robertson and Wainwright (2020), who explored young black people and the justice system, argue that the social exclusion of BAME communities dominates this overrepresentation. The authors note that around 80% of the black community reside in SED. Furthermore, they cite the racial discrimination in youth justice and policing systems as critical influences on knife-carrying. Young black men are, for example, most likely to be stopped and searched by police (ibid).

In conclusion, evidence suggests that black youths are most at risk of knife-carrying. Nevertheless, one must account for many influencing variables, including systemic racial bias (Robertson & Wainwright, 2020; Thompson, 2019). Another influential variable is SED, where many young black men reside.

7 Tony Blair's comments were in the context of dropping 'political correctness' before curbing youth violence. Original article: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/apr/12/ukcrime.race
Above, I have outlined some prominent trends in knife-carrying and some characteristics of knife-carriers. Knife crime is erratic compared to other crimes, perhaps due to the prevalence of young peoples’ knife-carrying (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018). Robbery seemingly correlates with knife-carrying (knives may relieve someone of their belongings) albeit the literature is sparse. I, and others (e.g., Harding, 2020; Palasinski et al., 2019), argue that knife-carrying is strongly associated with SED. Here, young men often carry knives in anticipation of encountering another armed person (ibid).

Next is a more in-depth discussion of literature relating to space and place, vulnerability and masculinity, including young peoples’ explanations for their knife-carrying. I start by discussing how social media influences knife-carrying. While a nascent area, recent media and academic work have explored the ‘digital street’, where young people goad others and share violent images.

**Space, Place and Vulnerability**

The digital street is a space where vulnerability manifests and knife-carrying gains legitimacy (Disley & Liddle, 2016; Whittaker et al., 2020). Here, young men experience peer pressure to react to threats of violence with actual violence to retain their ‘toughness’ or masculine status (ibid). Social media platforms thus become stages for performances of masculinity that facilitate knife-enabled retaliations (Pawelz & Elvers, 2018; Whittaker et al., 2020).

I should mention the uncertainty as to whether the digital street is solely a male domain. Nonetheless, for this thesis, my literature review explores young men’s occupation of the digital street.

**The ‘Digital Street’**

*If you see the people you’re living around holding knives in these videos, you know it’s real … so you’re going to be scared and make sure you aren’t the only one who can’t defend yourself* - Participant in Irwin-Rogers et al. ’s (2018) research on social media and youth violence.
Increasingly, youth violence appears as analogous to disease, spreading through social interaction \(^8\) including digital communication and increasing social media use (Patton et al., 2018). As Irwin-Rodgers et al.’s (2017) review of the UK gang violence and social media shows, this habit creates a ‘digital street’ where people share violent experiences and goad rivals. While most online videos are benign, a significant minority are incendiary. Provocation often precipitates a retaliation so common it has a label: ‘internet banging’ (*ibid*). With uncomplicated sharing and limited security, the traumatising nature of violence spreads, even among those removed from direct threats.

The vastness of social media audiences increases retaliation as the potential for status challenges and disrespect abounds (Fatsis, 2019a, 2019b). It is also easy to access such online content where young people (predominantly young men) weave accounts of recent stabbings or murders into direct threats to others (Disley & Liddle, 2016; Whittaker et al., 2020).

Researchers (e.g., Blandfort et al., 2019; Whittaker et al., 2020) note the threats of social media. For example, a small minority of young men experience daily exposure to violence online. This content includes young men infiltrating rivals’ spaces and theft or violence against other young men (Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017). Indeed, some social media accounts have the singular purpose of displaying violence, disrespect and humiliation (Densley et al., 2020; Whittaker et al., 2020). Young men are also subject to peer pressures if their networks see them as ‘weak’ or ‘passive’ recipients of online disrespect (*ibid*), which creates an expectation to retaliate violently and protect their reputation. Such retaliation, fortified by perpetrators’ access to knives, are recorded and uploaded, perpetuating the revenge (*ibid*).

Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of inner-city young BAME men avoid the knife-carrying lifestyles popularised on some platforms. Indeed, many use social media to demonstrate their entrepreneurialism, citing, for example, a conscious motivation to evade ‘street life’ (Peterson & Densley, 2016). Thus, one must be mindful of generalising online communications as the sole determinant of knife-carrying. Instead, many young men and professionals say that provocative online interaction

\(^8\) See the reframing youth violence as a public health concern (e.g., Shrotri & Scantlebury, 2019)
stimulates only severe violence, and not knife-carrying in general (Patton et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2017; Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018).

**Vulnerability, Victimisation and Deprivation**

... *knife-carrying by [some] teenagers who are ... a threat appears to directly influence the likelihood that others will carry in response.* Marfleet (2008, p. 84)

London experienced a ‘violence crisis’ during the late 1800s, with a growing ‘criminal class’ seemingly running amok. A metaphorical (sometimes literal) fog hid transgressors, creating a palpable vulnerability among inner-city inhabitants. In these historical accounts, one can contextualise modern-day concerns about inner-city violence. These iterative ‘Moral Panics’ (Garland, 2008) emphasise how violence among a community - those from the ‘street’ – is both shaped by and shapes societal concerns.

An abundance of research links knife-carrying with SED. In 2009, Silvestri and colleagues systematically reviewed 20 years of weapon-carrying literature and highlighted the association. Nonetheless, as Silvestri et al. argue, such data describes but does not explain. SED is, however, geographically concentrated, which has repercussions for peoples’ experiences of violence. Indeed, research shows that observing or experiencing violence increases violent behaviours (Gunter, 2008; McAra & McVie, 2010, 2016). Put simply, violence begets violence.

The irregular distribution of violence and SED have implications for knife-carrying. For Booth and colleagues (2008), the issue is not the increase in knife-carrying per se, but its proliferation among SED areas. For example, in 2019, London’s Metropolitan Police recorded 34% of all knife-crime in England and Wales (ONS, 2020). Simultaneously, the communities where knife-carrying is commonplace are all SED inner-city areas *(ibid)*. This trend excessively impacts young BAME people who densely inhabit SED spaces like Maxwell. It is unsurprising, therefore, that many BAME young people cite ‘self-defence’ for their knife-carrying (Harding, 2020; Thompson, 2019).

Young peoples’ vulnerability primarily emerges from their fears of victimisation and the vicarious violence in their communities (Harding, 2020). Thompson (2019) also showed how vulnerable young people in SED inner-cities are more open to
exploitation from criminal gangs. In her interviews with youth practitioners (N=143) and young people (N=260) in Manchester and London, factors such as young peoples’ sense of responsibility towards their families and lack of alternative employment compounded their vulnerability. This issue has long existed, as Marfleet’s (2008) focus groups with young people in Pupil Referral Units in London show: those who felt their community was ‘unsafe’ lived in constant fear, which was aggravated through previous victimisation experience. Conversely, violent offenders felt less vulnerable, as did young people frequently carrying knives. Concisely, Marfleet (ibid) and Harding (2020) found that knife-carrying made young people from violent communities feel safe.

Brennan and Moore (2009) reviewed knife-carrying literature through a motivational prism. One account – which encroaches upon the themes of self-defence and victimisation - discriminates between ‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’ (i.e., aggressive) weapon use. The three instrumental motivations being ‘harm, protection and coercion’ (2009, p. 218), which, according to the researchers, refutes the assertion that weapons are entirely for harm. Brennan and Moore illuminate:

*The view that weapons are simply an instrument of harm within the violent act is undermined by evidence indicating [...] the weapon as a tool to attain non-violent goals, [...] weapons are carried for defensive reasons under the risk of violent victimisation rather than as an expression of the weapon carrier’s aggression* (2009, p. 216).

Further research (e.g., Grimshaw & Ford, 2018; Palasinski et al., 2019) also highlights that, for some, the gains of knife-carrying outweigh the risks. Moreover, the fear of victimisation, and the subsequent need to protect oneself or retaliate, often supersedes any legality concerns (Palasinski et al., 2019). Nonetheless, as Marfleet (2008, p. 16) suggests, defensive knife-carrying creates ‘opportunity-related benefits’ – including involvement in robberies/muggings. These opportunities are more frequent in environments that normalise and foster such behaviours via a ‘street code’, which I discuss later. Silvestri and colleagues (2009, p. 24) relate one’s perceived vulnerability to knife-violence with ‘street credibility’ and respect. These notions have specific importance for young people such as those on Maxwell who lack access to legitimate statuses.
Some researchers (e.g., Roberts, 2019) found that young people carried knives as they felt unprotected by the police or their parents. Knives were thus a legitimate (albeit consciously illegal) form of security. Further, Palasinski and Riggs (2012), who interviewed young white British males (N=16) attending an inner-city youth centre, warn against simplistic associations between knife-carrying and immaturity. They suggest that young men view knife-carrying as an appropriate response to threats and lack of police support. For these researchers, young men’s knife-carrying is necessary for preventing harm and being ‘streetwise’. In their analysis, knife-carrying was an act of responsibility while not carrying was negligent.

Brennan (2018) argues that young men’s knife-carrying correlates with anti-police attitudes – of increasing importance given the blossoming Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. For Eades and colleagues (2008), a mistrust in protective agents partly explains the higher proportion of knife-carrying among those excluded from mainstream education - those with little confidence in the police and their parents. As Lemos’s (2004) youth violence review found, almost half of young victims of crime did not tell their parents or police due to fears of retaliation or being a ‘snitch’. Lemos (ibid) also found that some young people mistrusted the police so much they thought they would be treated as the offender when reporting a crime.

Barlas and Egan (2007) investigated links between weapon-carrying, delinquency, personality and sexual promiscuity with 121 adolescent survey respondents (Males = 62%: average age = 15.7 years). They advise researchers to view the self-defence justification cautiously, having found that neither victimisation nor vulnerability accounts for all weapon-carrying. Instead, weapon carriers were generally irresponsible and delinquent with a more significant concern in appearing aggressive. Their research also found that attitudes toward weapon-carrying did not overtly reflect status, a feature attributed foremost to weapon carriers by non-weapon carriers.

For Lauger and Densley (2018), in the cultural setting of ‘street life’, knives possess symbolic significance in generating masculine respect. The notion of a knife as a ‘masculine resource’ for street respect has undergone some scrutiny (e.g., Harding, 2020; Palasinski et al., 2019), but remains underdeveloped as an explanatory narrative. I summarise the literature that I have found below. I articulate my position on these viewpoints later in this chapter.
Knife-carrying as a Masculine Resource

... various studies have identified the forms of masculinity that gain most respect as involving hierarchies based on toughness [and] threat of (or actual) violence (Phoenix et al., 2003, p. 180)

This section highlights features of masculinities that valorise knife-carrying. Masculinities are a social construct situated across different spaces, places and cultures, shaped by power relations and associated with structures of class, sexuality and ethnicity (Hearn et al., 2012). Masculinities may then be (re)constructed by violence, or its latent threat, through knife-carrying (Lander et al., 2014). Nevertheless, it is spurious to claim that masculinity or, being a young black male, equals inherent violence (Reid, 2017; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). The research below, I argue, explores how young men’s identities and their attendant actions become legitimate within a specific context.

Phoenix et al. (2003) interviewed 11-14-year-old boys (N=245) from London about their masculine identities. They identified being tough, strong and fashionable as ‘masculine’ traits, possessed by the popular boys. Ethnicity and social class, meanwhile, informed masculine preferences. Poorer black boys saw aspirational masculine ideals as being strong, attractive to girls and looking fashionable. Black boys aligning themselves with these characteristics appeared to be more masculine than, for example, Asian boys, who appeared less physically strong, less rebellious and less attractive to girls. Despite the racial differences, Phoenix et al. concluded that, in specific contexts, boys constructed their masculinity in terms of ‘toughness’, self-protection and defending females.

Young men’s position in street hierarchies determines the acquisition, presentation and retention of ‘street capital’, which simultaneously generates and curbs peer pressure (Harding, 2020). Harding’s review of contemporary knife crime debates maintains that street capital operates as a currency among peers, with young men generating stocks through their ‘street skills’ (coined ‘The Game’), including their use of knives. Harding shows that young men generated street capital in the expectation of ‘converting [it] into economic capital’ (2020, p. 31). Street capital decreased, for example, after young men felt disrespected in front of peers. Conversely, street capital grew through, for instance, stabbing someone for peers’ respect. For Harding (ibid),
this inflation/deflation economy creates social competition, replete with threats, risk and violence as young men compete to maintain positioning before advancing through street hierarchies.

Reid’s (2017) PhD thesis explores young men’s (N=29) ‘on-road’ (street) cultures on a London estate like Maxwell. Reid’s ethnography uses semi-structured interviews and focus groups to identify young men’s experiences and identities. On-road living was paradoxical: offering opportunities to build otherwise absent masculine identities (e.g., the ‘provider’ or ‘protector’) but entangling young men in a trap, stunting their personal growth. Reid’s urban ethnography provides a useful methodological roadmap and techniques for researcher immersion and participant recruitment – with young men like my participants – I can draw on. Lastly, ‘on-roadness’ (which Reid cites as synonymous with ‘street masculinity’), and its powerful shaping of young men’s lives, is a prominent theme in my study.

Eric Anderson’s (2008) ethnographic study used in-depth interviews (N=32) and observations of a US collegiate fraternity to examine their masculine configurations. Anderson found that some young men’s identities permitted ‘tit-for-tat’ violence via narratives rationalising aggression. Explicitly, perpetrators avoided labelling themselves as violent and thus transcended the victim/perpetrator dichotomy. This rationalisation (that also asserts that one should not face violence unarmed) sees self-defensive force as ‘reasonable’ since it emerges from environmental not personal sources. Others’ aggression thus warranted self-defensive violence; therefore, an equal or more significant attack (including with a weapon) becomes both reasonable and legitimate.

The above review covers some key issues within knife-carrying research and resonates with my research questions on vulnerability, masculinity and space and place. These issues require theoretical deconstructing to inform my analysis, which appears next.

**Theoretical Position**

Utilising the disciplines of gender studies, youth studies and criminology, and adopting a sociological and interactionist approach, I discuss Maxwell’s *street code* and
localised hegemonic street masculinity. I also discuss complicit masculinity, which offers a dividend for Maxwell’s subscribers. Readers should note that I infuse this section with my findings, as I iteratively revisited my theoretical position throughout my fieldwork.

My argument is twofold. I contend that Maxwell’s street code – its diktat - normalises violence and knife-carrying. Second, I assert that young men’s performances of street masculinity are a feature of Maxwell’s hegemony. This form includes violence and knife carrying – tools for mitigating vulnerability created by Maxwell’s street code, which I describe in the following section. Those aspiring to Maxwell’s hegemonic street masculinity often fall short, but still, receive complicit dividends (e.g., feeling safe or protected) by appearing to fulfil some of its features (e.g., by boasting of promiscuity, looking physically imposing or wearing expensive clothes and adornments).

Street Codes

The precise meaning of space and place attracts much debate. While a comprehensive discussion is beyond this thesis, I offer the following definitions. Space is a location lacking social meaning or connection (Moore & Breeze, 2012). Conversely, place is more subjective; for Agnew (2011), it is a distinctive congregation where things just happen. Succinctly, place creates organised meaning for space, which requires (sometimes implicit) consensus. For Agnew (ibid) and others (Densley et al., 2017; Lane, 2016) urban places with their own code-based beliefs possess a ‘street code’, which, if only one person follows, is dysfunctional. Street codes require full adherence and acknowledgement of their legitimacy; therefore, place embeds itself in communities and local collectives (Brookman et al., 2011). In the rest of this section, I describe how space and place interact with Maxwell’s street code that normalises knife-carrying.

Elijah Anderson’s (1999) book, The Code of the Street, describes peoples’ movements through affluent and disadvantaged spaces, showing the code of civility. Anderson links social pressure with contextual violence in his ethnographic descriptions of the subjectivity of places in Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia. For Anderson,
Germantown Avenue was a ‘continuum’. The affluent (mainly white) end observed a ‘civic code’. Conversely, those at the poorer (predominantly black) end observed a ‘code of conflict and aggression [for] resolution’ (1999, p. 14). The minority doggedly pursued this ‘street code’, while the social pressure to adhere influenced the entire area (ibid). As Anderson states, the street code drew significant repercussions for the community’s victimisation and vulnerability.

For Anderson (ibid), street codes emerge from, for instance, ‘damaging’ SED and marginalisation. Likewise, Bourgois (1996), describes the suffering of those such as Maxwell’s young men experiencing SED within a ‘rich city’. For Bourgois, the proximity to the affluence and power of the predominant business district for Maxwell’s inhabitants (London’s financial centre is close by) spawns:

\[
\ldots \text{an ‘inner-city street culture’: a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society’} (1996, p. 8)
\]

As Brookman et al. (2011) note, street codes regulate and define what is ‘necessary violence’ for maintaining order and superiority. Subsequently, necessary violence is underpinned by ‘respect’ and one’s intolerance for ‘disrespect’. Respect divides those adhering to it (sometimes competitively) and those who do not. Violence - or appearing to have a capacity for violence through knife-carrying – thus has strategic significance for Maxwell’s young men. As Sandberg (2008, p. 161) explains:

\[
\text{With the right amount of respect, individuals can avoid being bothered in public. Respect then is inextricably linked with an individual’s capacity for violence and augments an ability to deter future assaults.}
\]

Respect is intangible but has significant repercussions for young men’s identities, so it must be contested and guarded (Barker, 2005; Irwin-Rogers, 2019). Knife-carrying thus has dual benefits: as a tool for respect and status not afforded by society, and, as an outlet for violent frustrations (ibid). Simultaneously, knives offer quick and lucrative promotion through street hierarchies (e.g., through robbing or attacking for kudos) and visible role models possessing symbolic and material wealth (Thompson, 2019; Whittaker et al., 2020). Knife-carrying thus becomes alluring for those in SED communities, where ‘performing violence’, while appearing hostile, is self-defensive. Vulnerability marries with - and is partly generated by - problematic transitions toward
Adulthood (Palasinski et al., 2019; Thompson, 2019). Alongside violence, Maxwell’s young men must navigate boredom, low self-esteem, unemployment, broken homes and illegal local economies (McAra & McVie, 2016).

Drawing on Marfleet’s (2008) ‘fear and victimisation hypothesis’, I posit that the contextual pressures of Maxwell’s street code force young men to protect themselves. This street code is so powerful that knife-carrying offers recognition and status otherwise missing. Being (or at least appearing to be) ‘protected’ or someone ‘not to mess with’ is both a response to young men’s feelings of vulnerability and a cause of their insecurity. Knife-carrying may decrease vulnerability or increase anxiety, as young men feel exposed to violence.

Research on street codes has limitations. While street codes help understand young men’s behaviours in their spaces and places, some academics question whether it explains the knife-carrying of groups and individuals (Heitmeyer et al., 2019; McNeeley & Wilcox, 2015). Also, these generalised descriptions lack utility outside of specific contexts. Despite these limitations, UK research on street codes (e.g., Brookman et al., 2011; Pickering et al., 2012) reveals similar social pressures to the US-based street codes research (e.g. Anderson, 1999).

Others have enhanced UK street codes research. For example, Earle et al. (2019) investigated being ‘on-road’ as a tool for understanding inner-city cultures. Being on-road confers codes of conduct framed by a ‘masculinity of the street’, a feature of the localised ideal. Central to this understanding is hegemonic masculinity (HM) theory (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and its interaction with Maxwell’s street code.

**Hegemonic Masculinity**

> used with ... historical context [hegemonic masculinity theory] may help explain the cultural embedding and specific shape of violence in communities where physical aggression is expected or admired ... (Connell, 2002, p. 93)

While theories of masculinity are still developing, many gender scholars agree on its contextuality (e.g., Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Jewkes et al., 2015). Coupled with my social constructivist positioning, this specificity holds that masculine performances
differ across spaces, times and individuals. Here, I draw on contextual masculinity theories to explain the masculine performances of Maxwell’s young men and their variance across public and private spaces, with Raewyn Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity (HM) (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) my primary instrument.

The hegemonic masculinity is the form most ‘culturally exalted’ (Connell, 1995, p. 77), or, in the words of Schrock and Padavic (2007, p. 629), ‘the most honoured way of being a man’. Scholars have used HM in gender studies since the 1980s to explain men’s power over women. Still, it is has critics, some of whom I cite later. In this thesis, I define HM as the cultural ideals, enacted practices and individual character traits and behaviours that become important markers (Jewkes et al., 2015) for Maxwell’s young men.

Connell delineates four types of masculinities, hierarchically positioned relative to each other: hegemonic, complicit, subordinated and marginalised. While I describe the hegemonic form above, gender studies often find that most men adopt the complicit position, participating in (and mainly accepting of) the HM system. This acceptance allows them to enjoy its benefits and, through their aspirations, experience its pleasure while avoiding subordination. A subordinated male suffers his position despite appearing to possess HM attributes. Males risk subordination when they do not perform a gendered role consistent with the hegemonic ideology. Research (e.g., Anderson & McGuire, 2010) refers to openly gay men as not ‘real men’ since they lack the legitimacy to aspire to the hegemony. The seemingly innocuous ‘… be a man’ taunts are, therefore, gender policing where men enact their fear of subordination, loss of legitimacy and fall from complicity.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that one should view HM as the way that (young) men position themselves and others among their peer groups and not of a certain type of (young) man. HM, therefore, represents social practices producing specific gendered relations and meanings, which shape what is ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ (Messerschmidt, 2018, 2019). In SED neighbourhoods, young men

---

10 A comprehensive dissection of HM is beyond my word count. See Moller (2007) and Howson (2006) for fuller critiques.
may perform ‘acceptable’ violent masculinities because of marginalisation by society’s hegemonies (Jewkes et al., 2015; Heber, 2017). Through violence, young men are expressing one of the few available masculine forms. For Stanko and Hobdell (1993, p. 409), exposure to violence leads to some young men having their ‘manhood taken away’. Subsequently, they exchange ‘weak’ characterisations of victimisation for masculine ones (e.g., retaliation with a knife). This exchange transforms their shame into the hegemonic form.

Concisely, if Maxwell’s HM valorises knife-carrying, then its young men are more likely to carry them. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note in their revised conception of HM, while strong and powerful the hegemonic form is vulnerable. For example, participants’ community maps show that when those performing the HM form are out of their context (shown in young men’s vulnerability outside of Maxwell’s safe spaces), the HM loses power. Moreover, HM is synergetic with status and respect. If Maxwell’s young men sees either plummet, perhaps because they are performing non-hegemonic features (e.g., ‘feminised’ traits such as sensitivity or not violently retaliating when goaded), they are susceptible to challenges of their hegemonic status. Thus, Maxwell’s spaces may potentially serve as figurative ‘proving grounds’ for the embodiment of socially-accepted masculine behaviours and attitudes. This explanatory quality interprets how participants equate ‘admired’ or ‘expected’ performances of masculinity with knife-carrying. In sum, one question is significant: does knife-carrying make Maxwell’s vulnerable young men feel more like the man they should, or aspire to be?

HM, nonetheless, has its critics (e.g., Hearn et al., 2012; Tomsen & Gadd, 2019) including those who contend that HM is an aspirational theory and not empirically validated (Anderson & McCormack, 2018). HM is further complicated when applying it to societal gender order (where male power often oppresses women and subordinates other men), or to a context-specific gender regime. While there is unease in the alignment between these two levels (Swain, 2016), HM helps to unpick how Maxwell’s young men create masculine identities and their challenges in doing so.

For some researchers, it is debatable whether violence is detrimental to HM. For example, Hearn et al. (2012) and others (e.g., Anderson & McCormack, 2018) argue that HM has not considered men’s violence in its development, although Jewkes and
Morell (Jewkes et al., 2015; Jewkes & Morrell, 2018) have sought to address this. Simultaneously, violence may diminish men; thus, other approaches (e.g., hypermasculinity) may be more suitable for understanding their violence, as they do not conflate gender stereotypes with hegemonic processes. As a critical scholar in the development of HM, James Messerschmidt, admits, violent masculine values and practices are not necessarily hegemonic in a culture (Messerschmidt, 2012, 2019).

Anderson’s (Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Anderson & McGuire, 2010) inclusive masculinity theory (IMT) is also critical of Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) HM perspective. Anderson contends that men’s transformations in their belief and behaviours are commonplace, and best understood as challenges to systems of sexual or gender inequality. While researching with various young, predominantly heterosexual white men, Anderson found that these groups founded themselves on ‘inclusiveness’ rather than heteronormative exclusive behaviours (what Anderson calls ‘orthodoxy’).

In IMT, masculinities are not vertical but horizontal - allowing more performances to be ‘masculine’, including those that some cultures code as ‘other’ (e.g., emotional sensitivity or caring) (Anderson, 2009). As such, IMT values Connell’s theorising of multiple masculinities and their social organisation in cultures that valorise heterosexual ideals (ibid; see also: Kimmel, 2005). IMT thus provides a lens for the changing masculine performances of Maxwell’s young men. Connell’s original theorisations of HM (1995) challenges the notion of such masculinities co-existing in one space. For Connell, HM is a hegemonic process where only one masculine form is ‘culturally exalted’ (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Subsequently, men feel pressured to align with this dominant form when it is in the public domain. While Connell offers protest masculinity as contesting the hegemonic form, the result is still one emergent hegemony (Anderson & McGuire, 2010). IMT posits that a different phenomenon

---

11 In their re-analysis of HM, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) question the transformative extent of inclusive masculinity practices on HM. Nonetheless, they acknowledge the transformative effect of inclusive masculinities at the local subcultural level (i.e., Maxwell). As Connell and Messerschmidt note, while these new identities and practices blur social and symbolic boundaries, they are not necessarily undermining systems of dominance or HM.
occurs in cultures of diminishing homophobia, where men can express previously stigmatised attitudes and behaviours. Simply, IMT suggests that in cultures of extreme exclusive masculinity (such as Maxwell), a dominant archetype exists. Nonetheless, Anderson developed IMT to understand changing societal attitudes towards homosexuality and not to interpret young black men’s masculine performances in urban spaces. I thus use IMT cautiously; instead, HM remains my primary theoretical instrument.

However, in cultures of diminishing homophobia, such as those across the UK in 2020, two archetypes consume men’s affiliation. IMT maintains that as inclusive cultures increase, multiple forms of horizontal (not stratified) masculinity can exist. Here some masculinity forms may dominate, including Maxwell’s ‘street masculinity’, but are not hegemonic across public and private spaces. In this way, IMT may explain the behaviours of Maxwell’s young men in both their public and private spaces.

During fieldwork, I almost exclusively encountered young men in public, not private spaces. One may, therefore, expect public performances of masculinity to resemble Maxwell’s masculine hegemony. If Maxwell’s young men were, for example, keen on performing features of inclusive masculinity in public, they risked losing peers’ respect and their status among them (Figure 2). This respect and status informally operate as a shield from the vulnerability created by Maxwell’s street code. Simply, if one has peers possessing ‘street capital’, one is likely to be protected.

Moreover, for Maxwell’s young men, this respect and status are one of their few available resources given their lowly position in society’s strata and the limited social mobility prospects (Heber, 2017). For some young men (two of whom feature in my findings), their masculine performances in private spaces are closer to inclusive masculinity. In private, these young men free the shackles of the localised hegemony. Due to the associated risks, I could not formally speak with those occupying the upper echelons of Maxwell’s HM positions. Nonetheless, participants would often talk of the cars, wealth, clothes and girlfriends of the ‘faces’ around Maxwell – those occupying the HM positions among the upper echelons of Maxwell’s street hierarchies.
Performing a Complicit Masculinity

For Maxwell’s young men, living in SED may frustrate and limit their capacity for self-esteem, creating a sense of perceived weakness (Stanko & Hobdell, 1993). They may subsequently resort to violence to mitigate this frustration and to attain the status and respect they feel they deserve. These young men then internalise these violent masculine performances, leading them to increase their risk-taking (i.e., knife-carrying) as they assert themselves and compensate for their deficiencies. This masculine performance, which I argue is part of Maxwell’s localised hegemonic masculinity, is synonymous with the ‘respect’ that Maxwell’s young men seek. However, as Elijah Anderson (1999) and others (e.g., Barker, 2005; Bourgois, 1996) argue, this respect is, and always will be, out of reach for those like Maxwell’s young men.

For Connell (1995), the complicit masculinity is equally difficult to achieve for many of Maxwell’s young men, which means they do not fully commit to the HM. Instead, they position themselves as a threat to others (through, for example, knife-carrying) to avoid violence. Nevertheless, there is a risk: avoidance may resemble a weakness that invites peers’ disrespect (Messerschmidt & Tomsen, 2018). A lack of respect could leave Maxwell’s young men feeling subordinated and open to victimisation, which, as Elijah Anderson states, is, for some, ‘a fate worse than death’ (1999, p. 49).
As my findings show, many participants aspire towards Maxwell’s hegemonic ‘street masculinity’, which valorises, for example, physicality, misogyny and violence. Moreover, many participants failed in their pursuit of this hegemony, at least in its unadulterated form. Instead, they performed a ‘complicit masculinity’, which still offers a dividend for subscribers. In Maxwell (and perhaps elsewhere), if one is willing to carry a knife or associate with knife-carriers, this dividend is protection against the vulnerability created by the estate’s street codes.

The performances of complicit masculinities among Maxwell’s young men subordi

ate a few selected ‘others’. For example, while some venerated select females (e.g., mothers, sisters), others (e.g., females affiliated with rivals) were insulted and commodified. Moreover, at MYC, young people attending for academic rather than social reasons were left alone. Thus, people performing neither the HM nor complicit masculinity were, in general, ignored. Nevertheless, some of Maxwell’s young men still chose to subvert these studious youngsters, calling them ‘not black enough’.

Exposure to Maxwell’s hostile spaces may diminish young men’s masculine standing (Disley & Liddle, 2016; Whittaker et al., 2020). Subsequently, they may exchange ‘weaker characteristics’ for retaliatory and violent behaviours, turning shame into status. Connell’s (1995) HM theory explains how these behaviours – including knife-carrying – subvert other masculinities in favour of Maxwell’s ‘street masculinity’, which exists as the idealised form for some and as the complicit masculine form for others subscribing to its social norms. HM is thus a useful lens for analysing valorised masculine performances. Simply, knives may enable Maxwell’s vulnerable young men to feel more like the man they believe they should be.

**Chapter Conclusion**

I have introduced some key literature on knife-carrying, masculinity, vulnerability and space. Concisely, the influences on young men’s knife-carrying are various. The Home Affairs Committee (2009, p. 1) states:

> Most young people who carry knives say they do so for ‘protection’; status and peer pressure … This perceived need for protection is compounded by the sense, reinforced by media coverage of stabbings, that everyone else is carrying a weapon, as well as experience of victimisation.
Several themes emerge from knife-carrying research, including the role of the police, families and friends. Each of these agents provides security, to some extent, from vulnerability. This vulnerability, in theory, provides a positioning that warrants violent self-defence, merging morality with logic (Thompson, 2019). Therefore, knife-carrying becomes responsible and, in some cases, justifiable.

In the UK, peer pressure, fashion, victimisation and fear are among the primary drivers for young men’s knife-carrying (Home Office, 2018). This research also namechecks broader influences, including social media, as reinforcing gendered behaviours and ambitions for ‘street capital’, although their specific influence on young men’s knife-carrying remains unclear (Harding, 2020).

Gendered debates highlight masculinity as central to young men’s knife-carrying, with such behaviours sometimes arising from masculinity challenges (Holligan et al., 2017; Messerschmidt, 2000). Here, knife-carrying helps construct a masculinity that supports navigations through street life (Reid, 2017). For Lemos (2004), while young men’s early motivations for knife-carrying are primarily for protection, ultimately, their behaviours become aggressive.

One frequently cited reason for knife-carrying is young men’s proximity to violence. Silvestri and colleagues (2009, p. 7) suggest:

\[ \text{the complexity of circumstances affecting behaviour is coupled with the complexity of social meanings, values and behaviour which young people experience and re-negotiate, individually and in groups.} \]

In Silvestri and colleague’s work, young men’s vulnerability emerges from daily anxiety, inequity, disillusionment and disadvantage. Similarly, in Grimshaw and Ford’s (2018) research, material and relative deprivation were principal drivers of knife-carrying.

I also introduce the theories supporting my analysis. Connell’s HM theory explains how Maxwell’s young men aspire toward the estate’s masculine ideal. For those falling short, HM also explains the performances of a complicit ‘street masculinity’, which provides dividends of protection from the estate’s vulnerability-inducing street codes. Meanwhile, Anderson’s IMT helps explain how the masculine performances of
Maxwell’s young men may differ in public and private spaces. Indeed, as readers will observe in my findings, some young men could perform complicit masculinity in public and an inclusive form in private. Maxwell’s street code underscores the performances of its street masculinity - fostered by the spaces that young men occupy. These spaces, with their street codes, inform young men’s sense of vulnerability and their demand for respect.

My research began with a question: why do some young men carry knives? In response, I argue that knife-carrying is normative behaviour, driven primarily (not wholly) by inherently violent street codes and street masculinity performances. Subsequently, these performances regulate knife-carrying as part of the cultural hegemony. I view Maxwell’s spaces as normative, where the estate’s young men navigate their relationships. Living among SED, Maxwell’s young men must traverse the street as a physical space; however, the street also possesses subjective meaning and interpretations of place. Where the street code and performances of street masculinities are commonplace, young men must decide whether to avoid or engage with the street. Knife-carrying thus becomes an option to protect oneself from victimisation or subscribe to the expectations for knife-carrying, respectively.

As my literature review shows, the link between young men’s knife-carrying and Maxwell’s spaces is complicated. Nonetheless, my theories argue for sensitising oneself to young men’s performances of street masculinities for regulation, status and peer acceptance. Simply, young men’s knife-carrying may be a symbolic gesture of not merely following the street code but being seen to do so in public. Overtly following Maxwell’s street code leads to performances of street masculinities, which has important implications for vulnerability and the contextual respect and status to which Maxwell’s young men strive.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Here, I describe my methodological approach, starting with the research design and methods, before presenting the research context, Maxwell. After, I describe participants’ recruitment and involvement before outlining the process of my analysis and ethical considerations, including my insider/outsider duality. Here, I hope to convey the suitability and originality of my methodological approach in presenting the voices of marginalised young men.

Research Design

My research intersects youth studies, gender studies and criminology (Figure 3). This intersection acknowledges the multidimensionality of young men’s knife-carrying as seen through an academic lens and the various social contexts where their vulnerability manifests (Squires, 2009). These intersecting fields also focus my literature review.

![Figure 3: Positioning of the study within overlapping fields](image)

The study of social contexts differs depending on one’s epistemological and methodological position. Led by my research objectives, my approach is sociological and interactionist, which enables me to examine participants’ (masculine) identities and agencies as reflexive processes. Here, their strategies and resources echo the stories they use to understand their worlds (Maruna, 2004). As Layder (2006) notes, action generally happens in spaces where participants congregate and interact. My
interactionist approach thus lends itself well to my immersive ethnography, which I detail next.

I use narrative and realist approaches to generating and analysing data. Narrative approaches investigate the connections between subjective experiences (Smyth & Mclnerney, 2011) which, in this study, are perceptions of vulnerability in participants’ stories. A narrative approach helps elicit participants’ sense of Maxwell’s spaces, creating culturally rich accounts of how they understand their behaviours (Feldman et al., 2004; Flick et al., 2014). Critically, these stories offer insights into participants’ past knife-carrying actions and, through self-creation, their future knife-carrying (Maruna, 2004).

Alone, a narrative approach does not lend itself to an ethnography in a straightforward way (Flick et al., 2014). Wanting to elicit participants’ descriptions of their knife-carrying experiences, I draw on the realist work of Silverman (2004), who views respondents’ reports as either being of facts (‘external realities’) or feelings (‘internal realities’). Silverman (ibid) distinguishes between realist and narrative approaches by saying that the latter concerns stories and the former include realistic accounts of facts. When combined, these methods present a holistic exploration of participants’ lives, based on the subjective (e.g., their vulnerability) and the facts (e.g., their knife-carrying). I can, therefore, better understand what happens in participants’ lives and what others think about them. This holistic exploration leads me to urban ethnography (discussed below), which allows me to explore participants’ spaces as organic entities.

**Ethnography**

Sociologists have used ethnography since the 19th century. Ethnography enables researchers to gather qualitative data through close and continuing contact with participants. The ethnographic work of several researchers on a similar topic to mine (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Gunter, 2008; Reid, 2017) assures me that my approach is feasible. While some may advise against ethnography in a potentially testing environment like Maxwell, my approach offered the best chance for rich (and unique) data to fill the research void.

Moreover, ethnography relies on informal conversations and informal notetaking, so I can focus on examining participants’ experiences from their perspective (Lane, 2016;
While not an active participant in Maxwell’s ecology, I participated briefly in young men’s lives across various contexts.

Ethnographers using an interactionist lens, like myself, are concerned with the intersubjectivity of human behaviour and the interpretations that actors attach to themselves (Lane, 2016). Here, I wanted to observe participants and how they interact, including their attempts to influence (and accommodate or resist) others such as youth workers, police and their peers. Drawing upon Gold’s (1958) typology of participant-observer roles, I positioned myself during fieldwork as:

- **The complete observer** – where I did not participate in participants’ social settings; I took this role during early fieldwork and rapport-building;

- **The observer as a participant** – where I had minimal involvement in participants’ daily interactions. Here, I had some connection to the setting, but not ‘naturally’; I took this role after building rapport with participants;

- **The participant as an observer** – I took this role once I gained access to Maxwell in more natural and non-research capacity, i.e., towards the end of fieldwork.

These methods enable me to understand how participants’ interactions and influences develop to influence their perceptions of vulnerability and knife-carrying will answer my research questions.

Thinking of the spaces and people I would encounter, I use an ‘urban ethnography’ approach, which frames the social and cultural importance of activities for those occupying inner-city spaces (Brewer, 2001).

**Urban Ethnography**

Urban ethnography (UE) emerged in the 1890s, as cities became ‘social laboratories’ (Jackson, 2016). Rejuvenated in the 1940s following William F. Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* ((1943) a formative text for my fieldwork), UE occurs in the spaces of inner-city life. The reality of these spaces impacts research design, analysis and reporting of results (Jackson, 2016).
I argue that urban spaces differ from other research spaces and thus require a nuanced approach. Before I detail my UE approach, I will sketch the fundamentals of UE to show the logic of my decision and my navigation of the insider/outsider researcher issue. I first define Maxwell’s ‘urban spaces’ before explaining my research engagement therein.

Maxwell’s urban spaces are social, cultural, and physical spaces. Those living in areas like Maxwell often experience crowded and poorly maintained housing, inadequate healthcare access and, significantly for my research, increased exposure to violence (Bourgois, 1996). Like Maxwell, many inhabitants of SED spaces are racially and ethnically diverse. Inhabitants also face social inequities, including harassment from police and continuous cycles of poverty and high crime (Lam et al., 2019). Maxwell thus typifies inner-city spaces in the broad UE literature.

For some researchers, inner-city spaces create anxiety, highlighting the difference between their background and the circumstances of research participants (Wacquant, 2002). My experience of and proximity to Maxwell is thus advantageous. Throughout this research, I use various approaches (e.g., researcher disclosure and gatekeepers) to assuage participant or researcher anxiety. Moreover, my UE uses conventional ethnographic methods, including observation (formal, informal and participant), informal conversations, interviews and field notes.

My focus in Maxwell’s spaces was to capture participants’ experiences, power dynamics and interrelationships through the lens of UE. Participants’ living conditions undoubtedly shape their perception of me, my ‘privilege’ (including my ‘whiteness’) and my efforts to understand their lives. Ethnographic researchers unfamiliar with their setting face challenges, including acquiring the social and cultural capital for assimilation (Bourgois, 1996). Because of my familiarity, I have the foundations to notice participants’ social norms and expectations more than most outsiders.12

Deeper engagement in social structures and the valuing of an inner-city space’s cultural reproduction is a staple for urban ethnographers. Some go to extraordinary lengths to engage in participants’ lives; Bourgois (1996), for example, collected data

12 I discuss my insider/outsider role later in this chapter.
while being a lookout for drug dealers in New York’s urban spaces. My engagement was more straightforward, as I live close to Maxwell and frequently moved through its spaces. While I did not masquerade as a youth worker, MYP colleagues enabled me to foster rapport with participants through my association with them. Subsequently, I did not resort to any extreme ‘immersion’ behaviours. Instead, by appearing ‘authentic’ – through association and strategic use of researcher disclosure -13 I gained reciprocity and thus, could broach sensitive topics (Duclos, 2019).

My UE involved spending considerable time alongside youth workers in Maxwell. Here, I observed and spoke with participants in their spaces during otherwise inconvenient times and with insider knowledge of ‘where young people were at’. I discuss these in the Methods section.

**Ethnographic Site**

Here, I outline why I chose Maxwell as a research site. Subsequently, readers can then contextualise participants’ voices and my findings (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). I had planned on using three research sites: (1) MYC (2) Maxwell’s streets and (3) a London hospital. Unfortunately, the hospital site became difficult to navigate, so I focused on Maxwell’s streets, including MYC.

The frequency of knife-related incidents in Maxwell’s London borough is higher than the London average. The borough has a notable youth violence problem and, during the London riots of 2011, experienced significant unrest. While the borough has undergone regeneration, there remains pockets of deprivation where crime and knife-carrying are rife (see Figures 4 & 5 for typical Maxwell spaces).

---

13 Researcher self-disclosure is a tool to negotiate unequal power relations within the researcher-participant relationship through the researcher ‘doing similarity’ and citing shared experiences. In my case, I shared my knowledge of the local area, including sites of specific cultural or historical interest.
Knife-carrying is most prevalent in SED inner-city areas. Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2019), Maxwell ranks among the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England. Maxwell’s demographic profile is in Tables 1 and 2.¹⁴

¹⁴ For anonymity, figures are approximations.
I chose Maxwell because of my history with the area and, on MYP youth workers’ advice, its concentration of knife-related issues. Also, MYP is well-established around Maxwell, so could enable access to spaces that I could not reach alone. Moreover, according to MYC’s youth workers, several recent high-profile local stabbings have some association with Maxwell’s inhabitants.

*Table 1: Maxwell population demographics vs. UK population (source: 2011 National Census)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>% of population</th>
<th>% of UK population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in England</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak English as their first language</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18 years old</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAME under 18</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Maxwell crime statistics - five most prevalent offences (source: police.uk June 2020)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-social behaviour</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence and sexual offences</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoplifting</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methods**

My research uses interactionist traditions and these practices:

1. Observations of young men’s interactions around Maxwell (approximately 15 separate occasions).
2. Over 100 informal conversations with young men and youth workers - when audio recording was impossible – with approximately half noted in my field diary.
3. Six audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with deeply engaged (i.e., Primary participants) participants (ages 18-22). One audio-recorded open interview with an MYP youth worker ‘Darius’.

4. Three focus groups (N=11 young men; ages 18-22) from Maxwell.

5. Community maps drawn by young men (N=11) during focus groups, showing their safe/unsafe spaces around London.

6. Focus group participants’ photos of spaces possessing symbolic vulnerability.

Hereafter, I explain my choice of methods alongside a justification for participant sampling and the fieldwork sites. I also describe the technical aspects of my methodological approach. Table 3 shows the fieldwork timeline and participation.

Table 3: Summary of participant involvement and fieldwork timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pilot period</strong></td>
<td>Feb-Mar 2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ The pilot of interview questions</td>
<td>Feb 2019</td>
<td>Four (in pairs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ The pilot of the focus group</td>
<td>Mar 2019</td>
<td>Four (in one group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Fieldwork</strong></td>
<td>Apr-Dec 2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Street observations</td>
<td>Apr-Jul</td>
<td>Approximately 25-40 young men who I engaged with frequently over nine months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Focus group discussions and community mapping</td>
<td>Jul-Sep</td>
<td>11 (two groups of four and one of three)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Informal conversations (recorded as field notes)</td>
<td>Jul-Dec</td>
<td>16 young men, two youth workers and several MYC staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Formal individual (recorded) conversations</td>
<td>Aug-Nov</td>
<td>11: Six young men (Five participants x two interviews) and three youth workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Photos (phase 1)</td>
<td>Aug</td>
<td>Seven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Photos (phase 2)</td>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>Six (including five participants from phase 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Youth club visits</td>
<td>Apr-Dec</td>
<td>Multiple (around 40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>41 young men participating in either recorded interviews, informal conversations or focus groups; 5 youth workers; several MYC staff; 25-40 young men who I observed around Maxwell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Piloting

During February-March 2019, I piloted interviews and focus groups, which I include in my analysis. On youth workers’ advice, I chose four young men to trial interview questions with at MYC. Here, I noted ease or difficulties with specific questions (e.g., wording or sensitivity of the topic) and the time taken for interviews. I also noted the dynamic of interviewing two participants simultaneously and whether these interactions were inhibitive. Feedback (e.g., "How did you feel when I asked …?" or "Was this question easy to understand?") led me to remove some questions and to prioritise individual interviews due to ‘participant performativity’.

Focus group piloting was at MYC, using one group of four participants chosen by MYP youth workers. I aimed to understand how participants discussed topics together, activity timings and the feasibility of community mapping. Feedback led me to shorten some activities and to incorporate photo projects for knowledge coproduction.

Street Observations

Street observations occurred around Maxwell and MYC between April-July 2019. My proximity to Maxwell meant I visited three to four times each week. Accompanied by at least one youth worker, observations lasted around 60 minutes each (weather and youth workers’ availability dependent). I recorded personal reflections on a voice recorder and took pictures of Maxwell’s spaces on my mobile phone. I also carried my researcher diary for compiling notes.

During early street observations, youth workers chose the spaces to frequent. Once I became familiar with Maxwell’s inhabitants (approximately three weeks into fieldwork), I chose observation spaces more freely. Observation data were analysed thematically, based on vulnerability (e.g., observing spaces and behaviours that may foster vulnerability), the areas where young men’s social activities occur and what happens therein.

Throughout street observations, I was mindful of my appearance. My affiliation with MYP would, perhaps, lead some to see me as a youth worker. While this would enhance my immersion (youth workers can easily access conversational areas), it raises some dilemmas, which I discuss in the ethics section.
Informal Conversations

Drawing on Brewer’s (2001) work, to better understand participants’ subjective perceptions of their social and cultural spaces, I observed their interactions in situ. Youth workers provided a vehicle for UE research as I engaged with participants in their own spaces. Alongside street observations, I spent three to six hours per week visiting MYC throughout fieldwork. I noted participants’ behaviours and the interactions the youth workers or I had with them. The young men I encountered were limited to those in the area or at the youth club when I visited. Nevertheless, once I gained a rapport, I would informally schedule to meet participants at an agreed time and place.

Ethnographers aim for a deeper understanding of how a phenomenon works in a specific cultural context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). On the advice of Swain and Spire (2020), I used informal conversations as the primary data generation method, to build rapport and establish non-hierarchical relationships. I could, therefore, observe Maxwell from participants’ perspectives (and not through my past with Maxwell). I also use informal conversations for generating data for my research questions, where I needed to hear participants discuss Maxwell in their own words (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As Swain and Spire (2020) note, informal conversations can yield authentic data, free of both interviewer and interviewee performativity.

Informal conversations replace the ‘me’ and ‘you’ with ‘we’ – befitting the in-depth communication of ethnography (Swain & Spire, 2020). Nonetheless, informal conversations are relatively underused, with most social researchers relying on formal fieldwork methods (e.g., interviews) (Berg & Sigona, 2013). Here, and because of my discussion topics, informal conversations meant that there was no recording device interrupting dialogue.

Informal conversations are not without criticism. While such discussions are closer to everyday dialogues than, for example, formal interviews, some (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) call them ‘conversations with a purpose’, inferring a power imbalance between researchers and participant - with researchers harbouring an ulterior conversational motive. Paraphrasing Hammersley and Atkinson (ibid): informal conversations are not ordinary exchanges, as researchers exert some control over the discussion. This asymmetry requires careful management on my part, making sure participants do not feel mislead.
Moreover, there are thorny issues around informed consent during informal conversations. As Swain and Spire (2020) argue, obtaining informed consent before, during or after informal conversations is unnatural and obtrusive. Therefore, acting on advice from Swain and Spire (ibid) and Akesson et al. (2018), I did not seek to obtain informed consent for informal conversations. Instead, I exercised my researcher obligation to preserve participants' confidentiality and anonymity outside of the community (Swain & Spire, 2020). This decision was based on my necessity to uncover participants’ stories and to deepen my understanding of their lives on Maxwell in the most natural way.

Venkatesh (2009) notes that, for some young men, voice recording of conversations is difficult due to their sensitive nature. To mitigate such issues, I relied on my researcher notes recorded immediately, or as soon as possible, after conversations. Although some researchers deem these reflective data to be a lower status, I argue that they are different rather than inferior. While voice recording data is preferable for many reasons (e.g. for verbatim quotations), researchers such as Al-Yateem (2012) cite a strong case for retrospective notetaking, particularly given my study's context.

When conversation recording was deemed mutually appropriate (for youth workers and participants), I semi-transcribed the audio (i.e., transcribing key themes verbatim and summarising off-topic discussions).

**Interviews and Focus Groups**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the six participants most deeply engaged (Primary participants) in my study. Interviews allowed me to explore individualised motivations and meaning given to behaviour and, in general, participants’ constructions of reality (Noaks & Wincup, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews gave flexibility and form, while a thematic structure allowed me to investigate theoretical assumptions, including the ‘why’, ‘where’ and ‘how’ of knife-carrying. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews is its strength, insofar as I was able to critically engage with participants and, where appropriate, challenge their accounts and motivations (Schmidt, 2004). Simultaneously, semi-structured interviews allow participants to discuss the importance of divergent subjects (ibid), reflecting the complexity of knife-carrying.
During focus groups, I wanted to investigate participants’ collective and normative vulnerability perceptions, including their attitudes towards knife-carrying. The biggest asset of focus groups is in how they facilitate individuals’ collective understanding and definition of a phenomenon (Bryman, 2012), foregrounding any issues of criticality. My focus groups also reduce power imbalances between the participants and me by resembling their daily friendship group interactions (ibid).

Focus groups have disadvantages, which require mitigation. For example, one person might dominate, or shy/introverted people do not contribute. Also, it can be difficult to discuss sensitive topics as people hesitate to talk openly (Bryman, 2012). Nonetheless, they are useful for forming a collective feeling, which may foster engagement and make voicing opinions more secure (ibid). My operationalisation of these approaches is in below.

**Semi-structured Interviews**

Interviews resembled extended conversations, befitting my UE approach (Choak, 2013). Wherever possible, interviews were at MYC to minimise distraction and improve comfort.

A small number of primary participants (N=6) undertook interviews exploring:

- Feelings of safety around Maxwell and how they dealt with these perceptions
- The key influences (e.g., role models) on their masculinities
- Their age at the time of exposure to knives
- How social media influences their masculinity and vulnerability
- The strategies and resources they use to attain status among peers
- The influence of institutions (e.g., police and statutory services) on their vulnerability

Interviews lasted 30-40 minutes each (see Appendix for the interview schedule), with all but two held individually. Of the six interviewees, four young men were interviewed twice. Follow-up interviews explored the above themes in more detail, whichever was most pertinent from the first interview.
Focus Groups and Community Maps

Four focus groups (including one pilot focus group) were held at MYC as youth workers deemed it a safe discussion space. I used community maps (see Appendix) to encourage participants’ involvement and to create a forum to discuss their experiences of their inner-city spaces (Travlou et al., 2008). Community mapping was useful for engaging discussion as it provided a visual reference for the familiarity of participants’ spaces and larger geographies (ibid).

I gave participants an electronic tablet with a map of Greater London. Participants took turns to visually mark places where they felt ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’, using their interpretations of what this meant. Participants waiting their turn informally discussed life on Maxwell with my facilitation. Once all participants had taken turns marking the safe/unsafe areas, they gave feedback on why some areas were safer than others. I noted their reflections as they occurred. Community mapping helped contextualise young men's feelings of vulnerability and indicate geographical norms. For example, did all participants describe Maxwell as somewhere safe? Or were some spaces further afield safer than Maxwell and why?

Photos

Over several weeks, I asked focus group participants to take pictures on their mobile telephones of areas that made them feel 'unsafe'. Photos foster participant involvement via co-production methodology (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014), while also adding to the uniqueness of my study by maintaining the presence of participants’ otherwise absent voices. For safeguarding, participants sent photos to a youth worker who forwarded them to me.

Several weeks after receiving participants’ photos, we reconvened and curated a final selection for contextual comments. From an analytical perspective, photos addressed my research questions by:

- gathering a visual sense of how participants framed spaces as unsafe;

---

15 Due to the risk of identifying the research site, and the subsequent risk to Maxwell’s young men/participants, the final curated photos are excluded from this thesis. More information is in Section 8.0 of my UCL ethics application form (NB – removed post-submission).
identifying characteristics of hazardous areas consistent between participants; and,
cross-validating participants' perspectives from original photos to focus groups’ reconvening.

Participants

Participant Recruitment

Here, I describe participant recruitment and the collection of their data. As noted, my initial thinking was to speak to young men exposed to knife-carrying. To support this, Lemos (2004) provides a typology for young people engaged in knife-carrying:

1. Those convicted of knife-carrying
2. Those known to agencies as frequent knife-carriers, but who had not received a criminal conviction
3. Those who infrequently carry knives and who are not recognised by criminal justice agencies
4. Those with friends/associates who carry knives but who do not themselves carry knives and are not recognised by criminal justice system professionals

Ideally, I would have spoken all groups. However, it was difficult to engage with groups 1 and 2 because of their ongoing involvement in criminal investigations. Also, youth workers indicated that these young men might be put at risk by their participation.

My participants thus belong to groups 3 or 4. Nevertheless, participants are likely considered 'at risk' of knife-carrying due to their demography and proximity to 'life on-road' (Bakkali, 2019; Reid, 2017). Research supports my decision to involve only groups 3 and 4; recent evidence (e.g., Palasinski et al., 2019) shows that many young men carrying knives do so undetected. Those appearing in criminal justice records are, instead, the ‘serious knife offenders’ (ibid).

I aimed to speak to as many young men as possible from Maxwell fitting the above typology and who possessed the knowledge to answer my research questions. Participant selection was one of convenience: those chosen were the easiest to access. I used two broad approaches to identify participants - where they lived and
their activities or circumstances, with MYP youth acting as gatekeepers, as suggested by Emmel et al. (2007).

I did intend to interview non-youth worker professionals supporting Maxwell’s young men. Still, I had to curb this for safeguarding reasons. However, I did speak informally with several professionals during fieldwork (e.g., church leaders and community police officers) who advised on where to focus participant recruitment.

My use of ‘pragmatic considerations’ (Noaks & Wincup, 2012) was crucial in participant recruitment. For example, I wanted to speak with young men aged between 18-22; however, I was unable to check participants’ ages formally. With the limited potential participants in mind, I took young men’s word (and the advice of youth workers) as to their age. Therefore, some participants may fall outside of the age limits. Sometimes, my informal conversations involved young women and young men outside of this age group (e.g., I spoke to the mothers of some participants). I chose the minimum participant age of 18 to avoid seeking parental/guardian consent.

My primary strategy for participant recruitment was through youth workers. In addition to supporting recruitment, they offered guidance on how to approach them for an interview. This involvement has many ethical and methodological considerations, which I discuss in the findings section. Nonetheless, I am under no illusions: some young men only participated because a youth worker asked them. However, it is these young men’s voices that are generally silent in the literature.

Once I had consistent contact with young men, I attempted to organise interviews and focus groups. Throughout recruitment, I consulted youth workers to understand who appropriate participants would be (infrequent or non-knife carriers, age 18-22). In hindsight, this was important since many young men were wary of being interviewed. Also, according to one youth worker, some young men together may ‘create a bad dynamic’ (Researcher field notes: November 2019). Some researchers may consider that, because I was unable to portray a more holistic picture of knife-carrying (based on a more significant number of perspective and viewpoints), my study has substantial limitations. Nonetheless, my practical and pragmatic considerations took precedence given the participants and the nature of their environments.
Participant Involvement

More than 74 young BAME men (aged 18-22) from Maxwell and five MYP youth workers were involved in this study. This number includes eight young men engaged during the pilot in October 2018. Readers should note that by using participation labels, I am not downplaying the contribution of some over others. Instead, my labelling describes their ‘extent of involvement’. Indeed, peripheral participants gave fascinating (albeit brief) insights into Maxwell that shaped my research.

Primary participants (PPs) were those most engaged and are thus the most present in my analysis (Figure 6) - the case studies among my findings are from the PP cohort. They included young men and three MYP youth workers whom I built a close rapport with that, superficially, resembled friendships. PPs were those with whom I interacted with regularly around Maxwell or MYC. While many discussions with young men were informal, I conducted several semi-structured recorded interviews (N=11: five participants x two interviews; one participant x one interview) with them, and in which I used more directive questioning. To characterise PPs in a few words, one would call them engaged, curious and open – but not necessarily from the outset. In general, PPs were also those with the closest relations with youth workers.

Put simply, secondary participants (SP) engaged to a lesser extent than PPs. Included in the SP cohort were two youth workers. Typically, SPs and I spent considerable time together during observations and informal discussions, but with no repeat interviewing. Tertiary participants (TPs) were peripheral; while some participated in focus groups or, contributed photos, their temporal involvement was limited. The TPs cohort included one youth worker, two MYP head office staff, several MYC administrative or management staff and other professionals. At times, TPs were offering interjections while others were talking, rebuking friends for exaggerating or, affirming others’ assertions.
The average age of PPs (excluding MYP staff) was 19.6 years old, while the SPs group average was 19.9 (excluding MYP staff). The average age (that participants disclosed) across PP and SP groups was 19.8. There was insufficient age information for TPs. Of the 48 participants involved, over half claimed to have carried a knife in the last few weeks or, were friends with someone who recently carried a knife.

**Gatekeepers**

Throughout fieldwork, I regularly travelled through Maxwell, sometimes accompanied by a youth worker. These youth workers, especially during early fieldwork, supported access to the conversations and rapport-building of relationships with participants. These gatekeepers were integral: they facilitated access and influenced the selection of the research sites and participants. As Aherne (2014) notes, sometimes, a powerful sponsor (youth workers in my study) may influence others in the fieldwork setting. For example, in his influential *Street Corner Society*, Whyte (1943) gained the sponsorship of an influential leader, ‘Doc’. Subsequently, Doc’s fellow gang members did not challenge Whyte’s researcher presence. One could thus view MYP’s youth workers as my co-researchers, my ‘Doc’. After all, they were gatekeepers for data generation, ‘sponsoring me’ (like Doc) and enabling my engagement with participants. MYP’s focus is, nevertheless, on developing youth work activities. While I worked alongside...
youth workers, did not define my research questions or analysis. However, given youth workers’ contribution, readers should know their influence.

While MYP did not receive recompense for their support, there were certain expectations. My research coincided with new youth work programmes, so my research, informed their development somewhat. Also, MYP can access this thesis, which may support future programme resourcing. I cannot say definitively that my research was independent of MYP’s activities; accompanying youth workers arose from my study’s fit with their programme priorities.

There is one remaining point about my researcher independence. Central to this study are participants’ subjective experiences of Maxwell’s spaces. Thus, reflecting on my collaboration with MYP, I remained aware of how their expectations could detract from my research focus. Therefore, I mitigated interference through regular debriefing sessions with MYP staff. My apprehensions were generally unfounded. Indeed, on occasion, I was mindful of limiting how my research priorities were informing MYP’s youth work rather than vice versa. This feature appeared indicative of the status MYP bestowed upon my research.

The Process of Analysis

My analysis incorporates the relational and subjective theories of vulnerability and street masculinity. My approach was also sensitive towards Maxwell’s young men, and, to address the scant emic research, allowed participants to tell their stories.

A challenge in qualitative research is the vast amount of data it generates. I thus used a systematic approach to interpret this wealth of information (Bryman, 2012). I used structured data collection approaches to mitigate these issues, drawing on Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) Grounded Theory and Seidel’s (1998) Qualitative Data Analysis. Within a grounded theory approach, I use coding techniques that develop constructs from participants' perspectives, in their language, and that sensitise me to potential lines of inquiry (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 43). A grounded theory approach champions fieldwork that gives a voice to ‘oppressed perspectives’ (Bryman, 2012) – a feature relevant to the stories of Maxwell’s young men.

Grounded theory receives criticism for its tendency to be overly inductive and for overlooking existing theory (ibid). To mitigate this, I used a thematic qualitative data
analysis, which adheres less stringently to an inductive approach, the central tenets being:

1. Noticing and making sense of events, places, talk, incidents of behaviours and relationships;
2. Coding units of meaning into wider (general) and smaller themes, using both a priori and emergent coding; and,
3. Making sense of what is happening, what is going on (ibid).

While qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) helps analyse larger datasets, I avoided them. As Seidel (1998) argues, coding and collecting alone are insufficient. I therefore used my cognitive faculties to understand the data, looking for trends and relationships and locating ‘discoveries’ related to vulnerability, masculinity and space and place.

My analysis married traditional and creative techniques. During street observations around Maxwell and MYC, I took notes in my diary and photos of the spaces where, according to the youth workers, young men congregated. I also noted youth workers’ comments about young men’s activities in these spaces (e.g., smoking, drinking or playing music). I related these notations to my themes of vulnerability, masculinity and space and place, using youth workers’ experiences to attach meaning and significance. This data allowed me to form several hypotheses, which then led me to devise a priori questions - couched in vulnerability, masculine performances and space and place - for informal conversations.

Where possible, I audio recorded a small number of interviews. I then undertook semi-transcribing on Microsoft Word, summarising but not coding 'off-topic' conversation. I coded on-topic discussion as per my themes of vulnerability, masculinity and space and place.

During focus groups, I recorded participants' collective and normative perceptions of vulnerability, including their knife-carrying attitudes. These perceptions were elicited during the 'question and answer' part of focus groups, which I noted in my fieldwork diary alongside participants’ reactions. The community mapping visually indicated where participants felt safe/unsafe. I used these 'geographies of vulnerability' to query how young men protected themselves in hazardous areas, and what occurred in safe
spaces to restrain their vulnerability. I coded participants' responses against the themes of vulnerability, masculinity and space and place.

During my latter fieldwork, my research moved past vulnerability and masculinity in general. Instead, I moved toward young men's descriptions of situational versions of both, thus developing space and place and knife-carrying themes. These concepts developed through the data - not for explaining knife-carrying, per se, but participants' social patterns (Figure 7 models this development). As I discuss in later chapters, these social patterns partially generate young men's knife-carrying.

![Map operationalising a priori themes (orange), emergent themes (blue) and interrelated themes (white)](image)

My analysis was cyclical: I used my supervisors and youth workers as sounding boards. Meanwhile, I shared data from interviews, researcher notes and focus groups with young men for their comments, improving the data quality and reducing limitations in my study's design. My field diary supported my analysis, offered additional data triangulation and helped in collecting, analysing and presenting data (Punch, 2012). My notes recorded young men's dynamics during focus groups, street observations and interactions at MYC and participants' experiences when perusing interview transcriptions. I present verbatim excerpts in my findings to support qualitative interview data. I consider these measures in my conclusion, including any methodological limitations.
On Seidel's (1998) advice, I paid close attention to transcribed texts: moving between them, forming connections between different aspects and phenomena. For Silverman (2004), this approach suits traditional manual coding (although I was cautious about over-coding my multiple datasets (ibid) - avoiding data analysis software, which often ‘smoothes out’ unexciting but valuable aspects, helped). Siedel's emphasis on attending to evidence and not vanishing within data seem particularly relevant for my work, given the need to explore new ground and amplify young men's passive voices.

Another vital consideration, concerning participants and the subject matter, is research ethics and risks, which appear below.

**Ethics**

Here, I discuss risks to participants and myself and how I managed them. I also describe how I negotiated the insider/outsider researcher dichotomy. I start by stating the importance of my research and why any risks were worthwhile. Readers can find my UCL ethics application form in the Appendix (NB: removed post-submission).

Fundamentally, my study offers valuable insight into the characteristics and needs of Maxwell’s young men. Specifically, I wanted to help organisations working with inner-city young men at risk of knife-carrying. I hope that youth workers find value in the approaches I used to engage participants, which may support a better understanding of young men’s perceptions of their vulnerability and knife-carrying.

My research adopts the British Education Research Association’s (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines. I stored anonymised data electronically on an encrypted and password-protected folder. MYP staff safely stored participants' real names with their pseudonyms at a central office.

Drawing on the advice of Swain and Spire (2020) and Akesson et al. (2018), I did not obtain informed consent for informal conversations with participants. Instead, I used my researcher obligation to preserve participants’ confidentiality and anonymity, except in the case of any safeguarding or welfare concerns. I gave participants information sheets describing their involvement and asked them to sign consent forms (see Appendix) before formal interviews and focus groups. Information sheets cited the reason for their selection and assurances of their anonymity (through pseudonyms) and the potential for them to leave the research without cause or
prejudice. Youth workers advised on participants' capacity for informed consent and interview scheduling. I gave participants a week between the invitations to participate and confirmation of their participation to reflect on their permission. I told participants that they could request a summary of the research findings.

I briefed youth workers before data collection, assuring them that I would not share information that may influence their employment unless there were conduct or safeguarding issues. During briefings, I asked youth workers to raise concerns about any topics I was discussing with participants. I also gathered feedback on my interactions with them and their continued involvement.

**Navigating Risks**

Street-based youth work creates unique risks, including exposure to hostility and vicarious trauma (Jones, 2014; Pitts et al., 2002). To minimise these risks, my accompanying of youth workers adhered to MYP protocols, including, for example, risk assessments. MYP has significant experience of working with inner-city young people, and so has existing policies - that I opted into during fieldwork - for mitigating risks.

I completed risk assessments for UCL’s research ethics committee, MYP and youth workers during initial fieldwork. These assessments outlined hazards and ways to mitigate youth worker and personal risks. I regularly reviewed these hazards with youth workers, including a stringent examination during the piloting of my methods. On a personal note, having worked with inner-city young people, and being familiar with Maxwell, I used this experience to navigate spaces safely. With youth workers, I identified the spaces to engage with young men during the pilot, which helped focus on where young men would congregate.

Youth workers initiated my engagement with young men after identifying their suitability (e.g., age, gender and knife-carrying habits). I accompanied youth workers during this introduction, mirroring their typical prompts for conversations with Maxwell’s young men. During these prompts, I introduced myself as the youth workers'
colleague. I told youth workers before the fieldwork that if young men did not wish to talk, then this should be respected.

During initial conversations with Maxwell’s young men, I did not disclose my study’s full details. My view (endorsed by MYP) was that this could stifle early discussions. Nonetheless, while the minutiae were not initially shared, I did not actively withhold details. Indeed, as participant relations developed, I shared my unadulterated focus. In general, once qualitative interviews began, I took several minutes to introduce myself and my study. This introduction allowed participants to rescind their participation.

Throughout fieldwork, I gave young men and youth workers reassurance of anonymity in any data presentation. As Guenther (2009) states, where anonymity occurs, researchers should still justify such steps. Guenther (ibid) also criticises the ‘thin veiling’ of participants’ identities, since internet searches can quickly locate research sites, participating organisations and even participants. No more so is this noteworthy than in ethnographic research, where removing actors from the places that define them is so significant. Given these criticisms, I offer some points on my decision to remove participants’ identities and the fieldwork location. First, anonymisation offers Maxwell’s young men the opportunity to 'be someone else', which is essential considering stereotypes of young BAME men and knife-carrying. Second, as the researcher, I should ensure that participants are safe throughout, and not only when a research ethics committee declares. Third, MYP insisted upon data anonymisation; this decision was good organisational practice (and entirely reasonable given MYP’s support). Lastly, young men’s knife-carrying and vulnerability is, for many, difficult to discuss. Anonymity allowed me to build trust with Maxwell’s inhabitants, fostering an openness and trust during qualitative interviewing.

Engaging Vulnerable Participants

The notion of vulnerability may allude to different features. For knife-carrying, one may argue that the entire young BAME male community is 'vulnerable' as statistically, this demographic (in geographies like Maxwell) is most at-risk of knife-carrying. Many other sub-communities of young people are vulnerable – due to their potential involvement in knife-carrying – including those not in education, training or employment.
While I was interested in vulnerability perceptions of Maxwell’s young men, this fearfulness extends to younger people in general. I took additional care in locating and engaging with young people who could be vulnerable. Part of this consideration was in evaluating whether their participation could present a risk, where experienced MYP youth workers gave an invaluable steer.

One early consideration during data generation that persevered was my relationship with Maxwell. Having personal knowledge of its violent reputation was simultaneously useful and inhibitive. During fieldwork, I oscillated between feeling at ease and apprehensive with my surroundings. Speaking with participants, Maxwell’s history connected us and built rapport. However, I was in constant self-surveillance, checking that my (somewhat negative) experiences of Maxwell were not biasing my research. My history with Maxwell led me to encounter people from my adolescence. Indeed, I met the children (and grandchildren) of people from my childhood. Following reacquaintances, one question persisted: “how come you’re back here, of all places!” My researcher diary noted my varying discomfort:

```
May 2nd 2019

Met an old acquaintance from childhood today. Felt quite sad as it appears he is still striving to be someone different—be even greater than he was when I last met him, all these years ago. He told me he has 5 kids by 4 different women. He’s even admitted that he doesn’t see the kids much. I wonder how many old friends are in the same position? My old friend is still in the same place he grew up in, nothing much seems to change for him. There’s still the old newsagent on the corner, still kids hanging about outside use to used to. There’s a few new places—a pub, a betting shop—but everything else feels familiar. The estate looks run-down and tired. Lots of people drinking and asking for money on the street.
```

While these encounters held no hostility, others’ reactions made me aware of playing a balancing act: leveraging my previous experiences versus the constraints of these
same experiences. To support this balance, I spoke regularly with youth workers on whether I was managing the balancing act appropriately.

**The Insider/Outsider Dichotomy**

In social research, researchers need to share their motivations for conducting research, especially qualitative investigations (Silverman, 2004). As Hodkinson (2005) states, ethnographies of youth cultures, particularly at doctoral level, are often undertaken by researchers, like me, with cultural proximity to participants. In attempts to define their role, ethnographic researchers typically position themselves as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' - those with some sense of belonging to participants, and those without respectively (*ibid*). This dichotomy raises an interesting question given my past with Maxwell and my present researcher status: was I an insider or outsider? Was I a partial version of one or the other (or both)? I tackle this quandary below.

During fieldwork, I was struck by the irony of my (necessary) emotional invisibility while exploring participants' ‘invisible’ experiences. I wrestled with how to perform as a researcher, particularly given my self-disclosure to build authenticity with participants. Insider researcher challenges were not unfamiliar; nonetheless, this was the first occasion of my researching spaces from my past, what Chavez (2008) calls ‘partial insider research’.

Chavez (*ibid*) further highlights the oversimplification of the insider/outsider dichotomy. For example, the distinction between ‘total insiders’ (with multiple identities or intense experiences) and ‘partial insiders’ (with a single identity or some detachment from those under investigation) (*ibid*). Merriam and colleagues (2001) also find issue with the insider/outsider problem, highlighting how positionality and power defines one’s place on the scale. As Merriam et al. note, researchers’ positioning is often fluid; indeed, the binary position of either insider or outsider can emphasise difference(s) rather than shifting commonalities between researchers and participants. Avoiding the binary status discussion, Ross (2017) calls my positioning in this study ‘someone familiar’.

My insider status, wherever on the scale it appears, offers benefits that are particularly useful given my work’s positioning within a participatory paradigm. Given my knowledge of Maxwell’s social, cultural and community contexts, specific advantages
include ease of field or participant access, expedient rapport-building and richness of
data interpretation (Chavez, 2008). Simultaneously, my insider researcher status
offers challenges including presumptions of shared understandings (which may curtail
correlation) or the researcher-participant relationship making some topics
uncomfortable to discuss (ibid). Moreover, I maintained a ‘healthy wariness’ of over-
familiarity with the context, participants or local ecology – features perhaps more
obvious to outsider researchers.

Complicated power issues may emerge from my multiple positions, many of which are
situationally different for participants. For example, while I am an insider researcher
with regards to participants’ experiences, my class differential (despite my history with
Maxwell) may influence researcher-participant relations (Merriam et al., 2001). As
Tilley (1998, p. 327) argues:

…the researcher’s familiarity with the context does not always
guarantee that the research … will be any less hazardous to the
participants than the research directed by someone stepping in
from the outside for a brief encounter.

Below, I describe my navigation of the insider-outsider dichotomy and how I
maximised my study’s rigour. Foremost, I acknowledge that my personal experiences
influenced the decision to research young men’s knife-carrying. These same
experiences have informed my approach to examining this issue.

To learn from my participant discussion, I kept a reflexive research journal. For
example, the following entry followed one informal conversation with a participant
‘Joe’:

Today was tricky – Joe appeared anxious to start, saying [to me]
things aggressively. I felt uncomfortable. I know I’m in a privileged
position. Many wouldn’t [be in such a location], as they would never
come here [Maxwell] and talk to these young men. Also, I think I
asked Joe some leading questions; he was unclear on what to
respond. When I elaborated on my questions, maybe they became
leading – I need to double-check these with the youth workers.
(October 2019)

Another example is below; here, I note the differences between youth workers’ and
young men’s conversation and tone with me:
The importance of reflexivity, and of my being continually reflexive, is a theme I cover briefly in my final chapter.

Some insider-researchers rely on informants with whom they are most comfortable (Hodkinson, 2005). Therefore, I was mindful of my familiarity with Maxwell affecting my discussions with participants. On the advice of Kanuha (2000, p. 443), I checked interview transcripts for 'artificial officiousness' – including participants referring to me in the third person, as if 'Brendan' was someone else who was interviewing them. One may argue that researchers can reduce these criticisms by removing themselves from the research context. Nonetheless, it appears somewhat naïve to assume since according to a constructivist perspective, researchers cannot remove bias entirely (Harklau & Norwood, 2005).

To reduce bias, I distanced myself from the research in different ways. First, I used multiple data sources and collection methodologies (Maykut, 2002; Patton, 2002). Second, my researcher journal was an 'audit trail' for daily reflections, tasks and reminders of events (ibid). I also cross-validated my interpretations with participants and youth workers for accuracy (e.g., participants revisited their photo projects). Concurrently, informal conversations with interviewees ratified my data interpretations (Swain & Spire, 2020). Once interview data were transcribed, and my interpretations formalised, I sent participants and youth workers a summary for their comment and clarification. Similarly, I reviewed my theoretical positioning by orally presenting it to youth workers and senior MYP staff.

**Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, I outlined and discussed my methodological approach. I positioned this study as intersecting three fields: youth studies, criminology and gender, reflecting the complexity of knife-carrying. I also described my underlying method: drawing on Silverman (2004), I use realist and narrative approaches to gather participants’ stories.
and factual accounts. I also presented the research context, Maxwell – an inner-city community of poor living conditions and frequent knife-carrying. This context justifies my choice of UE as an approach (Jackson, 2016). I introduced the participants, how I recruited them through youth workers and the extent of their research engagement. I finished by defining the process of my analysis, the ethical considerations and the puzzle presented by my insider/outsider researcher duality.

Next are my main findings. I use a small number of in-depth participant case studies that are symbolic and representative of young participants and youth workers, which draw out key themes that help to answer my research questions.
Chapter 4: Findings

Here, I use four cases/case studies to provide further insight into my participants. Such cases appear in many researchers’ work (e.g., Bernabeo et al., 2013; Collett & Childs, 2011), including Connell’s (1995) key work, *Masculinities*. These descriptions support my narrative-based approach as participants’ stories reveal how my main themes of masculinity, vulnerability and space and place manifest. Also, these cases show how structures, including gender and SED, appear in and through participants’ practices. One disadvantage of using cases is the risk of reducing what I can showcase. For Reay et al. (2019), the approach ‘reflects the trade-off between depth and breadth’ (p.9). To mitigate this, I blend cases with other data to organise my narrative and to offer readers an overview of the points of interest.

These cases are generated inductively from my data, embodying and representing stories from the overall participant sample. These cases may also be ‘revelatory’, where researchers such as myself can gain access into the everyday lives of young men, thus providing important insights into their knife-carrying and vulnerability. My cases, therefore, allow other researchers to develop hypotheses for testing with larger participant samples. This approach cannot capture the diversity of responses from everyone I encountered during fieldwork. Nonetheless, while each case is not representative of a broader population, I believe that each represents a narrative that is typical among similar geographic, demographic and socioeconomic communities.

My cases represent wider typologies of ways of enacting patterns of masculinity and highlight participants’ meaning-making (Reay et al., 2019) relating to their masculine performances and vulnerability. The cases are from a selection of primary participants – those engaging most deeply and whom I got to know best. While the cases consist of three young men and one youth worker, all were black males who had experienced violence and deprivation. For example:

1) Azeez aspires to join the hegemonic group but lacks the resources. He therefore tends to perform a complicit masculinity.

2) Bankz embodies many hegemonic qualities that others aspire to replicate. Nonetheless, the presence of his older brother, Mo, ‘raises the hegemonic bar’ for Bankz.
3) Charles rejected Maxwell's street code, having previously embodied many aspects of its HM. His (present) masculinity veers towards the inclusive form.

4) Darius is a youth worker (and former gang member), who offers many young men aspirational inclusive masculine features that oppose the violent masculinities within Maxwell's street codes.

Darius’s section appears different to the young men’s cases because of his youth worker role and his unique position in Maxwell’s ecology. He thus exhibits unique traits and features. Nonetheless, where possible, I have woven Darius’s case into the three young men’s cases. Darius also provides value in his public modelling of inclusive masculinity features, which some of Maxwell’s young men reserved for their private spaces. Therefore, Darius was an archetype for change in Maxwell’s masculine hegemony.

I focus first on Azeez’s construction and presentation of his masculine identities, the resources that underscore these performances and how street codes influence his knife-carrying. I also outline how various actors influence Azeez’s life around Maxwell, including his mother who gave time for multiple informal conversations with me. While Azeez is one participant, his experiences represent many of Maxwell’s young men.

Azeez

Azeez, 18, has lived on Maxwell for 12 years. He lives with his mother, Amina, and two younger siblings (who have a different father) in a small three-bedroom flat. Azeez left school at 16 and has held sporadic minimum-wage employment since. In Azeez’s words, he divides his time between ‘hanging out with friends from Maxwell’, ‘playing computer games’ and ‘messing around on social media’.

Azeez is shaven-headed, of a slight build, about 5’6 tall and appeared of mixed black and European ethnicity. When I first met him, he wore a t-shirt and jeans, but around Maxwell he wore dark sportswear with his hood over his head. Azeez wore several layers of clothing under his outermost sportswear, which made him appear bulkier. One youth worker noted that layering allowed for better concealment and multiple pockets for storing money, drugs or weapons.
I spoke informally with Azeez on multiple occasions, both individually and in small group settings. We also had two recorded conversations of 45-60 minutes at MYC. During one-to-one conversations, Azeez was polite and softly spoken, making little eye contact and shuffling his hands nervously. Around his peers, Azeez would use profanity and derogatory remarks about others, particularly young women.\footnote{As an interesting aside, whenever I saw Azeez with his friends he was sat or perched on top of a bench. As most of his friends were taller than him, it appeared Azeez avoided any height or stature comparisons.} My impression was that Azeez enjoyed ‘performing’ this bravado; his peers approved, laughing at his comments and offering lots of affirmation.

MYP was alerted to Azeez after his biological father left several years ago. According to MYP’s youth workers, Azeez had become violent at school, and Amina found knives in his bedroom on several occasions. Azeez is particularly close with MYP’s youth worker, Darius, who had taken a mentoring role over the last 18 months. Darius considers Azeez to be at risk of becoming ‘involved with the wrong people and getting up to no good’ (Researcher notes from informal conversation [RNIC]: June 2019).

**Aspirations of Hegemonic Masculinity**

From Darius’s descriptions, it was clear that Azeez had very few older males in his life. In my first chat with Azeez, he appeared deferent to Darius, who is an imposing figure. As Darius’s presence waned in our interactions, Azeez began to reveal more about his emerging responsibilities at home. When he spoke about such things, I noticed that he would lose his usual playfulness.

Azeez looked after his two young siblings in a paternalistic way, instructing them, taking them to school and, sometimes, feeding them. His siblings idolised him, cuddling up to him on the sofa to watch TV, one under each arm. Azeez described his relationship with his siblings in this recorded interview excerpt:

**BK:** Do [Azeez’s siblings] look up to you?

**Azeez:** Yeah. They’re like me, no dad around, they need looking after, and mum’s busy with work and stuff.

**BK:** So, do they come to you for support … with schoolwork or something?
Azeez: Sometimes. I gotta be someone for them to look up to. There aint no-one around for them. So, I gotta be like a dad, the man of the house [laughing].

BK: How does that feel?

Azeez: I gotta behave now, be responsible. None of the mad stuff from back in the day.

BK: … the stuff you used to get up to. You don’t do it now because you look after your siblings?

Azeez: Yeah. I used to be out a lot, messin’ about and hanging out, getting up to nonsense. But man’s gotta be grown up now. It's my family, and I gotta look after them. (September 2019)

As the ‘man of the house’, Azeez saw his masculine responsibility as being present for his siblings, something that Thompson (2019) links to increasing vulnerability risk factors. While Azeez acknowledged his past misdemeanours, his siblings’ need for a ‘father figure’ saw him change his masculine identity from a street-based one to a caring paternal one. This caring side to his masculine identity arguably has many feminised associated qualities (Paechter, 2006; Swain, 2016), which contrast deeply with his previous violent masculine identity. This nascent ‘fathering’ masculinity (Hunter et al., 2017) reflects Azeez’s shifting role: as he grew from a ‘boy to a man’, to paraphrase Amina, he spent more time caregiving indoors and less time with his friends. Azeez would frequently refer to his past, which included hanging out with ‘dangerous people’ and carrying knives (RNIC: September 2019). When I asked him about why he associated with these people, he cited a sense of loyalty, having known them from school. I also got the impression from Azeez that, in his father’s absence, this period of transgression served as a nursery for his masculine identity. As Reid (2017) shows, young men lacking positive masculine exemplars during formative adolescence will often turn to (violent and knife-carrying) street codes for guidance on masculine performances. Fortunately, for Azeez, the presence and closeness of Amina and his siblings meant that he was, to some extent, able to recalibrate his masculine identity away from Maxwell’s influential street code.

I first met Azeez’s friends (a core group of four young men) on Maxwell’s streets in August 2019. Many were smoking weed and listening to drill music which Azeez said was common. Their language was coarse, was difficult to penetrate and understand,
and littered with offensive and chauvinistic comments (Research notes from observation [RNO]). Some of the group acknowledged my presence, but many chose to ignore me. It was noticeable that Azeez’s friends dressed the same: dark sportswear, sports shoes and sweaters. Some wore baseball caps, pulled down, so I was unable to tell where their gaze was. When one group member would leave, it became apparent whether they were going home as they used eye drops to mask the effects of weed smoking. I asked Azeez and a couple of his friends what they usually did to pass the time. They replied: *hang out, blaze together, take some drinks together* (RNIC: September 2019). Dressed and behaving as they were, Azeez and his friends were embodying the HM of ‘gangsterism’, as seen in Payne’s (2006) work. Most of Azeez’s friends looked older than him, so I asked him why they were his friends during one interview:

_Azeez: Most of them are older … they would buy stuff that I liked … creps, nice whips. We would drive, blaze, go somewhere away from Maxwell._

_BK: … was there anything about them that you admire?_

_Azeez: … some of them had jobs, proper jobs, and not shottin stuff. Some had girls too. Wow! … so many peng girls!_

_BK: And did they look or behave in a certain way?_

_Azeez: They dressed in nice things, fresh creps … looked good on-road._

_BK: You wished that you had some of their stuff?_

_Azeez: Definitely. Man’s gotta look good on-road … It shows everyone … that you’re successful, that you’re good at what you do … Whatever you’re doing. Having money, it’s important._

_BK: What does it get you apart from clothes and a nice car?_

_Azeez: Respect! People see you’re successful, and they respect you. I know my family would respect me if I make money. It’s not just for me; I wanna be a man and provide for my family._ (September 2019)

Azeez admired his peers’ accomplishments in providing for themselves and their loved ones. In this way, Azeez was attempting to emulate the role of ‘modern-day outlaw’ as seen in Earle’s (2011) study. The material success of his peers (through whatever means necessary) meant they could display their wealth through their material objects
and promiscuity. Such performances were highly stylised and visible throughout my fieldwork and echoed the work of Phoenix et al. (2003). Despite Maxwell’s impoverished appearance, many young men I saw around Maxwell wore designer clothing and expensive-looking jewellery when ‘on-road’ (RNO). For Azeez, attaining and displaying ‘exclusive labels’ was another sign of success, one that would generate others’ respect despite the heightened risk of being mugged. For Lauger and Densley (2018), in the cultural setting of ‘street life’ – which prizes masculinity - adornments (e.g. expensive clothes and jewellery) possess symbolic significance in generating masculine respect and ‘myth-making’. As the excerpt above shows, ‘on-road living’ can be contradictory. It offers opportunities for young men like Azeez to build otherwise absent masculine identities (e.g., the ‘provider’ or ‘protector’ as previous excerpts show) but entangled them in a trap, stunting their personal growth (Reid, 2017).

Once we had a rapport, I occasionally visited Azeez’s flat with Darius. The apartment was modestly furnished, with what looked like family pictures adorning every wall (RNO). His mother, Amina, would always offer tea and biscuits while we waited for Azeez who, in Amina’s words, was ‘tarting himself up’ (RNIC: September 2019). Amina often spoke of Azeez taking pride in his appearance, and not leaving the flat unless he ‘looked and smelled good’. Whenever Azeez would emerge, his clothes appeared clean, neatly pressed and brand new. His usual attire was a bright white t-shirt, slightly oversized to make him appear physically bigger. He cared about his appearance and wanted to give the impression that everything he owned was new and ‘fresh out the packet’ (RNIC: September 2019).

According to the youth workers, Azeez got into trouble two years ago after he had left school, aged 16, and fell into a crowd committing petty crimes including mugging. One youth worker told me that this was when the police caught Azeez carrying a knife. Azeez was, in the words of one youth worker, ‘easily led and influenced by older kids’ (RNIC: June 2019). When I asked Azeez about this period, with some hesitation, he recalled his motivations of ‘rolling with some bad people’, that ‘gave him some status’ on Maxwell. Azeez went into more detail, speaking of opportunistic muggings with both pride and embarrassment, as he described the ritual of asking victims for a cigarette before demanding their possessions. During such transgressions, Azeez made it clear how young men used knives, noting:
… they’re [knives] for scaring … If someone got brave. [Sometimes] we knew mans would probably be carrying too. So, like, eye for an eye, you know?” (RN: September 2019)

This ‘defensive knife-carrying’, which Marfleet et al. (2008, p. 16) say leads to ‘opportunity-related benefits’ is a feature of young men’s involvement in robberies or drug dealing. When I probed Azeez about why these muggings appeared attractive, his tone became remorseful, saying:

… I wanted the money. I wanted to get stuff, sell it, and buy myself and my mum things. I saw this Louis Vuitton scarf for her birthday. I needed to make money! (RN: September 2019)

As the above shows, Azeez’s motivations for aspiring to join the HM group - ‘making money’ - were not wholly selfish. Azeez’s reverence for his mother (coupled with the disdain for his father) created a duty-bound need to reward her in highly symbolic ways. Azeez’s general tone when he spoke of his mother was of sincere admiration. He appeared to enjoy the aspirational mantle of ‘protector’ and ‘provider’, becoming more animated when talking in such terms (RNO). He repeatedly acknowledged that his poor schooling had taken him to illegal money-making and fulfilling one of the central traits of the HM ideal – a kind of currency for respect among peers (something that Harding (2020) allies to the generation of street capital).

During one interview, I asked Azeez what ‘being a man’ meant to him. Azeez said that a ‘real man’ should ‘be able to look after himself’ and ‘not act a pussy [a weak or feeble person]’, akin to the ‘tough black boy’ ideal in Phoenix et al.’s (2003) work. Azeez’s tone again became highly charged, repeatedly hitting the table and gesturing:

Azeez: He’s gotta have swagger … lookin like you aint gonna back down if someone steps to you.

BK: And what would you think of a man if you saw him back down?

Azeez: If that’s one of my [friends], I’d be like ‘stop being a pussy’. I don’t know many people who would back down. Once you back down one time, people think you always a pussy. (September 2019)

The ‘swagger’ that Azeez refers to chimes with Harding’s (2020) assertion that young men generated stock of street capital through their skills in ‘The Game’. Azeez’s dictum: ‘once a pussy, always a pussy’ was, in general terms, a thread running through
many of his conversations with friends. I observed that if someone in the group failed at something (e.g. video games or sports), they were roundly (albeit jokingly) called a ‘pussy’. Similar derision followed anyone trying and failing to ‘chat up’ a girl; in many cases, group members forced others to go beyond a point of no return (RNO). While Azeez and his friends used the term jokingly, for people outside of friendship groups, the worst thing to be was a ‘pussy’: someone who lacked courage was weak and effeminate (RNIC). In this way, being a pussy was the main characteristic of the subordinated form of masculinity.

Throughout our conversations, Azeez referred to a man’s mettle, not just physically but also as a provider for others, as the following interview excerpt shows:

   BK: So, what other qualities should a typical man possess?

   Azeez: Mans gotta be brave, have heart, ‘cos it’s a jungle out there! I think a typical man should be a provider for his family for himself. No handouts …

   BK: And if a man doesn’t possess these qualities, what is he?

   Azeez: Then he’s my dad! [laughing] (September 2019)

Azeez’s descriptions of ‘being a real man’ resonate with performances of courage and being a provider (Reid, 2017). Interestingly, Azeez makes a malicious ‘othering’ comment about his father; this was apparent in a few conversations with Azeez and other young men from Maxwell – many had absent fathers. In general, very few of the young men I spoke with were complimentary about their fathers, even if they were present in the home. For some, their contempt came from the physical and verbal violence that fathers directed towards the family – particularly mothers. Arguably, many young men were guilty of replicating this violence on the street – perhaps born of their resentment. For other young men, living in a relatively disadvantaged community was, in part, due to their fathers not providing enough (RNIC). Many young men’s descriptions of masculinity centred on taking ‘themselves and their family out of Maxwell’ (RNIC: October 2019) – something that their fathers failed to do. In this way, some of Maxwell’s young men measured their masculinity by their ability to usurp their fathers’ achievements.18

18 A phenomenon that some psychoanalysts would say resembles the Oedipus complex.
Performances of Street Masculinity

Alongside Azeez’s attire, he used many of the affectations of young men occupying Maxwell’s streets. Azeez’s trousers invariably hung low, with his hands seemingly always grabbing his crotch (a sort of phallic gesture that many would practice). His language for his peers was markedly different from his speech and tone with adults, including Darius and me. When Azeez spoke with his mother, he was polite with no aggressiveness. Likewise, during my early conversations with him, his tone was well-mannered.

As Connell (1987, p. 79) notes, gender involves: ‘the weaving of a structure of symbols which exaggerate and distort human potential’. Thus, for Connell (ibid), the structure is not static; the weaving infers an ‘elastic masculinity’, inherent within Azeez's masculine performances for different people in different spaces. Paraphrasing Giddens (1984), Azeez's spaces influenced the way he acted and interacted and how he conducted his body and the space his body occupied. Nonetheless, as rapport built, Azeez's tone became like the one he had with youth workers – somewhere between his deference to Amina and the 'street slang' with his peers. I took this change as marking the development in our trusting relations and Azeez's increased acceptance of my presence.

As Azeez's conversations with me became more expansive, he divulged the extent of his knife-carrying behaviours.¹⁹ During the latter part of his school years, Azeez had a circle of friends from Maxwell with older brothers and male cousins who would meet them after school to smoke weed. As Azeez became part of this ritual, he joined them a few evenings each week, smoking and drinking and playing video games. This practice quickly escalated to Azeez accompanying them on forays, 'picking up girls', or ‘seeing what to rob from the shops’ around Maxwell’s perimeter (RNIC: September 2019). After that, Azeez’s group would encourage one another to take things further; rather than stealing from shops, friends would assist in stealing from others on the street. When I asked Azeez how knives entered this scenario, in one recorded

---

¹⁹ Although I was unable to prove the veracity of Azeez's claims, both youth workers and Azeez's peers said that such practices were plausible.
Azeez's descriptions follow two themes: 'peer pressure' and 'expectancy'. The group's ringleader, 'Jay', began knife-carrying as transgression escalated. Subsequently, others beyond their group became aware (through social media) of the spate of muggings and, in the group's mind, were preparing themselves by knife-carrying. As the group became ambitious, they used their profits to acquire valuable resources for 'showing off'. Nonetheless, many young men, like Azeez, hid these ill-gotten gains from parents or siblings, in shoeboxes under beds or at friends' houses. Azeez would say to his mother: "I'm just going to [friend's] house, I'll try not to be back late." (RNIC: October 2019) This inference seemingly placated Amina that Azeez would be safe, unwise to the group's activities.

Moreover, as shown in Irwin-Rodger et al.’s (2018) research, Azeez (and his friends) would organise transgressions on social media, away from parents' notice. Thus, Azeez reserved his activities (and their spoils) for his performances of grandeur for his peers. Hiding his achievements away at home – apart from the occasional present for his family – meant that those most aware of Azeez's performances were on Maxwell's streets. At home, Azeez 'performed' a benign masculinity, willing to take on responsibility as the 'man of the house' (RNO). I captured these differences during one street observation:

_I spent lots of time with Azeez and his friends today. Lots of talk about football, stuff online and girls they were trying to chat up. Lots of profanity and misogynistic terms for the girls. The phone rang, and when he saw mum's number, he begged his friends to be quiet, so his mum wouldn't know who he was with. With his mum, his voice changed completely – the pitch went up, and all_
As my diary shows, Azeez’s performances were deeply contrasting and, at times, visibly immature. This lack of maturity is present in other researchers’ work, notably Marfleet et al.’s (2008) study, which found that participants’ emotional immaturity heavily influenced knife-carrying. However, his peers did not rebuke Azeez for these differences; instead, they acknowledged the need for them by performing the same way for a select few, primarily mothers (RNO).

**Street Codes and Vulnerability**

*BK: Don’t you think you should feel safe wherever you are?*

*Azeez: But it aint happening, is it?*

*BK: What happens when you don’t feel safe?*

*Azeez: Well, aint no man looking after me except for me! Aint no police giving a shit. I look after myself and if that means being backed up then, whatever.*

*BK: But you’ll get into trouble with the police.***

*Azeez: Well, there’s always other ways. But what do you expect? If you’re a black kid from here [Maxwell] and on the street, then something’s gonna … kick-off … at some point.*

*BK: What do you mean ‘something’s gonna kick-off’?*

*Azeez: … shit happens on-road. If I go some other ends, there’s a risk. Here? Nothing! Unless there’s [people] I don’t know. But you know if I go other ends, I’m probably backed up—at least one of us.*

*BK: It sounds like no-one could help you stay safe?*

*Azeez: True. Aint no-one for people like us. (October 2019)*

Azeez’s frustration (and aggression) in the above interview excerpt was typical of our interactions. Despite often observing Azeez among large groups, his descriptions of “aint no man looking after me except for me!”, imply a feeling of isolation. He was never comfortable and appeared aggravated talking about feeling ‘vulnerable’ or ‘unsafe’, inferring a fragility to his masculinity. Indeed, his preoccupation in appearing belligerent echoes the work of Barlas and Egan (2006), who note that knife-carriers
possess a significant concern in appearing aggressive. The behaviours that Azeez referred to reflect his inherent precariousness. This wariness was particularly evident when moving through unfamiliar areas, or spaces where other young men would gather (an occurrence that some groups would seek out on social media). This same issue arose during focus groups. The community maps below (Figures 8 & 9) demonstrate how unsafe some areas were for participants in comparison to their community.

![Figure 8: Example community map showing safe (blue) and unsafe (red) spaces](image8)

![Figure 9: Example community map showing safe (yellow) and unsafe (red) spaces](image9)
When I asked Azeez about how his movements through Maxwell’s spaces, his candidly said:

*Whenever I leave [Maxwell], I never go alone. You never know when next mans around the corner. Even on Maxwell, people looking for trouble … chasing beef and status.* (October 2019)

Azeez’s admitted that he never travelled far alone. When he did, there were usually ‘three or four boys’ with him, which spoke of the need for safety in numbers and an inability to feel at ease. Also, Azeez tacitly acknowledges that people ‘chase trouble’ as a means of furthering their street status. When I broached the subject of knife-carrying among his peers, Azeez spoke frankly:

*If there’s like, four or five of us, I know that probably two or three people are backed up. Especially when we go on-road, at least someone’s backed up ‘cos that’s the way it’s gotta be.* (RNIC: October 2019)

Azeez’s admission shows that, among some young men on Maxwell, knife-carrying is expected. Azeez’s explains that some consider knife-carrying as ‘responsible’ behaviour, given their ‘on-road’ vulnerability (Harding, 2020). This responsibility mapped to Maxwell’s young men policing their community. Those I met around Maxwell (not only participants) felt that the police were ‘not there for us’ (RNIC: October 2019). I took this to mean people from estates like Maxwell. Still, Azeez highlighted the racial aspect of the sense of police abandonment that is clear in the literature (e.g., Fatsis, 2019b; Thompson, 2019):

*BK: … people talk about the police, what’s your experience of them?*

*Azeez: [laughing] The police?! You must be mad! The police don’t come here [Maxwell], they only interested [in me] when I’m on-road. The cops aint for me … they’re for people like you [pointing at BK]*

*BK: … like me?*

*Azeez: They [police] help white people. Aint no helping us black and brown folk! They just grip us when we minding our own Ps an’ Qs on-road. They [police] jus’ looking for drugs … whatever. [They] aint there when we need ‘em.* (October 2019)
This view reflects a growing body of work relating to how the black community's mistrust of police fuels knife-carrying (e.g., Brennan, 2018; Grimshaw, 2018). Azeez's comments reflected the thoughts and feelings of many of the black community I spoke with and was visible in notes and graffiti around Maxwell's (Figures 10 & 11) for notes taped to lampposts following the Black Lives Matter movement). The racial tensions from past and recent events were part of peoples' everyday expectations. Indeed, on one visit to a participants' home, I spoke with their mother. She took great pride in telling me how she was teaching her six-year-old son about police powers and what his rights were if the police stopped him. When I asked her why she felt the need to prepare her son in such a manner, she replied: 'well, he's a young black boy. I know when he goes outside and is on the street, at whatever time, the police will stop him and start blaming him for something or other' (RN: September 2019). Thus, as seen in research elsewhere (e.g., Harding, 2020; Thompson, 2019), community vulnerability was primed from a young age. Azeez spoke lucidly about the pressures of living life 'on-road', the lack of protection he felt from the police (as well as their punitive actions) and the (highly pragmatic) expectations of Maxwell's young men:

*You just gotta face it sometimes, being from here, it's not about being famous, it's about surviving. We [young people from Maxwell] see people like [grime artist] Stormzy, and we're like 'yeah, I can do that. People don't realise that's a one in a million ting. We look at people on-road, with their nice whips, nice things, and we're like, yeah, I can do that easy! We got them as role models, not our parents. (September 2019)*

*Figure 10: Picture of anti-police note (of several) found around Maxwell*
For Azeez, the expectation to dress, behave and even talk in a certain way seemed set by his time spent with peers on-road (Reid, 2017). When I looked at Azeez, I would see most of the young men of Maxwell, right down to their consensual suspicion of my researcher presence when fieldwork started. Azeez’s uniform and his performances were like many of his peers. When I asked Azeez about why he and his peers all dressed the same, he said: “it’s like the uniform on-road … it’s sportswear cos it’s comfortable, and we can run from the police [laughing]!” (October 2019). Despite Azeez’s humour, the message about punitive policing was consistent. I also put it to Azeez about others ‘on-road’ and how they dressed: could he spot someone on the streets who was ‘up to no good’?

Azeez: The road mans all look the same, hood up, dark garms, roadman bag. They make you think they’re backed up, even if they aint. Some people stick things into their trousers that make you think they’re backed up, but they just frontin’. But these roadmen are dangerous too, you know. They always tryin’ to prove something, make a name for themself an’ move up [the street hierarchies]. Most don’t give a fuck what they gotta do, shot some weed, steal something, wet someone … whatever. (October 2019)

Indeed, on my travels through Maxwell’s spaces with youth workers, I often saw groups of three and four young men, younger than Azeez, hanging out on the streets dressed as Azeez described. Those taking part in photo projects took pictures depicting these young men as symbolic of ‘unsafe’. Youth workers described these young men as ‘foot soldiers for those higher up the food chain’ (RNIC: August 2019).
For many, the prospect of becoming part of the lucrative economy of the streets was enticing. Azeez reflected on his brush with the roadman lifestyle a few years ago:

*I got into shottin’ stuff for some people. Around the time, I was robbing. Mans would try and take your stash, thinking you were pussy and would give it up. Even people who you were tight [friends] with. You gotta be prepared [as a roadman] to fight, cos you lose your stash and man’s gonna be pissed. But some of these kids are making papers … like £200 a day.*

**BK: Why do they get involved?**

*Azeez: They want respect from the streets, other mans on-road. They aint gonna make that stacking shelves at Tesco, are they?”*  
(October 2019)

These lower-ranking roles were highly risky. Nonetheless, such functions offered opportunities for progress into more lucrative positions promising a lifestyle akin to the HM of the streets – replete with material wealth, a bounty of female attention and peers’ respect (Anderson, 1999; Gunter, 2008; Harding, 2020). In this way, the balance between risk and reward falls on the side of the gains available, as seen in other research (e.g., Grimshaw & Ford, 2018; Palasinski et al., 2019). Azeez’s comments about not being able to obtain respect “*from the streets*” while “*stacking shelves at Tesco*”, speaks of what the street defines as respect-enhancing. Rather than making money from legitimate means, many of Maxwell’s young men were motivated by the ‘fast lifestyle’ (RNIC). For example, make money swiftly, do whatever it takes to rise quickly up the street hierarchy and, once there, indulge oneself in disposable friendships and relationships. This lifestyle was one which commanded respect among Azeez and his friends, and, as in Anderson’s (1999) study, was the lifeblood of Maxwell’s streets.

**Resources and Relationships**

Azeez repeatedly mentions the importance of size and physicality in displaying masculine prowess (Phoenix et al., 2003). His references were made more remarkable given his relatively slight frame, which I found gave him a certain aspirational quality (RNO). When I asked Azeez about people around Maxwell who gained others’ respect, he mentioned:
There’s a few guys around here. You know they’re the real players ’cos they’re in the nice cars, looking fresh all the time, fresh haircut, the works. Most of them spend a lot of time in the gym - you can see they look after themself. No need to dress in layers. (September 2019)

Azeez also refers to the 'fresh' appearance of exalted males in the area – something apparent in Phoenix et al.'s (2003) research. Here, poorer black boys saw masculinity as being strong, attractive to girls and looking fashionable. From Azeez's words – and the pride he took in his appearance – it was clear that one had to look the part to gain respect and status. In some ways, this sense of ‘the clothes making the man’ manifests on Maxwell's streets. In Azeez's mind, it is not enough to be successful on-road, a man must also look successful. I raised with Azeez that, if someone looked successful, would people assume that they were successful? His response was:

Yeah, definitely. Everyone knows there’s mans 'round here with a [Mercedes] Benz parked outside but no money for petrol. For people on the streets, that don’t matter. It’s all about the look. (September 2019)

During my conversations with Azeez, I was surprised at how he regularly flipped between conveying annoyance and indifference on a subject (RNIC). His displeasure was often regarding insignificant things such as the way someone looked at him or the perceived disloyalty among his peers when they failed to react as he did (Messerschmidt, 2000). These slights were acts of what I call ‘micro-disrespect’ that Azeez took personally, as the following observation from my researcher diary shows:

Azeez and his friends bumped into some acquaintances on Maxwell. Azeez knew all but one or two. After chatting, the acquaintances left, and Azeez started complaining about the people he didn’t know. He said something like: who were those two guys with ‘X’? You see the way they were screw facing me, staring at mans. Pussies! They better not try anything 'round here, or they’ll get wetted (October 2019)

During the above conversation, Azeez and one other were chastising the others for not saying something to the disrespectful passers-by. For Azeez, their inaction was tantamount to disloyalty and showed their weakness (Densley et al., 2020). Among

20 A riff on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where Polonius tells his son, Laertes: "the apparel doth oft proclaim the man" (Shakespeare, 1609, 1.3. p.3)
Azeez's circle of friends, I observed an unspoken adherence to a 'code'. For example, appearing to dress and talk in a manner and 'back each other up': if one group member (re)acted, others should follow suit. In my researcher diary (October 2019) I noted that group members mocked those who were not abiding by the rules (e.g., "Why you dressed like that? You look shit!") or scorned (e.g., "Why did you stand for that? You looked like a pussy!"). In this way, avoidance was a weakness inciting the scorn of peers (Messerschmidt, 2000). When I asked Azeez how people in his circle of friends could show loyalty, he mentioned their role in maintaining the appearance of 'toughness', saying they should: “… be there if I need them. If it goes off, they need to be there. If it goes off and they aint there, then they need to be there when we rush them later.” (RNIC: October 2019)

When Azeez moved away from the on-road lifestyle, he began to spend more time at home. Amina experienced an awakening following Azeez's police caution for knife-carrying. Subsequently, Amina tasked Azeez with more ‘parenting’ responsibilities with his siblings. During one informal conversation with Amina, she mentioned that this was ‘to get Azeez to think about someone other than himself’ (RNIC: October 2019). In a short time, Azeez had, to paraphrase Amina, grown from a boy into a mature young man – something she closely related to his ‘older brother’ responsibilities.

**Bankz**

Bankz, 19, has lived on Maxwell for almost four years, having moved from an estate nearby. He lives with his older brother, Mo, 22, in a two-bedroom flat within the central part of the estate's environs. The brothers' father left when they were young, so they lived with their mother until Bankz moved out. Youth workers speculated that their mother could not deal with their transgressions. Bankz has a somewhat ambiguous past; he does have something of a ‘celebrity status’ around Maxwell due to his emerging profile in drill music.\(^{21}\) The moniker ‘Bankz’ is from his drill music collective ‘M-Road’.

\(^{21}\) Drill is a style of music with its origins Chicago during the early 2010s; it is defined by violent and nihilistic content and ominous trap-influenced beats.
Bankz stands a muscular 6’0 tall and appears of black ethnicity. He has two pervasive features: a baseball cap pulled down his brow and multiple items of expensive-looking jewellery. I first met Bankz by chance in a chicken shop on the edge of Maxwell, having accompanied a youth worker during early street observations. Bankz was ‘holding court’ in the shop, surrounded by several peers of a similar age who were hanging on his every word (RNIC: August 2019). As my researcher notes at the time show, Bankz was playing drill music from his phone at a volume that filled the shop. The shopkeepers, who I spoke to briefly, turned a blind eye to the loud behaviour of the group as they ‘didn’t want any trouble’ (RNIC). Undoubtedly, Bankz had a presence; when he spoke, his vernacular was ‘of the street’ – at times, I needed youth workers to translate some of his speech. When I talked to Bankz, he would flip between affable and unfriendly, which made him a challenging interviewee. Subsequently, a large amount of Bankz’s data is from my researcher diary and street observations.

Bankz and I spoke informally on multiple occasions, generally within small group settings on Maxwell’s streets. We attempted one recorded interview but stopped ahead of schedule as Bankz became agitated for an unknown reason. Despite this, Bankz was keen to participate (perhaps due to the status it bestowed) and his profile added significant value to my study. During our conversations, Bankz would alternate between staring straight into my eyes and spending minutes averting my gaze. Since most of our interactions were around Bankz’s peers, I got the impression that he enjoyed ‘performing’ in front of them (RNO). At times, he would punctuate answers to my questions with lines of music he was writing, which made following his train of thought problematic.

MYP was attempting to engage with Bankz after his older brother was stabbed and hospitalised following an attack by three assailants a few months before my fieldwork. Due to his close relationship with his brother, Bankz was at ‘high-risk’ of involvement in gangs and their associated activities. Indeed, many youth workers I spoke with already believed that Bankz was involved in criminal behaviours. Nonetheless, at the time of writing, Bankz had only minor infringements on his criminal record and none for knife-carrying.
Aspirations of Hegemonic Masculinity

Speaking with youth workers, Bankz was extremely close to Mo, who was known for his involvement with a well-established local gang, ‘The Dock Boys’ (TDB). Bankz protested any involvement with TDB although the youth workers believed this to be untrue. Unlike Azeez, Bankz was not deferent to the youth workers. Instead, he was mostly dismissive of them, saying things like: “You guys [youth workers] got no idea ‘bout real mans [people like me] on-road” and “I dunno why you keep botherin’ me, I’m just about my music” (RNIC: October 2019). The term “real mans on-road” made me infer that Bankz believed he possessed an ‘on-road’ authenticity that others lacked. This authenticity was a feature of the conversations about Bankz’s experiences.

Further, Bank’s reference to being ‘on-road’ (which appears throughout his vignette) echoes Azeez’s struggles with on-roadness. For Azeez, on-road living offered him the opportunity to build an otherwise absent masculine identity as the ‘provider’ or ‘protector’ of his family. Nonetheless, Bankz, like Azeez, seemed entangled in a trap of shaping his masculine identity per the characteristics of HM on the street, thereby stunting his personal growth.

In many ways, Bankz embodied the HM ideal to which others aspired. Indeed, his use of his moniker instead of his real name gave him a status and ‘otherness’. Bankz dressed like many of Maxwell’s young men; however, Bankz was obsessed with high-end designer labels and would continuously be showing them off to peers (e.g., “look at my new Guccis, £300, fam!” RNIC: October 2019). Further, many of his peers would mirror Bankz’s performance in terms of his style, mannerisms and dress (this was confirmed when I met Bankz’s peers without him when they dressed and spoke almost entirely differently) (RNIC).

For Bankz, the predominant masculinity was redolent of success and brashness. Repeatedly, Bankz’s response to questions about others’ success or experiences was a curt “I don’t give a fuck about them” (RN: November 2019). Bankz’s success (or instead, his retelling of his accomplishments) was the cornerstone of many of his stories. Once, at an MYC football tournament (October 2019), Bankz came with his usual entourage, clearly not dressed to participate. When one youth worker asked Bankz what he was doing there, his (again curt) response was “watching, it’s a free
country plus I don’t see no tickets sold.” I then observed Bankz regale his group with stories of his football prowess and how he “could’ve turned professional, but man’s heart wasn’t in it.” (RNO) These descriptions of his capabilities, while having a degree of legitimacy (Bankz was a competent but ill-disciplined footballer according to youth workers), were met with peers’ nods of approval and affirmation. At the same tournament, Bankz would pass comment on others playing, saying “ah this guy’s shit, he can’t play. He should’ve passed it, man’s greedy. If I had my boots, I’d show them.” Invariably, Bankz uttered these comments between puffs of his cigarette or joint - a frequent fixture in his hand (RNO: October 2019).

During one chance meeting on Maxwell’s streets (RNIC: October 2019), I bumped into Bankz with only one of his friends, rather than the usual five or six normally in attendance. He recognised me from the football tournament and our necessary interaction on the day with the greeting: “oh yeah, you’re Darius’s boy, innit? But you aint no youth worker though, are you? What’s your name again?”.22 What struck me was his instruction to his single friend beside him. While Bankz and I engaged in small talk, he ordered his friend to “run into the shop and get me a Coke”, which his friend did obligingly. When his friend emerged with the drink, there was no ‘thank you’ or even eye contact from Bankz. Instead, he snatched the bottle and scowled “didn’t they have a cold one?” to his friend. During our short conversation, I realised that I did not know Bankz’s friend’s name, so I asked. Bankz answered “He’s Jason” before his friend could answer, rendering him almost invisible. Bankz’s dominance in his group was seemingly so complete that very few of his peers dare to even respond to a direct question in his presence.

Through exerting his dominance in public, and disabusing others of any status, Bankz was highlighting his competencies in ‘The Game’ – a term used by Harding (2020) as a proxy for ‘street life’. The Game’s currency is street capital (ibid), which Bankz claimed to have in abundance through his boastful stories and shows of subjugation. In one such tale, Bankz entertained his peers by recalling a confrontation with a known gang from a nearby estate. As he narrated, his peers were silent, interrupting only to

22 Bankz’s questions of my role and interest in my research were a common thread throughout our series of brief interactions.
ask questions about the ferocity of Bankz’s response to the confrontation. Bankz retold the story during our brief recorded interview:

**BK**: Can I ask you about the time the gang from 'X' confronted you. The time you were speaking about last week?

**Bankz**: [laughing] Yeah. I made them shit themselves, innit. Fuckin pussies aint gonna mess with me no more. They think they oh so ghetto and shit, fuck that. I'm ghetto.

**BK**: You didn't explain last week why they confronted you in the first place?

**Bankz**: I reckon they beefin’ with Mo [Bankz's brother] and can’t get at him, so they gonna try me, innit? Think mans a pussy tho. They don’t know that I aint playing games. I'll fight any mans. So, I did.

**BK**: It was a fistfight?

**Bankz**: It started like that. I knocked some prick out. Switched off his lights [laughing]. Then mans pulled a shank. But they aint got the balls to wet mans. I aint gonna hesitate to knock mans out or wet him if I gotta. Fuck it. I kinda get a buzz from that shit. (October 2019)

It is telling that Bankz calls himself ‘ghetto’ – a term young men used to describe a toughness and willingness to go to violent extremes. Indeed, as Phoenix et al. (2003) note: ‘various studies have identified the forms of masculinity that gain most respect as involving hierarchies based on toughness [and] threat of (or actual) violence’ (p.180). Thus, Bankz’s assertion that he is more 'ghetto' than his ‘gutless’ confronters speak of hardiness but also of his being ‘of the streets’ – another reference to his authenticity and enthusiasm to demonstrate his ‘realness’. There was, nonetheless, an interesting paradox in Bankz's eagerness to demonstrate his authenticity. Many of Maxwell's young men married their living in SED with legitimacy: the more you struggled, the more truthful your views and experiences. Nevertheless, the street code also demanded that young men show off the fruits of their labour in their expensive clothes and other resources (e.g., jewellery) (RNO). A throwaway comment I picked up from Bankz during an informal conversation shows this; as one young man spoke about going home for dinner, Bankz said:
Ah man, I bet you got some three-course meal, innit. Mans belly is rumblin’ fam, but that’s the struggle, innit … brothas be hungry … as long as I got my blaze, I’m cool. (RNIC: November 2019)

As Bankz appears to lament a lack of food at home, he was wearing clothes and jewellery that seems to be worth several hundred pounds. Nevertheless, his peers nodded their approval as if they validated Bankz’s ‘struggle’. This excerpt shows the lengths that Bankz went to verify his street credentials – it was not enough for him to be successful; he had to be both successful and struggling. This oscillation between identities meant that Bankz could participate in others’ struggles yet, when appropriate, raise himself above them and remain part of the aspirational HM.

Bankz’s accompanied his story with a smirk as if recalling some great achievement (RNIC). I thus took his experience of the confrontation as something he found somewhat pleasurable, which chimes Heber’s (2017) work with young men in violent communities. Bankz also infers a certain inevitability in the confrontation - referring to assailants’ ‘beef’ with his brother and his ‘stepping in’ as a replacement target. Knowing his brother’s reputation (and thus to an extent, his own), Bankz knew he would attract unwanted attention. Nonetheless, he appeared to revel in his notoriety as it raised his authenticity, legitimacy and status – as the brother of a known ‘face’ around Maxwell. Thus, Bankz was happy to produce pubic exemplars of masculinity, such as the patterns of gangsterism in Payne’s (2006) research, that others attempted (and often failed) to follow. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that while Bankz performed the HM role for his peers, his brother, Mo, raised the metaphorical HM bar. Compared to his brother, Bankz fell short of the HM, and was thus closer to performing a complicit masculinity. It seemed apt then that I, and many others, never saw Bankz with Mo in public (RNO). One may posit that, perhaps, Bankz was wary of losing his hegemonic status among his peers if Mo was present.

Performances of Street Masculinity

Unlike Azeez in my first vignette, Bankz’s ‘performances’ were reasonably consistent across his different spaces (RNO). While I was unable to visit Bankz’s flat (a youth worker advised against it due to the potential presence of Mo), he gave the impression that mostly, he had only one masculine performance available: that of a hardened but entrepreneurial man of the street.
Central to Bankz’s persona was his music. As drill music group member, Bankz could draw upon an online and social media presence that validated his authenticity of being ‘of the street’ to anyone who questioned him. Indeed, during one informal gathering at MYC, I asked Bankz if he could show me some of his music videos, and he was quick to oblige. As I watched them, I noticed their general content: about a dozen young men, all around Bankz’s age, wearing masks or scarves over their faces (Figure 12) so it was challenging to identify Bankz from the line-up. I found some of the language difficult to comprehend – even given my familiarisation with Bankz’s speech – but could distinguish threats of violence and multiple references to guns and knives (as cited in the work of Fatsis (2019) and Densley and colleagues, (2020)). Moreover, many scenes depicted young men smoking joints and making mock gun signs with their fingers (Figure 13).

![Example scene from drill music videos watched by Bankz](image12)

*Figure 12: Example scene from drill music videos watched by Bankz*

![Example scene from drill music videos watched by Bankz](image13)

*Figure 13: Example scene from drill music videos watched by Bankz*
In many ways, Bankz’s street masculinity matched - and sought to emulate - the profile of those in his music videos. Most of the music videos that Bankz shared depicted young men dressed in the same way as him (see Figure 14 for a picture of Bankz). In one interview, when I asked Bankz whether this drill ‘uniform’ was symbolic, he responded:

Yeah. Most mans cover up [their faces] on Insta or Snapchat cos they don’t want next mans peepin’ at them. If shit goes off, like mans call you out … then you don’t want mandem knowing your face … the feds, they be peeping too … the threads are standard, all about poppin’ tags and lookin dope … (October 2019)

Like Azeez, Bankz emphasises the importance of appearance (“… all about popping tags and lookin dope …”) to preserve an image of success for observers. Bankz’s success connoted a sense of power among his cohort of friends and acquaintances, an image that also appears in the work of Phoenix et al. (2003). As Azeez uses his clothes to give the impression of success and to fit into a specific scene, so did Bankz (although, I got the idea that Bankz enjoyed showing off much more than Azeez).

Bankz’s determination not to show his face in case “shit goes off” infers an inevitability of goading and subsequent confrontation, both frequent themes in Bankz’s music. This inevitability is something that shines through the literature on street or ‘urban’
masculinity performances (e.g., Heber, 2017). Through the medium of drill music, young men – themselves from violent and deprived neighbourhoods - were performing masculinities in the context of their subjugation by conventional society (ibid). The symbolic violence of marginalised young men depicted in drill music videos creates social practices of resistance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As in Lander et al. (2014), society overstates this resistance (for example, in the public scorn for the drill music genre (Fatsis, 2019)). Instead, young men like Bankz appear to have limited options to express themselves, with drill music allowing for one of the few forms of accessible (albeit violent) masculinity.

In our recorded interview, I asked Bankz whether ‘shit went off a lot’ because of his involvement in drill music, he replied:

*I ain't always bout shit goin’ off. If mans getting shanked or somethin', these music videos [are sometimes] at the centre of things."

*BK: … there are threats put out in these videos?

*Bankz: All the time. Not single people all the time, like … groups or shit on Insta or BBM

*BK: Groups as in gangs?

*Bankz: hmmm … yeah.

*BK: Do gangs and drill music go together then?

*Bankz: …[laughing]. Fam! You the feds coming with heat or something? (October 2019)

Bankz’s toned changed to elusive and specious once I mentioned ‘gangs’ (RNO: October 2019). I took this as indicative of Bankz’s association with his brother, a known gang member, and the distance he wanted between him and the ‘heat’ or attention from the police he would generate. In some ways, Bankz’s evasion of an association between his drill music and gangs preserved two things: his appearing as a threat through a visible drill presence (a staple of street masculinity), and an avoidance of direct (implied) violence through any gang associations. As Messerschmidt (2000) notes: if Bankz were to avoid appearing threatening, it might appear as a weakness inviting the scorn of peers. Further, Anderson (1999) argues that if someone like Bankz
perceived a lack of respect of his peers, he could experience feeling subordinated, which, for some is 'a fate worse than death' (p.49).

I believe that Bankz worked out the implication of agreeing that gangs and drill music go hand in hand. Nonetheless, he did not deny the association but instead laughed it off as me ‘interrogating’ him like the police, who, like in Azeez’s case, have a significant negative connotation. In this brief interaction, Bankz displays a microcosm of his identity: someone who appears to have stocks of authentic street masculinity, but who has the ‘street smarts’ to disassociate himself when the heat is on him. Such a performance mirrors the work of Lemos (2004) who found that young people avoided talking in terms of their transgressive exploits for fear of being labelled a snitch by peers or someone in cahoots with police. Such an act would immediately erode Bankz's street status and put him at significant risk of retribution.

Our conversation about Bankz's online presence segued into a general discussion about his use of social media. Bankz had multiple social media accounts across different platforms, and he took pleasure from showing me some of the other pages or accounts he followed including sites proliferating the buying and selling of weapons (see Figure 14 for two examples). These accounts centred on many epithets of street culture, including street fashion, drugs and knives. I asked Bankz (with two peers present) whether he followed any pages that I might find surprising:

*BK:* You’re clearly into drill and fashion … do you follow other musicians who aren’t drill artists?

*Bankz:* [laughing] You mean like … Justin Bieber or some shit like that?

*BK:* Do you?

*Bankz:* [laughing] Fuck off, man! [laughing] This mans [pointing at BK] thinks I’m pussy, fam! You think I’m pussy? Nah. That’s black music for white people. Fucking gay shit. You don’t listen to that shit, do you [pointing at BK]? I don’t follow that fuckin gay shit, man. (October 2019)

Bankz confrontational use of ‘pussy’ – denoting weakness – coupled with his homohysteria, confirms his subjugation of these masculine forms. Bankz seemingly attempts to enhance his heterosexual masculinity by slandering homosexuality, a feat echoed by Carnaghi et al. (2011) in their study of the role of homophobic epithets in
constructing gender identities. It appears that, in Bankz’s mind, listening to drill, and following its various designations, is more masculine and genuinely street than listening to what he calls “… black music for white people”. Moreover, Bankz associates this type of music (and culture, to an extent) with homosexuality and weakness. Indeed, I took his question towards the end of the excerpt (“You don’t listen to that shit, do you?”) as a ‘test’ of the credibility and status I accrued during fieldwork.\textsuperscript{23} Bankz’s following of social media sites that offer purchase of knives and other weaponry correlates with the symbolism that is clear and present within drill (Figure 15). While being careful not to demonise or scapegoat a whole genre of music, the examples that Bankz showed me were replete with violence and calls to bear arms. As Anderson’s (1999, p. 14) key work on street and civic codes show, social pressures to adhere to codes of ‘conflict and aggression [for] resolution’ has significant repercussions for a community’s victimisation and vulnerability. With Bankz’s influence on his followers in mind, it is not hard to imagine the proclivity for weapon-enabled violence to be more widespread than I found within Maxwell.

\textbf{Figure 15: Two examples of social media sites showcasing knives that Bankz was following}

It was during the later stages of my fieldwork (in November 2019) that I (albeit briefly) met Bankz’s older brother, Mo. I was with a couple of youth workers at MYC when a car pulled up in the side street alongside the building. One youth worker, Alex, immediately walked towards the driver’s open window. I could make out a black male

\textsuperscript{23} I took Bankz's question as a compliment of sorts, as we had built some rapport to that point. My side-stepping of Bankz’s issue was met with silence before we changed the subject.
wearing a baseball cap, with one arm hanging outside of the open window, holding a, what looked like, a cigarette (RNO). The car was close enough for me to hear the intense bass of a drill music track and faintly smell weed smoke. Alex beckoned the second youth worker to join him, and I followed. After a brief chat between the youth workers and the driver, I introduced myself. The driver was Mo, and his response was to ask whether I would be interested in talking to him, as his brother had mentioned he had spoken to me recently. I politely side-stepped his offer but could not help noticing his striking resemblance to Bankz in every way, from his build down to his dress, vernacular and tone (RNO: November 2019). While I had assumed that Bankz was intent on portraying his brand of 'street masculinity', it was abundantly clear that he was a clone of his older brother – someone who generated swathes of respect on Maxwell’s streets. The similarity between the brothers made me realise that Bankz was, perhaps, striving to achieve Mo's hegemony. In this way, Bankz's involvement in drill was a boost to his self-esteem (that Ray, (2011) argues is lacking among those from areas like Maxwell) and his unfulfilled journey toward his idealised HM.

**Street Codes and Vulnerability**

When I met Mo, he made a brief comment that Bankz's music is positive as it 'kept him out of mischief' (RNIC: November 2019). I viewed Mo's feedback through the lens of Bankz's past misbehaviours, which had brought him to live with Mo in the first instance. MYP's youth workers verified Mo’s comment that Bankz's music was keeping him out of trouble. Alex, the youth worker with the closest relationship with Mo,\(^{24}\) told me:

>Mo adores his little brother, but he knows that he can’t afford for him to get caught up in the same stuff that he has. Mo is target around the area for other gangs, because of who he is. Mo knows that this increases the risks around here for Bankz. (RNIC: November 2019)

When I asked Alex whether he knew how these risks influenced Bankz's behaviours, he noted:

\(^{24}\)It transpired that Alex was the caseworker in charge of Mo when he arrived at a local hospital after his stabbing in 2019.
In my opinion, that's one of the reasons that he's always got his cronies around. His boys. They're loyal to him as they're riding on his coattails.25 (RNIC: November 2019)

After Bankz's evasiveness to my question about drill music and gangs, I chose not to ask him about knife-carrying. Instead, I relied on the testimony of the youth workers who knew him and Mo best. When I probed Alex about Bankz's involvement with knives during one informal conversation, he emphasised some of the symbolism I witnessed in Bankz's drill music videos:

Drill music is not necessarily about carrying knives, but it's about not standing for disrespect. There's a 'code' that says if someone calls you out, then you have to react; either call them out back yourself or tool yourself up and get them. (RNIC: November 2019)

As Alex's words suggest, drill music is not directly associated with carrying a knife (or gun) per se, but it is the notion of retaliation that sparks such behaviours. In this way, (some) drill music operates as an incendiary medium, like other forms of social media, for young men to goad one another into violent retaliation. As Irwin-Rodgers et al.'s (2018) review of the UK gang violence and social media shows, this creates a 'digital street' for sharing threats – which were replete on the videos that Bankz showed me. Alex also mentioned that Bankz's recent confrontation with several assailants (which I recalled in a previous section) resulted from one of Bankz's drill music group calling out another group – and was not directly associated with Mo as first thought. This situation quickly escalated, and a small group from a rival estate infiltrated Maxwell to start a confrontation close to MYC. After that, rivals stole bikes and mopeds from nearby. As a result, many of Bankz's close associates took it upon themselves to 'protect' him from victimisation by knife-carrying, which superseded any of their concerns about legality (Palasinski et al., 2019). In Alex's opinion, they were protecting their greatest asset – someone who, through association, afforded them the status and street capital they craved (Densley et al., 2020; Harding, 2020). While Bankz

25 When I asked Alex about how they were 'riding on Bankz's coattails', he mentioned that could bask in Bankz's emerging status around Maxwell (as well as the associated status of Mo – I heard many young men say "yeah, I'm tight with Mo's brother, Bankz"). Bankz's circle of friends were also able to gain some infamy by appearing in some of his drill videos.
appeared not to be carrying knives, Alex argued he did not have to while his peers were nearby.

Social media played a significant role in Bankz's life. While I did not see him occupying Maxwell's physical spaces as much as some young men, he did, by several accounts, spend much more time online — the digital street. Bankz showed me that he had hundreds of followers on his Instagram feed, and many more friends across other online accounts. Also, his YouTube videos had thousands of views. Whenever Bankz spoke about such achievements, he did so with great pride — a significant shift from his usual apathetic communication style. Bankz also spoke of the number of times that “people had been chatting shit” about him or his drill music collaborators online. I asked him to describe the type of messages he was receiving in our interview:

\[\textit{Fuckin bait shit. Just man callin’ me and my boys out. Sayin’ they comin’ for us, gonna bring mandem to Maxwell and shoot up the place or shanking people. They always beefing these pussies … throwin’ up gang signs like pop pop [gun sounds] … they just chatting shit tho, aint no one coming to Maxwell, ‘cos they knew we prepared.} \text{(October 2019)}\]

When I asked Bankz whether he felt unsafe because of the online threats, he again became coy and more defensive. He did state that he knew of people close to him who would arm themselves “just in case … pussies come to the ends and try anything” (October 2019). As Disley and Liddle (2016) argue, the digital street is a space where knife-carrying gains legitimacy. In the case of Bankz and peers, knife- or weapon-carrying was a responsible act of preparation “just in case”. When I interviewed Bankz about why people did not call the police instead in response to these threats, he tellingly said:

\[\textit{You call the feds? Not here, nah. People think you a pussy for callin’ the feds. Sort it yourself with your boys on-road. No getting feds in on it. An eye for an eye, you know what I mean? They come with arms, so are we. Settle this like men.} \text{(October 2019)}\]

Bankz’s reply touches on two key themes: peer pressure and the responsibility of men to ‘settle this’ with violence in an ‘eye for an eye’ manner — a phrase that Azeez used in our discussions. These themes are prominent in the research on young men’s responses to online ‘baiting’ (e.g., Densley & Stevens, 2015; Disley & Liddle, 2016; Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017; Whittaker et al., 2020). These studies show that peer
pressure stokes violent (and usually escalated) responses to threats of violence so that young men can appear as ‘tough’ or masculine grown men. In this way, Bankz (and others in his peer group) used social media platforms as stages for their masculine performances, which included knife-carrying as a responsible and legitimate act (Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017).

Resources and Relationships

Our chance meeting led me to believe that Mo held a similar status in Bankz's life that Amina held in Azeez's. Bankz looked up to his older brother and resembled him in many ways (RNO). While I met Mo only briefly, in his few words, he spoke of concern for his brother's welfare. To paraphrase our interaction, Mo asked if, during my interaction with Bankz that he had shown me his drill music videos. When I replied yes, he laughed and said, “I knew he would, he’s in that stuff deep” (RNIC: November 2019). I noticed that Mo was the only person to use Bankz's real name (which initially caught me off guard), instantly evaporating the otherness to which Bankz’s peers deferred. In this way, Mo appeared to establish a clear hierarchy, with him towards the hegemonic summit.

Mo followed up with a quick comment that Bankz's music was 'keeping him out of trouble', which I took to mean involvement in gangs. Here, there are parallels between Mo and Amina: both wanted their charges to have a sense of responsibility – Azeez through his caregiving for his siblings, and Bankz through his involvement with music. Nonetheless, Mo, through his comments on Bankz 'staying out of trouble', knew that stress was inevitable for him – perhaps through living in Maxwell or, through his association with his brother.

Alex explained that, as a teenager, Mo had seriously got into gangs and carrying knives regularly (RNIC). Meanwhile, Bankz looked up to Mo in his father's absence. Mo's habitual transgressive behaviour led to his mother experiencing significant troubles. When Mo's behaviour became too challenging to manage, she threw him out of the house. Bankz would see his older brother a few times a month as he lived only a couple of miles away on Maxwell. In the absence of his older brother, Bankz got into trouble at school for violence. This misbehaviour continued, and Bankz's visits to Mo's
place became more frequent. Soon, Bankz moved into Mo’s home permanently to give his mother respite.

Mo’s reputation for violence on Maxwell preceded him. Some of the young men I spoke with would use Mo’s name as collateral during our conversations, saying:

*You’re speaking to Bankz, aren’t you? He’s Mo’s kid brother. Have you met Mo? I’ve met him a few times, hung out, that kinda stuff. We’re not tight, but we’re cool you know, he’s safe with me.*

(RNIC: November 2019)

Indeed, as I spoke more with Maxwell's young men, it became clear that Mo (and thus Bankz by association) enjoyed an elevated status on the estate. If there was any tension or 'beef' that involved anyone from Maxwell, one of Mo or Bankz would be 'in the know'. Mo, through his connections to organised gangs, was someone that the young men would go to for protection; although, in many instances, they would go to Bankz first as a gatekeeper. Bankz thus held a role as a conduit, a position I asked him about during our brief recorded conversation:

*BK: You’re close to your brother, Mo, aren’t you?*

*Bankz: Yeah … he kinda looks out for me.*

*BK: In what way? Does he keep you safe?*

*Bankz: [laughing] I don’t need him to keep me safe, mans can look after myself.*

*BK: He [Mo] seems to look out for a lot of people around here?*

*Bankz: Yeah, I heard that. Any beef needs squashing then Mo’s on point. He’s got connections, you know what I mean.*

*BK: Would you say that Mo makes Maxwell a safer place for lots of people?*

*Bankz: Kinda, I suppose. Mans come to me first though, innit. They speak to me before they speak to him.*

*BK: But doesn’t that kinda make things unsafe for you?*

*Bankz: How? Cos I’m Mo’s brother. Nah, fam. Everyone’s tight with me. They look after mans cos they know that they can’t fuck wit’ me. I just gotta tell Mo, innit.* (October 2019)
In the above excerpt, Bankz realises that he was indirectly ‘protected’ by his brother (despite his denial that Mo directly kept him ‘safe’). Despite Bankz seemingly fitting the profile of someone with street capital, everyone I spoke to about Bankz referred to him as ‘Mo’s little brother’ (RNIC). Mo’s reputation for violence and sorting others’ concerns cascaded down to Bankz, who, coupled with a burgeoning drill music profile, enjoyed an elevated status among his peers. Bankz did not have to feel vulnerable or protect himself (through anything like knife-carrying) because he was surrounded by peers. Indeed, many of these same peers were open about their knife-carrying as it enabled them to get closer to Bankz, and thus closer to Mo. Somehow, Maxwell had weaponised Mo so that Bankz could avoid actual involvement in violence. Nonetheless, one could argue that his participation in drill – with its violent and provocative content – was a form of symbolic violence (Fatsis, 2019b) in which Bankz was happy to indulge.

Charles

Charles, 22, has lived on Maxwell his whole life. He lives with his mother, younger sister and ‘uncle’ - 26 who spends little time at the house. The family live in a three-bedroom flat, in one of the smaller blocks in Maxwell. Charles attends college, studying business. Some time ago, Charles was a central figure in Maxwell’s street ‘ecosystem’. He is, in his own words, a reformed character but happily speaks about his previous behaviours, characteristics and transgressions.

Charles is athletic, six feet plus, and identifies as black African ethnicity and a practising Christian. Charles is a likeable character, with wit and charm. Whenever we spoke, in both informal and recorded conversations, I found him to be polite and often phlegmatic. Charles, by his admission, has a problem with punctuality, which he attributes to his fondness of talking at length to everyone. Charles often referred to his past misdeeds voluntarily in the context of “drawing strength from things in the past” (RNIC: November 2019). I first met Charles by chance at MYC; he had heard of my conversations with other participants – word travelled fast around Maxwell - and

26 An honorific term for his mother’s long-term partner.
introduced himself. On that occasion, Charles was at MYC for a local church meeting, which became part of our schedule of interaction.

Charles and I spoke informally on multiple occasions (often at great length) and had three recorded conversations of around 50 minutes each. Charles approached each of my questions with a thoughtful pause, before offering rich and often detailed (and sometimes meandering) reflections of his experiences. Many of Charles’s stories are not of the ‘right now’, but of his past; his descriptions, therefore, possess a reflexive distance, providing an interesting triptych alongside Azeez’s and Bankz’s accounts of their present. While it was evident that Charles liked to talk, there was a restraint in some of his stories, particularly about his family, which gave me the impression that his transgressions had had a significant impact on them.

MYP’s youth workers had worked with Charles several years ago and during the early stages of his religious epiphany. Many of the youth workers would, themselves, seek Charles’ counsel on community matters, particularly about Maxwell’s troubled young men.

**Aspirations of Hegemonic Masculinity**

In one recorded conversation, Charles painted a picture of his past masculine aspirations by recalling his miscreant behaviours. Charles occupied a high-ranking position within the DTB, until what he called his ‘awakening’ (RNIC, November 2019). In DTB, he was known for his temper, assuming the street nickname of ‘the devil’ among his peers. In one recorded interview (November 2019), Charles told me how he became involved with DTB:

*It was a gradual thing, with ‘tests’ thrown at me to kinda check if I was serious … everything from stealing stuff, mopeds, small things. Then it got worse, [I was] carrying things for other people, drugs, knives, that kinda thing. Suddenly, I’d get tested, like, are you man enough to roll with us [laughing]? I didn’t know no better. I was a follower, not a leader.”*

*BK: … where did the ‘devil’ nickname start then?*

*Charles: That’s later, once they tested me, I had to show them [DTB] that I was special, not just a standard roadman, one not to mess with. I had to show how far I would go for them.*
Charles’ descriptions of his past self as someone ‘not to mess with’ shows the extreme lengths he went to for his DTB peers. Charles told me that he was a shy young man who acquired a fiery temper to forge a reputation that gave him a higher status than his fellow ‘youngers’ in DTB. In the excerpt above, Charles acknowledges his newfound calmness - channelled through his faith – and found a more ambiguous HM status. For Charles, Christianity has made him exchange his street identity for humility among his “Christian brothas and sistas” (RNIC: November 2019). As Wetherell and Edley (2014) argue, Charles’ position is potentially more ambiguous, as it removed his self from the conventional (or idealised) conceptions of masculinity. Instead, Charles had reconstructed his masculinity, finding his ‘ordinariness’ among his ‘brothas and sistas’ both genuine and manly. The following excerpt from one recorded interview (November 2019) shows Charles’ new-found enthusiasm for a quieter, more peaceful life:

*BK: Looking at where you are now, what do you think of the life you came from?*

*Charles: I thought I was indestructible, king of the streets, you know? I had my Burner, fast money, girls, drugs … people around me who would back me up if I needed. It felt like a family.*

*BK: … and now? What’s your life like?*

*Charles: [laughing] … peaceful! I get to bed at a decent time, get my eight hours of sleep. I pray … that keeps me calm, calms the devil inside [laughing]. I don’t need that rubbish anymore, just a cup of tea and God’s love. That’s what makes me sad when I see all these kids on-road now. I used to be like them, thinking I was all that ‘cos I was stacking papers and living all ghetto … like a ‘G’. That’s a one-way ticket to destruction, but they don’t realise that. They don’t have the strength to take a different path.*

Charles, like Bankz and Azeez, refers to his – albeit previous - ‘ghetto life’, which, in many ways, provided these young men with an additional authenticity (Bakkali, 2019; Reid, 2017). As an aside, many young men around Maxwell used the term ‘ghetto’ interchangeably with being ‘on-road’ (RNO). Sometimes being ‘ghetto’ was less of a verb or adjective and more of a noun. Some young men would use the two labels in the same sentence as in: “he thinks he’s so ghetto when he’s on-road …” (RNIC, various times between September-December 2019). As if to reiterate his shift from
one masculine identity to another, Charles compared his old Friday routine with his new one during a recorded interview (November 2019):

Charles: Now, every day is for God ... and making sure that I respect the day for what it is. Before? Man, it was very different ... I would wake up after midday 'cos I wouldn't have got to sleep until, like, three or four [AM]. Then I'd wake and blaze and check what's happening that evening—usually a party or something, some rave or skank somewhere. Then I'd text everyone, make sure they're set and find out who's hitting this party.

BK: ... and how many of you would go to these parties, normally?
Charles: ... if it's somewhere we know, like six or seven if it's somewhere else, like at least a dozen.

BK: ... why so many people?
Charles: There's always beef at these places. Groups of young men, most of them drunk or messed up on something. Girls, you know [laughing] lots of testosterone ... all it takes is one man to step on next mans new creps and it's on.

BK: ... would you see violence at these parties?
Charles: ... all the time. There's security, but if you wanna hide a weapon, you're gonna find a way. Metal detectors ... whatever ... you'd find someone to smuggle them in the club.

BK: ... and what would these weapons be?
Charles: ... knives, guns, [knuckle] dusters, the lot.

Charles' violence created an implicit expectation for its occurrence. Despite knowing that attending these parties would inevitably lead to an altercation, Charles would attend and, along with many others, circumnavigate barriers to violence. In one recorded interview, when I asked Charles whether the threat of violence would play on his mind, he said: “Yeah, of course. But everyone would be excited by it. Like a test, but a good one ...” (November 2019). This sense of violence as 'a test' chimes with both Azeez's and Bankz's modelling of their behaviour per 'The Game' of street life (Harding, 2020).

Further, as Phoenix et al. (2003) show, Charles aspired to achieve status within the violent HM by displaying his temper and propensity for going to extreme lengths. Indeed, Charles' appetite for violence, and his ability to fly into a rage, gave him the
nickname of ‘the devil’, in which he revelled. The handle, and the reputation (and implicit imagery) that preceded it gave Charles the street capital that he craved in the absence of “… any achievements in anything else I tried” (recorded interview excerpt November 2019). Charles’ transition from feared ‘devil’ to passive ‘ordinary Charles’ appeared in his insistence on (rather embarrassedly) showing me the devil tattoo on his lower neck he now covered due to his Christian beliefs (RNIC: November 2019).

In contrast to Bankz, who took multiple opportunities to display his street credibility by lamenting the struggles of life on Maxwell, Charles flaunted his wealth and status as a younger man. This lifestyle took him away from Maxwell to stay in friends’ apartments around London and further afield.27 For Charles, ‘struggling’ was not something he entertained as he surrounded himself with expensive objects. While Bankz wanted to connect to his peers by appearing to struggle with them, Charles tried to distance himself from the struggle of Maxwell - a life he experienced as a child - as shown the next excerpt (RNIC: November 2019):

Growing up, we didn’t have much. I mean, we weren’t poor or nothing, we just didn’t have nice things. Like I remember clothes, they were stuff my cousin passed down, tired clothes, you know? When I started making money, the first thing I did was make sure I wasn’t living like that no more.

Charles often recalled his childhood during our conversations winced at what his violent lifestyle bestowed upon him (RNO). While Heber’s (2017) research with violent young men recalls the excitement that some would get out of it, Reid’s (2017) work shows how other young men would turn to religion for reform. As further research, particularly from the US (e.g., Aspy et al., 2004; Salas-Wright et al., 2014), shows, religion is a protective factor for many vulnerable or at-risk young people. Indeed, as Reid (2017, p. 162) notes, many young people reject childhood religiosity as it does not resonate with their ‘on-roadness’ (p.162). Reid further argues that, for some young men on-road, religion offers an escape ‘from the trappings of their former life’ (ibid). Many of the young men in Reid’s work resemble Charles, who describes his Christian faith and practices as beneficial, especially given his previous immorality.

27 Charles never disclosed the extent of his involvement in illegal activities. However, one youth worker told me that he was involved in so-called ‘county lines’ - the practice of trafficking drugs into rural areas and smaller towns, away from major cities.
The circumstances behind Charles finding religion were never made clear during fieldwork. Some youth workers claimed that the murder of Charles’ close friend ‘gave a dose of harsh reality’ (RNIC: December 2019) to his life. A few of Maxwell’s elders whom I met during this research appeared to support this ‘tipping point hypothesis’. Nonetheless, Charles’ faith was the primary reason for his reform, and in his own words, “was probably the reason why I’m still alive …” (RNIC: November 2019). With a degree of conjecture, the church gave Charles the belonging he had sought since a childhood spent affiliating with any person who gave him attention.

Moreover, the church’s collegiate nature and support system seemed to create a structure and discipline that Charles enjoyed. In one throwaway comment, Charles also intimated that the church brought him into contact with “positive black men” (as opposed to the negative black men in Charles’ youth) (RNIC: November 2019). This exposure to positive black male role models was crucial for Charles given his absent (violent) father figure and the violence of Maxwell’s elders who filled paternalistic roles in his adolescence. Lastly, Charles’ tone and general affability were at odds with the intense violence of his youth. From Charles’ words, the church appeared to bring a calm or stillness to his life, and respite from his daily performances of Maxwell’s violent street code (RNO).

**Performances of Street Masculinity**

Charles was, without doubt, very different from the person who earned the nickname ‘The Devil’. Nonetheless, his reflexive distance from his previous performances provides a thought-provoking contrast to Azeez and Bankz – who are at different stages of their masculine identity journeys. Like Bankz, Charles possessed a consistent performance across different spaces and contexts; nonetheless, Charles was an explicitly more violent young man who would go to extreme lengths to prove his street credentials. Through our conversations, I came to believe that Charles’ street masculinity performances were cries for acceptance. His familial history was marked by turmoil, domestic violence and exposure to drugs and criminality from a young age. In keeping with our general interactions, Charles was remarkably lucid in recalling his childhood on Maxwell and the boredom that led him seeking attention:

*Charles: There was never really anything for us kids to do around here. The swing park, the cage [where people would play*
football] … I went from group to group, looking for friends, no one got [understood] me. I would go from place to place, looking for attention. I got it from some elders on the estate, people I knew were bad, but they gave me attention.

BK: How did you know they were bad?

Charles: You just knew, the way they dressed, what other people would say about them … people would talk about the elders and the youngers. I saw my chance of becoming a younger and I took it. (recorded interview: November 2019)

From there, Charles would hang out with the elders around Maxwell, who introduced him to some of the youngers. As Charles noted in one informal conversation (November 2019), the atmosphere among the youngers was not one of friendship, but of competition:

… you’re with all these youngers, five or six of them competing against each other for the elders’ attention. It was a bit like being on a football team, wanting to impress the manager so you’d play. We knew that if one of the elders took a shine to you, you could make some money and live like them …

From Charles’ descriptions, the youngers’ competition for the elders’ attention emerged from the prospect of living like an elder. Like Azeez, Charles was surrounded by young men who showed off their resources (cars, money, women) like trophies of their success. Also, part of the performances of these elders was the ‘myth-making’ identified by Lauger et al (2018) and others (e.g., Palasinski, 2013; Harding, 2012). In Lauger and colleagues’ work, the cultural setting of ‘street life’ – which prizes masculinity - symbolically values violence (and knives) as a masculine resource for respect and status (c.f. Barlas & Egan, 2006). In one recorded interview (December 2019), Charles confirmed this was the case in his interaction with Maxwell’s elders:

Charles: I remember clearly. I was in the lift and Alfred and Jermain was in there too. Jermain was an elder and Alfred was coming up [moving up the ranks of the youngers]. They were talking about Alfred getting a shank and Jermain pulled a sword from his jeans … Woah! I was 12 or 13 … Jermain was waving this sword in the lift … he started teasing me, pointing it in my face to scare me. Alfred was laughing. Jermain was saying that I should get some money and buy a shank. Alfred said he had asked for one already, so I knew I had to say yes too so I could impress Jermain and not look weak. [laughing] What else did I have …? I had nothing …
Charles' assertion that he had no other options available and, that he “had nothing going for me ...” bring into view his struggles and helplessness. As Beesley and McGuire (2009) note, some young men have no choice but to turn to violence for their constructions of masculinity. It appears in Charles' case that his desire to please the elders in Maxwell led him to adopt his street masculinity, which, as Charles' experiences show, legitimised his violence and temper. Furthermore, the excerpt above shows the peer pressure that Charles felt: “Alfred said he had asked for one already, so I knew I had to say yes ... so I could impress Jermain and not look weak.” This peer pressure appears explicitly in Azeez's case, and perhaps more implicitly in Bankz's. Nonetheless, for Charles, the overwhelming demand for acceptance brought him into contact with Maxwell's street code, which, for a period, dictated his every move, as the following recorded interview excerpt (December 2019) shows:

**BK:** How did they [Maxwell’s elders] influence your day-to-day living?

**Charles:** In every way. From what I wore, to where I hung out to when I was there. What I ate and where I ate it. If everyone was eating at the chicken shop, so was I, even if I'd eaten like 20 minutes before. I obeyed them ... that's what it's [like] ... kinda mind control. But I was just a kid, y'know—no mind of my own.

For Charles, the elders on Maxwell's street gave him a 'mind of his own' – which one could easily read as 'an identity of his own', which was lacking. In Charles' youth, where there was a void of positive identity-forming personalities, he adopted the identity of the street and, to echo Reid's (2017) study, became trapped in life 'on-road'. During our conversations, Charles said that his faith (and identity) was dormant in his body before he found religion (RNIC: November 2019). This ‘finding faith’ is not uncommon: individuals have found themselves in a religious sense in, for example, prisons (see: Clear et al., 2000; Mulcahy et al., 2013).

For Charles, his conversion to Christianity was in the social milieu of the street and during a specific life stage in his growing up. Thus, Charles' sense of being trapped by Maxwell's street code is akin to having his freedom and agency taken away. Meanwhile, the street gave Charles the social context for him to experience the adverse conditions (e.g., violence, instability, peer pressure) encroaching upon his young adulthood. For Charles, it was when he was profiting from illegal economies and gaining notoriety that he questioned his masculine identity and exercised his
agency to make drastic changes. While Charles never detailed how he was able to change, MYP’s youth workers speculated that a chance encounter with a ‘reformed’ old friend led to an arranged meeting with a local church pastor.²⁸

Charles’ criminality and marginalisation made him question who he was; in Charles’ own words, the Christian dogma “opened my eyes to my place in the world.” (RNIC: November 2019). Charles’ faith became a space where he could create a new identity – in stark contrast to his ‘on-road’ character. In our conversations, Charles admitted that, despite his new pursuits, he still retained significant respect from other young men on Maxwell. From his perspective, this respect was due to his fearsome reputation, and the semblance of relationships with former ‘on-road' peers. Charles also suggested (with more a sense of hope than confidence) that others’ respect was for his transition and commitment to Christianity (RNIC: November 2019). In one recorded interview (November 2019), Charles depicted the struggles that some young men from his past had (and continue to have) trapped by Maxwell's street code:

_These guys now, some of them are obsessed with being on-road. It's not just on-road, it's the mentality too. All they know is acting tough, being a bad man, that kinda thing. If only they had something strong that pulled them outta that mindset. I found God; I ain't saying it's the answer for everyone …_

As the above shows, Charles adopted new behaviours and ideals that rejected Maxwell's street codes. Thus, Charles offers an alternative perspective to the many young men I met on Maxwell, who was committed to Maxwell's street code. Charles’ experiences illustrate how religion was central to freeing himself from his violent on-road life and, in his words, the ‘messed up young man’ (or male identity) that it developed (RNIC: November 2019). As Reid's (2017) study shows, removing oneself from the on-road culture is rarely pain-free. Indeed, Reid (ibid) and others (e.g., Bakkali, 2019; Decker & Pyrooz, 2015) show that many young men believe that leaving on-road life is a myth – despite their enthusiasm to do so. In my fieldwork, I found that few young men were able to entirely reject Maxwell's ingrained street code and its inherently violent street masculinity customs for a more legitimate and positive

---

²⁸ One youth worker, who claimed to have been close to Charles when his friend was murdered, claimed that Charles had joined the controversial evangelical London church SPAC Nation, which describes itself as getting gang members to give up their weapons and join the church.
male identity (RNIC: December 2019). Some participants hinted that this was because they lacked positive (black) male role models in their life (RNIC: December 2019). As Anderson (1999) and Hallsworth and Young (2011) argue, being on-road provides many young black men with visible role models possessing symbolic and material wealth.

**Street Codes and Vulnerability**

Unlike Azeez and Bankz, Charles was vocal about his vulnerability on Maxwell’s streets and beyond. The distance between his past and present predicament seemingly offered Charles an opportunity to discuss vulnerability without the fear of peers’ reprisal or scorn. While both Azeez and Bankz took any disclosure of vulnerability as a weakness (or being ‘pussy’ in their terms), Charles was far more comfortable talking about feeling unsafe, perhaps because of his removal from the environment of constant testing and peer pressure. He thus gave some insight into how young men moved between, and behaved, in their spaces.

When I raised the theme of vulnerability with Azeez and Bankz, they would almost immediately 'other' it – ascribing it something that others would experience. These others would rarely be friends of theirs as they would never entertain the idea of hanging out with 'pussies' - such an act would irrevocably damage their street reputation and respect. Charles, nonetheless, described many occasions where he would feel desperately vulnerable but was afraid to show it in front of his peers. In the following excerpt from a recorded interview (December 2019), Charles describes an occasion where he and a group of friends were heading to a party where a rival group would likely appear:

*We got word that [group] was coming too. Someone mentioned it on Snapchat, and when I saw it, I was like ‘it's gonna go off at this place’. I didn't wanna go, and I was just waiting for an excuse, someone to say there's something better somewhere else, some girl to invite me to her place – anything I could've used as an excuse. But cos of who I was, I was expected to front up and be there. The closer it got to the day, I was looking for a way out, anything. People were talking about bringing arms 'cos there would be no security. I knew then I couldn't back down. No way! I was the devil! Can you imagine turning up somewhere, carrying whatever, knowing that there's people there … intent on*
As Charles states, the initial fear arose from social media and then spread, as Slutkin (2013) notes, like a virus. As Irwin-Rodgers et al.’s (2018) review of the UK gang violence and social media shows, Charles’ fear began on the ‘digital street’ where people ‘call-out’ rivals. In Charles’ case, the provocation of rivals being at an event - and their determination for violent retaliation – was equivalent to a non-negotiable attendance commitment. The fear created by the digital street then moved to the place of the party - creating an organised meaning for space. This meaning required Charles and his peers’ consensus for violence, which equals the ‘street code’ (Brezina et al., 2004; Heitmeyer et al., 2019). If only Charles followed the street code, it would be dysfunctional. However, by Charles and his peers committing full adherence and acknowledgement of the street code’s fondness for violence, the place became embedded in the collective (ibid). Interestingly, one excuse that Charles was seeking to exploit to avoid this potential dispute involved finding ‘some girl’ – a nod to the promiscuity that Maxwell’s street code revers among its followers.

As Charles states, “People were talking about bringing arms … I knew then I couldn’t back down.” Thus, the role of peer pressure is again apparent: Charles knew that his peers’ respect for him would take a severe hit if everyone wanted a battle and the so-called ‘devil’ was not there. Moreover, Charles’ risk of victimisation would likely increase if he reneged, something he would have to withstand every day (Sandberg, 2008). His reputation was such that it would have been unthinkable for him to back out; as Anderson (1999) argues, a lack of respect can leave young men feeling subordinated and open to victimisation, which, for some, is ‘a fate worse than death’ (p.49).

Charles’ status among his peers around Maxwell meant that he was often called upon to accompany groups of young men when they ventured across London (RNIC: November 2019). As young men's community maps show, outside of a relatively tight perimeter around Maxwell, most young men felt unsafe. Charles was no different when I asked him about travelling outside Maxwell, he mentioned:

*There's probably only a few reasons we would leave [Maxwell]: linking a girl, for business, to link a friend or some party or rave somewhere. I'd never travel alone unless I was driving, even*
then I’d only be alone if I was linking some girl. I’d never go alone for a business thing. You never know who’s there ready to rush you, jump you for your things. There’s a lot of revenge and trapping. Some guys I know got honey trapped back in the day, went to meet a girl and they got set-up by another group. They turned up at the girl’s address and got rushed, they messed him up bad. (Informal conversation notes: December 2019)

Charles’ recollection shows that a certain paranoia accompanied his movements around what he described as ‘black areas’. When I asked him whether he felt safer in predominantly ‘white areas’ he said “Yeah, unless it’s the police [stopping him]. I still get it now, even though I’m not in the game anymore” (RNIC: December 2019). From what Charles said, he seemed to infer that ‘black areas’ may be inherently riskier for him than ‘white areas’ (of which there was a growing number around Maxwell’s gentrified perimeter). This trend echoes Anderson’s (1999) prominent work The Code of the Street, where certain areas observe different ‘codes’ depending on their demographic composition. In Anderson’s research, Philadelphia had ‘black areas’ that followed codes of conflict and aggression, while ‘white areas’ observed a ‘civic code’.

For Anderson (1999), street codes emerge from, for instance, ‘damaging’ SED and marginalisation. While Charles acknowledged that he felt safer around Maxwell as a younger man, he noted that Maxwell’s streets both “looked and felt unsafe places … the graffiti, the warning signs … making people paranoid. Like they’re watching for us [young black men] to do something wrong …” (RNIC: December 2019) Participants’ photo projects support Charles’ opinion of Maxwell, with its warning signs, graffiti and aggressive notices (see Figure 16). When I asked Charles who ‘they’ were who was watching, he replied “for the young men around here, it’s the police, the people in the government buildings … people who don’t care about their safety, they just wanna catch them doing stuff …” (RNIC: December 2019). Charles’ words echo the sentiment of researchers (e.g., McAra & McVie, 2016; Roberts, 2019; Thompson, 2019) who found that young people carried knives as they felt unprotected. As Charles noted in one informal conversation (December 2019):

… for a lot of these young men around here [Maxwell], knives keep them safe ‘cos there’s no one else who can. It was the same for me when I was younger; nothing’s changed … parents can’t protect them ‘cos they’re in the dark about their behaviour.
The police feel like a negative presence for the black community, and there’s little that’s being done to reverse that.

Charles’ words above suggest that young men view knife-carrying as an appropriate response to threats and lack of police presence. As shown in Riggs and Palasinski’s (2012) study, for many young men (and, as an adolescent, Charles included) knife-carrying is necessary for preventing harm and being ‘streetwise’. As a younger man, Charles, like Azeez and Bankz, saw knife-carrying as an act of responsibility, and conversely, not carrying an act of negligence. While Charles had changed his views following his move to religion, he gave me the impression that he had a degree of empathy for the young men of Maxwell - such as Bankz and Azeez - who felt compelled to carry knives as a de facto rule of the street code (RNO).

Figure 16: Example of participant photo projects showing gang graffiti and warning signs near Maxwell

Resources and Relationships

By Charles' admission, he was a young man from a broken home struggling to adjust to his living environment. As a child, Charles' said that his teachers would dampen his intelligence by putting him in a classroom “with all the foreign kids … many of them didn’t speak English at all …” (RNIC: December 2019). At home, Charles said he remembered “feeling poor, even compared to others around Maxwell …” (RNIC: December 2019). His family were disengaged from his daily life, leaving him to his own devices and entertainment. Charles, like the young men in McAra and McVie's (2016) study, struggled with navigating boredom, low self-esteem and SED.
Subsequently, from a young age, Charles invested lots of energy into “impressing others, teachers, kids in my class. I would mess around just for the attention ...” (RNIC: December 2019). Charles also remembered spending lots of time alone as a child; without his parents' engagement, he would roam the swing parks and streets near his home. Charles' mood became sombre every time he discussed his childhood, as if, on reflection, he saw where his violence originated.

As Charles' behaviour became more erratic, his mother appeared to grow tired of his antics, choosing instead to invest more time and effort in Charles' younger sister. Charles recalled family gatherings, where he would try and befriend his older cousins, many of whom sported designer clothes or drove expensive cars. For Charles, he remembers that these cousins:

```
...were the coolest people on the planet. They had things that I’d seen on the TV. But I didn’t get it, I mean they looked like me and were family, but they weren’t poor like me ... (RNIC: December 2019)
```

This memory for Charles stuck out; he was around 11 at the time, and about to move into what he described as the “most basic, run-down secondary school near the estate. My mum didn’t want me to go far ‘cos she knew I’d be trouble.” (RNIC: December 2019). From this point on, Charles began mixing with young men from Maxwell who were several years older than him. These young men would meet Charles on his short walk to school and convince him to do things that fit with their approval (e.g., carry their cigarettes, so they were not confiscated, run errands to the local shop). These requests became more extreme as time passed until Charles was stealing for the older boys from the shop *en route* to school. Charles' desire to please, and to appear popular among the 'cool kids', meant that he followed these requests willingly.

Once Charles had gained a reputation for being someone who could be relied on (or bullied) to do things, he met some of Maxwell's elders. From this point, Charles remembers feeling "looked after" and "protected" from people around Maxwell and at school. Indeed, his status at school rose once he became known as someone who was “under the protection of Maxwell's elders” (RNIC: December 2019). The more involved that Charles became in the daily activities of the elders, the more his sense of loyalty grew. Charles remembered how he looked up to the elders during one recorded interview (December 2019):
Then I felt like I had to be more like them, that it would bring me more respect from them if I did. With the little money I had, I’d try and buy nice things, clothes, trainers. I’d smoke cigarettes to be more like them. I hated smoking! [laughing] … I remember doing push-ups at home to try and get like these guys! I was just this skinny guy from the block trying hard to fit in, so they’d respect me … and I’d do anything for them …

The sense of safety that Charles felt from the elders resonates with his earlier observations about the lack of police protection. For Charles, in exchange for feeling protected, he felt compelled to show his loyalty in return. To a large extent, it appeared that his mimicry of his protectors served to fortify his commitment – for Charles, being more like the elders meant that he was more likely to be protected by them (and potentially become an elder one day). This loyalty was also present in Maxwell’s youngers – many of whom I spoke with during fieldwork: each younger I met had an affiliated elder who would encourage the junior male to ‘impress him’ (RNO). Again, for Charles, his ability to impress grew as he began to resemble his elder – wearing the same clothes, talking in the same street slang. These resources were used by Charles to strengthen the affiliation between him and his elder and raise his status among the other Maxwell youngers.

Once Charles has risen through the ranks of Maxwell's street hierarchy, completing tasks or 'tests' along the way, he inherited his 'younger'. Charles remembers “treating that kid like a slave. Getting him to do whatever I needed, errands, bringing me food …” (RNIC: December 2019). After a while, Charles has a group of youngers under him but felt no safer. As an elder, there was a responsibility to, in the words of Charles, “… go to any lengths to make money … it was like a full-time job …” (RNIC: December 2019). Mixing with people who Charles called "big-time players", he began to dress in expensive clothes, buy valuable things, so that “people would think I was successful in the game” (RNIC: December 2019). He also started to go to the gym regularly to get bigger since he was: “getting a reputation. I didn’t wanna be this skinny younger with a temper no more …” (RNIC: December 2019). Charles was aware that otherwise “people would take the piss. I wanted to be this fearsome elder with a temper, make myself scary …” (RNIC: December 2019). Conscious of his growing (fearsome) reputation and the elders’ brand, Charles wanted to cultivate an image that marked his transition from younger to elder and his burgeoning status around Maxwell.
An essential aspect of Charles’ transition from younger to elder was his graduation from being surrounded by knife-carriers to becoming one himself. Charles remembers the rather blasé approach of other elders towards knives, an attitude he felt compelled to adopt:

_The first time these guys [elders] were showing their weapons off, they were so chilled, passing them around like things to be impressed by. Some guy passed me this thing … like a sword … no messing about just like ‘hey, fam, look at this’. I knew that if I was gonna be accepted, then I was gonna have to raise my game …_ (RNIC: December 2019)

From that point on, Charles’ confidence – as it appeared outwardly – with knives grew. He acquired a weapon, as a sort of symbolic or 'signature' resource to reaffirm his belonging and status as an elder of ill repute. Soon after, he acquired a nickname (every elder had one), 'Dreamer', which became 'The Devil' after Charles was involved in several violent brawls with rivals. For Charles, his new mark came with an expectation that he always had to live up to (and often exceed). In this way, like Azeez and Bankz, Charles was caught in the trappings of Maxwell's street codes – which pressurised him to think and act in specific ways, and to adopt violent masculinity that appeared to be his only way to achieve status on Maxwell's streets.

**Darius**

Darius, in his late-thirties, stands a stocky six-feet tall and identifies as being of black British Caribbean ethnicity. He has been a youth worker for almost 20 years and working at MYP for five years. He lives within a short drive of Maxwell's estate, having grown up in one of its larger blocks. Darius's background includes – in his own words - time spent 'affiliated with local gangs' (RNIC: September 2019). He has a criminal record from his violent youth but, since his twenties, has dedicated his professional life to supporting young men who are at risk of falling into transgressive behaviours. Darius is an avid reader of sociological and race theory texts, the themes of which he tries to weave into his youth work practice as much as possible. He dotes on his son, 17, whom he fathered as a teenager.

I spoke informally with Darius on multiple occasions, usually when accompanying him on street observations around Maxwell. Darius also participated in two recorded
interviews, each about an hour in length. Whenever we spoke, either on the street or at MYC, it was inevitable that Darius would be interrupted at some point, by a phone call or by someone wanting his attention. I took this as a marker of his popularity and status among the other youth workers and the young men of Maxwell. As one of the older members of MYP staff, Darius had a fatherly quality to him; he would offer advice to everyone (me included) on issues ranging from fashion to career progression (RNIC: September 2019). I enjoyed accompanying Darius on my forays into Maxwell’s hidden spaces as I felt safe; his presence had a calming effect, which appeared to be part of his charm. In many ways, Darius was an exceptional case – his age, history and links to the area – among the other youth workers I met. That is not to denigrate the other youth workers’ effectiveness; instead, Darius’s approach and ‘authenticity’ were unique among his colleagues.

I present Darius’s case as an exemplar of someone who offers his mentees (many of whom I spoke with during fieldwork) aspirational masculine qualities. Many of these qualities are the inverse of the violent masculinities within Maxwell’s street codes. I use different subheadings for Darius because he occupies a distinct position in Maxwell’s ecology. While he shares some similarities with my other participants’ case studies (e.g., being a black male, or like Charles, he is now a reformed ‘observer’ of Maxwell’s street codes), he is not under the same influences as Maxwell’s ‘young men’. Before presenting Darius’s case, it is worth the reader knowing the extent of his youth work practice. This summary helps the reader to synthesise and interpret my analysis and the implications for professional practise that is a cornerstone of the EdD.

In its most basic form, youth work aims to support young people’s often tricky transitions into adulthood. While some elsewhere (e.g., Krueger, 2005) write more specifically about youth worker practice, much debate remains (both inside and outside of the youth work profession) about what constitutes youth work delivery (ibid).

Throughout my fieldwork, I spoke with young men who declared an admiration and respect for Darius, both as a youth worker and a man. As shown in Bankz’s case, being seen with Darius was enough for me to earn the status of ‘Darius’s boy’ – as if that was my sole defining characteristic. Nonetheless, being seen with Darius helped me gain credibility and access the young men of Maxwell during my research.
While I sketch Darius's 'gatekeeper' role in my discussion chapter, here, I focus on how he gained 'authenticity' among Maxwell's young men. To do this, I draw upon on Harris’s (2019) work Down with the kids … Darius’s authenticity undoubtedly helped forge meaningful relationships with Maxwell’s young men, feeding their admiration for him and enabling access to their lives and experiences. If I can conceptualise (at least partially) Darius’s authenticity, I can aim to improve the value of my research for professional practice since others in the youth work field may seek to replicate his rapport building with young men living in SED.

Building Authenticity

In their book, ‘Responding to youth violence through youth work’ (2016), Harris and Seal suggest that youth workers are well-positioned to understand and deter youth violence. Specifically, these researchers note that ‘home-grown’ youth workers like Darius - with lived experience of violent offending and who possess ‘street capital’ - are potential mentors and role models for young men trapped in violence.

As a home-grown male youth worker, Darius had much to offer the young men of Maxwell - especially when they appeared sceptical of other adults (including me during my early fieldwork). Indeed, Darius, with his local association and ‘credibility’, possessed large amounts of masculine and street social and cultural capital (Holligan et al., 2017; Sandberg, 2008). Darius used this capital to access Maxwell’s critical agents, including the elders who, as the cases show, are influential figures in young men's decision-making. Darius's home-grown strength lay in his empathy for the struggles faced by Maxwell's young men, which enabled him to comprehend what Harris (2019) calls their 'evolving subjectivities'. Thus, Darius was able to guide in a way that other ‘decontextualised’ professionals in these young men’s lives cannot (ibid), as the following excerpt from a recorded interview shows:

A lot of these young guys have multiple professionals in their lives. Stuffy people who wear suits and sit in front of computers asking them questions … getting these guys to fill in forms. They don’t get that they’re making themselves and the system that’s meant to support them alien to the young people. Most of the young people I meet just want a conversation with a human being, not an interview (October 2019)
Despite his criminal history (and his admitted lack of formal educational qualifications), Darius found solace and, through gainful employment, social mobility through youth work (RNIC). Darius’s powerful redemptive script (Maruna, 2004, 2011) helped him make sense of his life and, as he navigated social barriers through his professional work and qualifications, cemented his transition from a violent to non-violent and inclusive masculine identity (ibid). The status of Darius among the young men of Maxwell is not without its drawbacks, something that Darius mentioned during one recorded conversation:

I’m not stupid; I see the way these young people look up to me. It means that I constantly have to check myself, make sure I’m doing the best for them and me. That’s one side to youth work that people don’t normally see. It’s kinda like having children, except around Maxwell, I’m a father to about 30 or 40 [laughs] that hang on my every word, take what I say as gospel …

(October 2019)

From the above, one can surmise that central to Darius's authenticity is his reflexivity or ability to ‘check himself’. Darius's sentiment echoes that of Harris (2019), who notes the potential for problems to arise when redemptive and 'street-savvy' youth workers are reified, thus becoming immune to critical analyses. For Harris (ibid), Darius’s shared experiences with Maxwell’s young men may become an over-identification and complicity with hyper-masculine ideals (Seal & Harris, 2016). Subsequently, there is a risk that Darius’s young charges may avoid responsibility for their violence, thereby precipitating more violence and victimisation. This avoidance, ‘neutralisation’ in criminological terms, can have dire consequences. As Darius noted in the following excerpt from a recorded interview, neutralisation may facilitate young men’s continued violence:

The trick that I have to pull is, to show the young men especially, that because I’ve lived my life the way I did, they don’t get a free pass. I experienced many bad things in my life so I can pass the lessons on that I’ve learned. I have to be careful what I share – they need to know I know what I’m talking about when I say “don’t do this because …” But they also need to know when to follow my example. It’s a balancing act because I don’t ever want to become an excuse for them to get into trouble. (October 2019)
Harris (2019) advises further caution for the home-grown male youth worker. The author notes that professionals like Darius may - unconsciously - blur personal and professional biographies or identities. Harris (ibid) continues, suggesting:

Some … attracted to the youth work profession may also be struggling with feelings that may be fuelling the psychic idealisation or vilification of women in their lives (p.4).

While this feature was not prominent in Darius’s words, he was mindful of how his relations with young men under his mentorship may serve to meet his needs more than the young men’s:

Part of my supervision [with senior MYP colleagues] involves reflecting on purpose. We always bring it back to the young people who need us. I know some people get into this job [youth work] to rid themselves of their past. I acknowledge what I’ve done back in the day, that it’s been wrong, and I’ve hurt people. Now I have to be completely selfless for these young people. (RNIC: September 2019)

These excerpts show how Darius’s apprehensions become entwined with his profession. This reflexivity was a key feature of my discussions with him. While this ability was present in all MYP’s youth worker cohort, Darius's erudite manner, married with his physical presence and status among his colleagues, made for a fascinating case study. Another central theme in Darius’s comments about his profession was the support he received from MYP to enable him to perform his role.

I’ve worked in youth services for many years, in statutory places and charities. This place [MYP] is the first where there’s been reflective supervision with the other youth workers. There’s also a great practice framework in place, embedded in theory. I love it! I’ve seen time and time again that without the right support, youth workers leave – I mean the money isn’t the best, and you can work in statutory for more money and fewer hours. (RNIC: September 2019)

As Darius describes it, without appropriate support, youth workers may suffer burnout or recidivism (Harris, 2019). This impact is of note when seen in the context of the shifting landscape of the youth work profession, where (intensive) professional supervision and support is generally piecemeal. As Darius’s almost magnetic

---

29 Statutory youth services, i.e., youth services paid for and provided by the government, such as the National Health Service, school nursing and children’s social services.
popularity around Maxwell shows, when male youth workers use their masculine and street social capital reflexively, their practice can become uniquely engaging (RNO). This feature was particularly evident among Maxwell’s young men who possessed an embodied and linguistic sense of ‘strength’ or ‘invincibility’ – that, according to Boakye (2017), inhibits their sense of vulnerability. Darius referred to this repeatedly in conversation, including in the following interview excerpt:

You see some of the young men around here [Maxwell] thinking they’re Superman, that they’re invincible. At the same time, their friends are walking around with stab vests on because they’re worried about who’s on-road. I understand it’s part of youth and growing up to take risks, but these guys are putting their bodies on the line, for what? A few notes and a fresh pair of trainers? Is that what their life is worth? (October 2019)

According to Klein (1946), young men's constructions of masculinity that valorise being a man who 'faces up' to confrontation has twin repercussions. First, such constructions form a psychic 'splitting off' of vulnerability. Second, these constructions create potential projections of vulnerability onto other young men. Subsequently, these situations raise political and ethical tensions for youth workers like Darius attempting to reframe young men's identities that they previously wrapped around hypermasculine performances. Moreover, Darius, who, as the above quotations suggest, embodies the HM in young men's idealisations, may unwittingly behave competitively (a trait explicit in the three young men's cases) and become complicit with violent power and the drive for masculine capital (Harris, 2019). Nevertheless, Darius was acutely aware of the perils of not being able to build rapport with young men, as the following passage from an informal conversation shows:

As I said, it’s a balancing act. You have to appear like someone that the young people want to be, aspirational, you know. But you also have to be someone that they've never encountered. Someone positive. Lots of these kids around here, their mothers, aunties and uncles, they work menial jobs. They're not doctors or lawyers, they're cleaners, and admin staff or they work in supermarkets. I gotta be someone they [the young men] look up to as a man. But I can’t take it too far. They have to learn that, as a man, it’s cool to do things like cry … I show them that it’s the most masculine thing they can do, to show pain, that stuff hurts. But they have to be ready for that, it's not gonna happen right away (September 2019)
As Tarrant et al. (2015) and Swain (2016, p. 7) notes, one embodiment of the HM is the role model, which Darius highlights in the above extract. As in Swain’s (ibid) work with army recruits, the young men of Maxwell appear to position Darius at the summit of their gendered hierarchy. Subsequently, the young men rendered Darius - in Swain’s words - as ‘successful and envied, and therefore, powerful and highly influential’ (ibid). Acting as a role model for many young men – especially given the absenteeism of traditional paternal influences, Darius was a source of incentives (as someone from the area who ‘came good’) and approvals through his authenticity. A central theme in young men’s appraisals of Darius (which also appears in Swain’s study of army recruits) is ‘respect’. As Swain’s (2016) work shows, army recruits who felt disrespected were more likely not to have any role models within their command unit. Indeed, as my participant case studies show, respect ‘on-road’ is fundamental to young men’s relations and their volatility. By paying Maxwell’s young men the respect they thought they deserved, and commanding respect himself through his authenticity and presence, Darius was able to influence young men’s lives more effectively.

As Darius also notes in the above passage, male youth workers who (consciously or otherwise) embody feminine or less racialised masculinities risk not building rapport with their charges. The hegemonic characteristics of a ‘real man’ (which, to paraphrase Darius, perpetuate in black subcultural contexts [RNIC]), married with the rejection of vulnerability, mean that Darius often must distance subordinate masculinities among Maxwell’s young black men. As Harris (ibid) argues, Darius’s comprehension of his interplay with young men in these subcultural contexts demands an understanding of these specific (sometimes unconscious) dynamics. Harris (ibid) also states that male youth workers require reflexive space for their identities and professional practice before working with young men who may adopt identities that subordinate other masculinities. Darius knew he would need to banish his embodiment of subordinating identities if Maxwell’s young men were to adopt new and less violent identities. He notes this feature in the below quotation, while also highlighting some features of the HM form:

_I remember being a kid; I got caught up with the crowd, saying that being a man is all about being promiscuous, having money, and being tough. That mindset took me through some bad times. I was scared to show people the real me, someone who is sensitive and caring. Even as a young dad, there were people_
telling me to leave them [his young family] and keep being the man on-road. There are lots of kids around here, teenagers who have babies who need their attention. I need to show them that the first thing they can do, as a man, is put down the gun, the knives whatever and look after your family. (Recorded interview: September 2019)

Once this occurs, Maxwell’s young men are well-positioned to surrender the status and influence such violent identities grant them in the street. As Hopkins and Noble (2009) state, Darius may need to renounce aspects of their self to empower Maxwell’s young men to do the same. More so, as Darius couches himself within a specific youth subculture, he needs to encourage young men to also think reflexively about the image they portray and perform. Unlike Darius, for many youth workers, this requires a deeper level of understanding that is neither encouraged nor facilitated in their professional contexts (Davies, 2013).

The intersectionality of social class further complicates Darius’s task. To be effective, he needs to maximise the transformative impact of his practice, sexuality and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1991), which are increasingly influential factors in our fluid society (Beilharz & Bauman, 2001). While HM still creates power inequalities by debasing certain masculine positions, intersections of identities are not always coercive. As Swain (2006) notes, they may facilitate growth by creating ‘personalised masculinities’ - with interwoven HM elements (e.g., athletic personas) - which do not subordinate or challenge other masculine identities. According to Hopkins and Noble (2006), these subjectivities occur in specific places and contexts. They also require a degree of distinction between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice of youth workers such as Darius and an awareness of one’s embodied agency. As Darius argues in the below excerpt from one informal conversation, youth workers and young men can build rapport in a society without patriarchal ideologies.

We need to move away from this narrative of ‘a man does this, and a woman does that’. We live in a modern society where women can be board members, and men can be stay at home dads. Places like this [Maxwell] need to move with the times, and the young people can be a big part of that. When I build a relationship with a young man, I want there to be mutual respect and understanding – young men should be able to laugh together, cry together, love their male friends but not just as men, but as human beings. People around here forget that – we talk about community, but we’re killing each other. Community is
about sharing and spreading love not hate … and about looking after one another. (September 2019)

Youth workers and young men exist in a society where young people improvise what were historical principles of ‘youth’ (i.e., youth subcultures) in more ambiguous cultural ways. Harris (2019) concludes that youth work practitioners should consider how to build their capabilities to manage contradictory and vague forms masculinities that coagulate in modern youth subcultures.

Chapter Conclusion

The above cases reveal how masculinity, vulnerability, street codes and knife-carrying manifest themselves in the lived reality of these men. The cases also show how structures, including participants’ gender and SED, appear in their practices. The cases were generated inductively from my data; while they are not wholly representative of a broader population, I believe they represent the narratives of those from similar geographic, demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. These cases also represent wider typologies of ways of enacting masculine formations and highlight the meaning-making of participants concerning their masculine performances and vulnerability.

I organise this conclusion under two subsections. The first summarises the three young men’s backgrounds, including details of their street masculinity performances, vulnerability and knife-carrying. The second compares the three young men’s performances and beliefs associated with HM and inclusive masculinity.

Participant Background Characteristics and Contexts

In Table 4, the bold text indicates a consensus across all three cases, while the italicised text indicates where terms/words agree across two cases. In the case of Azeez and Charles, some features have parentheses describing whether the feature was prevalent at home or for peers in Azeez’s case, or, whether the feature was current or in the past for Charles. Table 4 is followed by a precis of the young men’s similarities and differences, with reference to their stories above.
### Table 4: Case comparisons of Azeez, Bankz and Charles - background characteristics and various contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Azeez</th>
<th>Bankz</th>
<th>Charles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent father</td>
<td>Absent father</td>
<td>Absent father</td>
<td>Absent father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive father</td>
<td>Abusive father</td>
<td>Abusive father</td>
<td>Abusive father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong mother</td>
<td>Estranged mother</td>
<td>Estranged mother</td>
<td>Estranged mother (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative older males</td>
<td>Negative older males</td>
<td>Negative older males</td>
<td>Negative older males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong sibling influence</td>
<td>Strong sibling influence</td>
<td>Strong sibling influence</td>
<td>Weak sibling influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggled at school</td>
<td>Struggled at school</td>
<td>Struggled at school</td>
<td>Struggled at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstable home life</td>
<td>Unstable home life</td>
<td>Unstable home life</td>
<td>Unstable home life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources and strategies used to gain status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expensive looking fashion</td>
<td>Expensive looking fashion</td>
<td>Expensive looking fashion</td>
<td>Expensive looking fashion (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size and physicality</td>
<td>Size and physicality</td>
<td>Size and physicality</td>
<td>Size and physicality (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large group of loyal friends</td>
<td>Large group of loyal friends</td>
<td>Large group of loyal friends (previous)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominion over others</td>
<td>Dominion over others</td>
<td>Dominion over others</td>
<td>Dominion over others (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternalism (at home)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife-carrying</td>
<td>Knife-carrying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association with others</td>
<td>Association with others</td>
<td>Association with others</td>
<td>Association with others (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>possessing street capital</td>
<td>possessing street capital</td>
<td>possessing street capital</td>
<td>possessing street capital (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends have used knives</td>
<td>Friends have used knives</td>
<td>Friends have used knives</td>
<td>Friends have used knives for violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for violence</td>
<td>for violence</td>
<td>for violence</td>
<td>Temper (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reputation (by proxy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reputation (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media (casual</td>
<td>Social media (frequent</td>
<td>Social media (frequent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication use)</td>
<td>and instrumental use to</td>
<td>and instrumental use to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>popularise his drill music)</td>
<td>popularise his drill music)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking weed (with peers)</td>
<td>Smoking weed (alone and with peers)</td>
<td>Smoking weed (alone and with peers)</td>
<td>Smoking weed (previously)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Azeez</td>
<td>Bankz</td>
<td>Charles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristics of Street</strong></td>
<td><strong>Performances</strong></td>
<td><strong>Performances</strong></td>
<td><strong>Performances</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking alcohol (with peers)</td>
<td>Drinking alcohol (with peers)</td>
<td>Drinking alcohol (previous)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill music (listening to)</td>
<td>Drill music (listening to/performing)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misogynistic towards all</td>
<td>Misogynistic towards all</td>
<td>Misogynistic towards all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>females ([excluding family] with peers)</td>
<td>females ([excluding family] with peers)</td>
<td>females ([excluding family] with peers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangsterism(^1) (with peers)</td>
<td>Gangsterism</td>
<td>Gangsterism (previous)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrequent knife carrier</td>
<td>Not a knife carrier (purportedly)</td>
<td>Frequent knife carrier (previous)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Whittaker et al. (2020) define gangsterism as urban identities occurring along lines of race and economics; it includes groups forming with the intention of committing acts of criminality or violence, and to defend themselves against the violence of others.
All three young men lacked positive male role models as children. While Charles had recently acquired his ‘uncle’ as a paternal figure, his biological father was absent from his childhood. Tellingly, Bankz never disclosed the status and whereabouts of his father, and his older brother’s ‘fathering’ of him was piecemeal at best. Azeez was vocal about his father’s absence and appeared to draw on these negative feelings as he performed his inclusive masculinity role with his family. In my opinion, Azeez used his father’s ‘mistakes’ as a motivation to succeed where he failed. Bankz, meanwhile, seemingly replaced one negative paternalistic figure with another in the shape of his brother.
One can see that mothers play a central role. Charles’ mother, who, in his own words, ignored him as a child in favour of his younger sister, was now part of his church-going lifestyle. Where once Charles felt rejection, he now felt closer than ever to his mother. Similarly, Azeez had begun to move away from Maxwell’s street code at the behest of his reified mother. Conversely, Bankz’s poor relationship with his mother seemed to push him to look towards Mo for his masculine performances. Tellingly, Azeez’s mother, Amina, highlighted the role that mothers play in the lives of young black men with absent fathers during an impromptu conversation:

… we [mothers of young men with absent fathers] can sometimes be guilty of bad-mouthing these boys’ fathers. They may have treated us badly, they may have been violent, but they’re still fathers to our sons. By telling our sons that their fathers are shit, we’re telling them that we made shit choices for them. We’re also telling them that they have a shit man to look up to. I used to bad-mouth Azeez’s father, but I learned not to for Azeez’s sake. Instead, I have to be his mother and father (RNIC: September 2019)

All three young men used Maxwell’s street code practices (smoking weed, drinking, misogynistic language) in public to strengthen their street masculinity. Further, they all indulged in public displays of bravado associated with Maxwell’s brand of HM that were otherwise missing during my brief glimpses of their private spaces. In Bankz’s case, many of his performances of masculinity mimicked the personas in the drill music he shared, down to his linguistic devices and explicitly homophobic/homohysteric taunts. The three participants also associated masculinity with violence and not being disrespected. While Charles previously went to great personal lengths to protect his status on the street, Bankz basked in his drill music reputation and the status of his brother to protect his. Meanwhile, Azeez indulged himself and his peers in the rhetoric of retribution – he spoke about using violence to address any disrespect he faced, but rarely (if ever) committed violent acts.

For the young men, it was essential to appear successful, in public, in how they dressed – and the more exclusive the label, the more successful they thought they looked. While Azeez invested in his appearance, his resources were more limited than Bankz, who boasted of spending hundreds of pounds on his ‘look’. While several years ago, one could say the same of Charles, who spent hours on looking good in public, improving both his style and physical stature to create a sense of fitting into the street’s
cultural expectations. Interestingly, Bankz supplemented his displays of wealth by recounting his daily struggles, as if he was somewhat nervous about alienating himself from his peers. Such action also hints at the fragile self-esteem and identity issues prevalent among young men living in SED (Ray, 2011).

All three young men valued strength as a masculine quality, albeit in different ways. In private, Azeez valued the strength of character within a man who looked after his family. Among his friends in public, Azeez would frequently cite that men should not be ‘pussies’ or weak, something also prominent in Bankz’s idealisations. Another heavily present theme within both Bankz and Azeez’s masculine configurations is promiscuity, while Bankz was also publicly homophobic in his expressiveness at times. In this way, Bankz practised a feature of Maxwell’s HM - the attitudinal position of ‘antifemininity’ that masculinity scholars have discussed for decades (Anderson, 2011) and which I discuss in the next section.

Williams and Sanday’s (1991) examination of the type of masculinity exhibited in fraternities provides some insight into Bankz’s public masculine performances. For Williams and Sanday (ibid) this monolithic fraternity masculinity contains a sexual hostility toward women constructed over the use of their bodies. Further, Wright (1996, p. 33) argues that:

[hetero]sexual aggression so permeates the language, lifestyle, and morals of fraternity members [and] have become a virtual breeding ground for men indoctrinated into the ways of sexism and sexual harassment.

Wright (ibid) adds that these fraternities foster hackneyed and stereotypical views of male dominion and female submissiveness so that women are objects for sexual conquests. This code, at least partly, expresses homophobia, particularly among young men in homogenous, masculine settings (Anderson, 2009; Sanday, 2001) such as Maxwell’s spaces. For Bankz, his drill group (and their culture) was akin to the fraternities Wright describes, one that valued aggression, violence, misogyny and objectification of females. One could say the same of Azeez, who, to an extent, mimicked the same fraternal behaviours in public for his peers ‘on-road’.

Charles’ case (and to some extent, Azeez’s) shows that removing oneself from Maxwell’s street code is challenging. As Reid (2017) and others (e.g., Decker &
Pyrooz, 2015; Gunter, 2008) argue, the prospect of leaving life on-road is unlikely such is their interdependence on its social, cultural and street capital for their masculine performances. Indeed, Bankz’s case shows that it was not only his status entwined with Maxwell’s street code; his brother was a proxy source of Bankz’s standing among his peers, despite his drill-music affiliation. While Charles cited his religion as a reason for ‘escaping’ Maxwell’s violent street code, and Azeez had his young siblings to support, Bankz appeared to have little incentive to disentangle himself from Maxwell’s street masculinity. In some ways, Bankz seemed to bask in his proximity to his brother and his (ambiguous) associated with DTB. Without the allure of redemption from religion, or young siblings looking up to him, Bankz was content to perpetuate in public the gangsterism epithets frequently (and sometimes incorrectly) associated with street culture.

**Inclusive and Hegemonic Masculinities**

Following on from Table 4, Table 5 summarises the different forms of masculine performances by Azeez, Bankz and Charles with bold and italicised text. These different forms are inclusive (Anderson, 2008; Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Anderson & McGuire, 2010) and hegemonic (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) masculinities and their associated beliefs. As with Table 4, I follow Table 5 with a narrative sketch of the three young men’s inclusive and hegemonic performances of masculinity and the consensus between them.

**Table 5: Case comparisons of Azeez, Bankz and Charles - forms of masculine performances and their associative characteristics and beliefs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine performance</th>
<th>Azeez</th>
<th>Bankz</th>
<th>Charles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inclusive Masculinity characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Showing kindness (to mother at home)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nothing evident</strong></td>
<td><strong>Showing kindness (to his community)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Caring (about younger siblings at home)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nothing evident</strong></td>
<td><strong>Caring (about Maxwell’s young men)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Passive (at home)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Passive (current)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sensitive (current)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Sensitive (at home)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Open to sharing his feelings of vulnerability</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Altruistic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine performance</td>
<td>Azeez</td>
<td>Bankz</td>
<td>Charles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive Masculinity Beliefs</td>
<td><strong>Believes men can be caregivers</strong></td>
<td>Believes men can be caregivers (current)</td>
<td>Believes that men can show love to or for one another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Men can cry and be emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers protection (peers and family)</td>
<td>Offers protection (peers)</td>
<td>Offers protection (previous)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine performance</th>
<th>Azeez</th>
<th>Bankz</th>
<th>Charles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hegemonic Masculinity Characteristics</td>
<td><strong>Dominant</strong> (with peers)</td>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Dominant (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Homophobic</strong> (with peers)</td>
<td>Homophobic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Homohysteric</strong> (with peers)</td>
<td>Homohysteric</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Misogynistic</strong> (with peers)</td>
<td>Misogynistic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Objectification of females</strong> (with peers)</td>
<td>Objectification of females</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Sexual aggression towards females</strong> (with peers)</td>
<td>Sexual aggression towards females (with peers)</td>
<td>Sexual aggression towards females (previous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Racially exclusive fraternity</strong> (informal gang)</td>
<td>Racially exclusive fraternity (drill group)</td>
<td>Racially exclusive fraternity (previous formal gang)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Racially exclusive fraternity</strong> (current church)</td>
<td>Racially exclusive fraternity (current formal gang)</td>
<td>Racially exclusive fraternity (current church)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>An athletic body aesthetic</strong></td>
<td>An athletic body aesthetic</td>
<td>An athletic body aesthetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Competitive</strong></td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Competitive (previous)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inclusive Masculinity Characteristics and Beliefs

Looking across the young men’s cases, one can see that Azeez and Charles share many similarities in their inclusive masculinity characteristics. In contrast, Bankz, at least during my fieldwork, exhibited few inclusive masculinity characteristics. One may speculate as to why this was the case; based on my time around Maxwell, it appeared that Bankz’s lifestyle, peers and prominent role of his older brother suffocated any potential inclusive masculinity characteristics.

As both Azeez and Charles show, kindness and caring were central to their inclusive masculinity performances. For Azeez, his caring was directed towards his mother and young siblings, and in the specific context of home. Indeed, my case study of Azeez clearly demonstrates that he was a very different young man at home to the one full of brio for his peers. At home, he was passive, and his language was much softer and well-spoken compared to the ‘Azeez of the street’ performing for his peers. Furthermore, while Azeez moved easily between ‘being street’ for his peers and ‘being inclusive’ for his mother, Charles found the fluidity much more difficult. To paraphrase Charles in one informal conversation: ‘If I hadn’t found God I’d be in prison or dead’.

Charles’s kindness and caring were, in his words, partly born from his negative experiences as a gang-affiliated youth and directed towards Maxwell’s young men. Without doubt, Charles saw his young self in many of the young men around Maxwell and sought to provide compassion and guidance to direct them away from the pitfall
he once experienced. It was these same past experiences, allied to his new spirituality, that seemed to fuel his altruism. During my fieldwork around MYC, I would often encounter young men who had received ‘pearls of wisdom’ from Charles who was generous with his time. Charles’ previous tumult with gangs and violence also brought to life his vulnerabilities at the time. As he admitted, when he was busy living up to his *nom de guerre* of ‘The Devil’, he spent little time reflecting on his vulnerability. In his new pursuits, his declaration of weakness and precariousness was part of the purging of his former self.

Both Azeez and Charles believed that men are capable caregivers (albeit Charles’s beliefs resulted more from his spirituality). For Azeez, the potential for men to be competent caregivers juxtaposed his experiences of his father - a constant source of ire during our conversations. Charles’s inclusive masculinity beliefs extended further; like Darius, he believed in publicly showing emotions and closeness with other men. While such beliefs did not encompass the topic of homosexuality (which may cause friction with Charles’s staunch Christian principles), Charles was open to men publicly expressing warmth, affection and sensitivity – again a stark divergence from his past hypermasculine positioning.

While Bankz continued to follow Maxwell’s street code, both Charles and, to a lesser extent, Azeez, had turned their back on it because of the church and their caregiving respectively. While Azeez’s transition from his on-road masculinity to a caregiving one was gradual, Charles quickly disavowed his following his friend’s demise. Both Charles and Azeez’s transition showed that removal from Maxwell’s hazardous street code was possible – given the right motivation and resilience. Bankz, nonetheless, appeared wedded to his on-road identity, showing no signs of untangling himself from the on-roadness that had trapped Charles. Bankz’s on-road identity, and his association between masculinity, success and dominion of others, was strengthened by his daily pursuits and his peers’ admiration.

**Hegemonic Masculinity Characteristics and Beliefs**

As Messerschmidt (2018, 2019) states: hegemonic masculinities are social practices that produce gendered relations and meanings. These configurations shape and police ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ (*ibid*) masculine performances for Maxwell’s young men. In this regard, Observing the three young men’s cases, one can see
similarities and dissimilarities between them. While Bankz’s inclusive masculinity performances were largely absent, his HM performances were evident from the outset. As with Azeez, Bankz clearly articulated his homophobic and misogynistic views through his frequent use of the term ‘bitch’ to refer to females. While among his peers, Bankz embodied the HM ideal; however, when contrasted against his older brother – who raised the metaphorical HM bar – Bankz appeared to practise the complicit masculinity. While Azeez reserved his HM performances for his peers, he too revealed several linguistic devices that objectified and denigrated females. Indeed, it was initially surprising to hear the phylogeny directed toward his mother at home after hearing his repeated references to Maxwell’s young women as ‘sluts’ because of their social media postings. In this way, Azeez appears to embody the complicit masculine form: while he strived for Maxwell’s HM, he lacked the resources (e.g., money and stature) to fulfil the ideal. Instead, Azeez’s bragging of his promiscuity were somewhat hollow (according to Darius) and his efforts to appear more physically imposing were falsified.

For Bankz, much of his HM performances mirrored those in the drill music that was such a prominent part of his life. In the lyrics of his songs, as well as those of his drill music group, there were explicit references to violence and, again, the sexualisation and objectification of females. These views were also evident among Charles’s stories of his past; although Charles’s experiences of paranoia about being ‘honey trapped’ or set-up by females associated with rival gangs perhaps goes some way to explaining his attitude.

The three young men have interesting parallels in their belief in a masculine aesthetic and competitiveness (for Charles, in his past). While Azeez admitted to wearing layers of clothes to ‘bulk up’, both Bankz and Charles admitted to wanting to appear physically imposing. Indeed, Charles went to great lengths to rid himself of the ‘skinny kid’ image of his youth. With regards to competitiveness. Maxwell was a hotbed of entrepreneurialism – as many took to legal and illegal means of making money to ‘get out of the ghetto’ – so opposition was fierce. Nonetheless, many young men, the three participants included, went to extreme lengths of one-upmanship to demonstrate their entrepreneurial success, which was evident in their HM beliefs. For some, they wore their success on their bodies and wrists with expensive clothes and jewellery. Others
recounted the ‘myth-making’ so integral to young men gaining status and respect on the streets (Lauger & Densley, 2018).

Perhaps surprisingly, all three young men bore similarities in the homogeneity of their respective fraternities. Both Azeez’s and Bankz’s circle of peers comprised young black men of approximately the same age and socioeconomic background. As Azeez admitted, many of his close friends came from the same block on Maxwell or within a few hundred metres of his flat. For Bankz, the homogeneity of his group (in his own words, their ‘blackness’ [RN, October 2019]) meant that they all shared the same ‘struggle’. His retort to my question about musical tastes with the claim that some music is ‘black music for white people’ shows the extent of his discomfort with whiteness (and perhaps my whiteness). Such unease hints at Bankz’s fraught, negative attitude towards authorities such as the police – views shared by Azeez. Charles, conversely, spoke of his ‘brothas and sistas’ in his old gang fraternity and his new religious friendship groups. It was not until late in my fieldwork that I realised that Charles’s church was considered a ‘black church’ by others on Maxwell. In this way, Charles traded one homogenous fraternity for another.

Meanwhile, there was a high degree of consensus among the three young men in their HM beliefs. Perhaps informed by his relationship with his high-status brother, Mo, Bankz was the most vociferous about his maxim that men should not be ‘pussy’. Indeed, being so would render any man weak and not authentically ‘of the street’. For Azeez, I got the impression that his recollections of his own father fuelled his HM beliefs. As Azeez stated, departing the family home and leaving his mother to raise the children by herself reduced his father to a ‘pussy’ or weak man who lacked courage. Azeez’s view of his own life – figuratively stepping into his father’s shoes – was clear: he would embody the qualities his father lacked.

Both Bankz and Charles shared Azeez’s views, although neither spoke of their (absent) fathers as the source. For Bankz, success in his music was of paramount importance, and his drill music brethren demanded that he was, like them, battle hardened and tough. Allied to Bankz’s drill music influences was status on Maxwell’s street through his relationship with Mo, who possessed large stocks of street capital. For Bankz, ‘toughness’ seemingly brought him closer to the status of his brother; conversely, if he had held more inclusive beliefs, he may have distanced himself from
Mo, and thus been unable to draw upon his stocks of street capital. In Charles’s case, part of a man's strength and courage came from turning his back on the hegemonic street masculinity he once performed. Cognisant of the temptations for Maxwell’s young men, Charles said that his extraction from ‘the game’ was a clear demonstration of fortitude – qualities he associated with ‘growing up into a man’.

**Darius's Inclusive Masculinity**

Darius’s success as a youth worker played to his strengths as a positive black male role model for young men lacking such a totemic character. As Darius’s case shows, he was acutely aware of his paternalistic presence in many young men’s lives. His responsibility was, in his words, to “keep them on the straight and narrow” and to “learn from the mistakes that I [Darius] made when I was their age” (RNIC, December 2019). Darius’s case, while different from the young men’s, shows how ‘authenticity’ is among the highest valued currencies on Maxwell’s streets. While Bankz went to great (almost theatrical) lengths to demonstrate the authenticity of his struggles, Darius’s lived experience was something he did not need to vocalise. When I spoke with young men around Maxwell about Darius’s allure as a positive role model, many replied that he had a ‘swagger’ or a ‘presence’ that “comes from having lived [life] on-road” (RNIC: November 2019). Nonetheless, Darius faced a somewhat precarious daily balancing act: sharing his lived experiences to show his authenticity while not appearing to legitimise or normalise violence. Such a skilful balancing act required Darius not to overshare details of his past behaviours, but rather to embody some of the masculine characteristics to which Maxwell’s young men aspired.

Through his youth work practice, Darius also embodied many of the cornerstones of inclusive masculinity. In Darius’s words, he taught young men that they “should be able to laugh together, cry together, love their male friends but not just as men, but as human beings”. In this way, Darius showed Maxwell’s young men that Maxwell’s HM would no longer police male gender and, therefore, young men can equally esteem emotionally open archetypes of masculinity usually present in styles once considered effeminate (Adams et al., 2010; Anderson & McCormack, 2014). Such practices contrast with the beliefs of some of Maxwell’s young men towards, for example, the social perceptions of homosexuality. In Bankz’s case, my insinuation of him listening to music he deemed “fucking gay shit” was slanderous and created (temporary)
hostility in our relationship. Similarly, for his friends in public, Azeez performed configurations that denigrated ‘weak’ or ‘pussy’ masculinities – which again have explicitly homophobic overtones. While Charles did not overtly say as such, many of his Christian beliefs still hold negative social perceptions towards, for example, homosexuality or homohysteria (Anderson & McCormack, 2018).

In many ways, Darius (alongside Charles) provided a blueprint for Maxwell’s young men to adhere to a more inclusive masculine ideal. Thus, part of Darius’s community outreach was creating a new masculine hegemony that valorised emotional sensitivity over violence. This alternative or ‘inclusive street masculinity’ was arguably lacking the traction of Maxwell’s violent street masculinity, but Darius held out hope that there was positive change afoot. In this sense, Darius and Charles were attempting to create a second hegemony in Maxwell’s surrounds – one that would eventually replace the violent ideal. I discuss this double-sided HM further in Chapter 5.

Darius also possessed ‘the look of success’ that many of Maxwell’s young men admired and espoused, including many of the valuable and symbolic adornments. For example, Darius was always well-dressed and well-groomed. He wore expensive-looking clothes and wore expensive-looking jewellery. Darius was a physically imposing man who has a strong muscular physique. He also had a degree of sporting prowess, having played professional football at a young age. These credentials, in sum, meant that when Darius spoke in his affirmative and unambiguous way, young men listened. As each of my cases show, the young men of Maxwell took the look of success as being enough evidence of success. Being successful for many of Maxwell’s young men meant an opportunity to escape the confines of the estate or, in Azeez’s case, to provide for his family as his father had failed to do. In Bankz’s case, success was a marker of notoriety, and, in some ways, a vindication of his decision-making. For Charles, success meant something different; as a younger man, success would be the admiration of his peers and an exalted street status. Now, his success was in his religious dedication and in his stoicism of turning his back on Maxwell’s street code.

Darius had also built a network of connections around Maxwell, so he was always cognisant of the machinations and politics within Maxwell’s ecosystem. This insider status allowed Darius to gain another layer of authenticity, as someone who had ‘their
ear to the street’ and ‘lived the same lives’ as Maxwell’s young men (RNO: November 2019). It also helped that Darius had swathes of ‘street savvy’ – he knew all the ‘movers and shakers’ as he called them around Maxwell. Moreover, Darius had spent a considerable amount of time with the families of Maxwell’s young men, understanding their situation, the confines they operated within, and the relationships (or lack of relationships) with individual family members such as fathers. In this way, Darius would be able to model the qualities and characteristics that were missing in these young men’s lives. His relationship with Amina, Azeez’s mother, was an excellent example of this: Darius would visit the family home before Amina was back from work to make sure that Azeez was looking after his siblings. Darius helped Azeez to prepare meals for his siblings before gently retiring his support.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

In this chapter, I address each research question and briefly state how I have met my study’s aims. I then offer what I consider to be the prominent findings from my research. After, I outline how my study contributes to the fields of gender and youth studies and criminology. I finish on the implications of my findings for my personal development and professional practice and suggestions for further research.

Answering my Research Questions

1. What resources and strategies do young men use in the construction of their masculine identities?

My study shows how Maxwell’s young men use multiple strategies and resources in both public and private spaces to construct their masculine identities. Publicly, one observes the ‘decoration’ of young men’s bodies with expensive items, including clothes and jewellery. For many of Maxwell’s young inhabitants, these adornments were symbols of success in the ‘street game’. Similarly, young men prized their bodies’ physical size, masculinity and dominion over others as inherently ‘masculine’. In Maxwell’s street code, if one could command a cabal of loyal male peers (each possessing ‘street capital’), their on-road reputation would be exalted.

One’s reputation could be cemented through, for example, social media. While not a prominent feature in my fieldwork, online platforms were effective conduits for young men to showcase their masculinity, status and propensity for violence to others challenging them. In private, some of Maxwell’s young men practised more sensitive, caring or ‘inclusive’ masculinities. Young men reserved these performances for private in fear of losing the status gained by appearing to follow Maxwell’s dominant street masculinity.

2. How do young men understand and legitimise knife-carrying, and to what extent does feeling vulnerable in their spaces influence this?

For most of Maxwell’s young men I came across during fieldwork, knife-carrying was an act of due diligence because of the explicit threat of violent victimisation. Of the frequent knife-carriers, most would use knives to facilitate muggings and street robberies (the proceeds could then acquire status-enhancing belongings). However,
many saw blades as an essential accessory given the high likelihood of others carrying (the so-called ‘contagion effect’). Further, the risk of victimisation and the perception of the availability of knives increased following the threats and taunts shared on social media. In sum, while the majority young men were hesitant to disclose feeling vulnerable (perhaps for fear of appearing weak), those able to ‘look back’ at their street life (e.g., Charles and Darius) explicitly said that spaces where the ‘street code’ was sacrosanct were vulnerability-inducing.

Many young men were willing to consider the risks versus the rewards of knife-carrying (Marfleet, 2008). For a significant minority of Maxwell’s young men, knife-carrying was part of the on-road ‘fashion’ – accompanied by a sense of peer pressure. Among a few young men, there was also a feeling of competitiveness or ‘one-upmanship’. For them, knives were a status symbol, and more menacing blades gained higher peer approval and street capital.

3. What role do informal and formal relationships play in young men’s performances of their masculine identities? To what extent do these relationships impact young men’s vulnerability and their subsequent knife-carrying?

Many of Maxwell’s young men had absent fathers and a lack of positive male role models in their lives. This absenteeism meant that many looked to other older (and less positive) male influences. Many of Maxwell’s young men saw females as objects and were particularly derogatory about them in public. In private, some young men constructed their masculinity in more inclusive ways. Publicly performing these features would likely exclude young men from the protective quality of following Maxwell’s street masculinity, rendering them vulnerable to violence.

While many females were objectified, there were a few exceptions. Young men’s mothers and sisters were reified and considered ‘off-limits’ for the negativity, objectification and misogynistic comments that were a staple of peers’ conversations. In many instances, young men performed a brusque and aggressive masculinity for their peers but switched immediately to a softer and more inclusive masculinity when speaking to their mothers. I took this to be a sign of respect for mothers, many of whom were the sole (or present) parent in young men’s homes. While young men considered
their sisters off-limits, they spoke with them in the same vernacular as they did with their peers.

Peers played a central role in supporting and cajoling street masculinity performances. Youth workers provided exemplars of more inclusive masculine performances that, based on my informal conversations with them, many young men found increasingly compelling. These performances were more convincing when embodied by a home-grown youth worker with authentic street capital (i.e., lived experience). In general, Maxwell’s young men felt that the police were not for people like them (read: young black men living in SED). Therefore, without the protection afforded to others, many young men felt that they had to take matters of their security into their own hands.

I also posed the question: does knife-carrying make vulnerable young men in Maxwell’s spaces feel more like the man they should, or aspire to be? To answer this directly, yes. Maxwell’s violent street masculinity idealises respect, toughness and status among its objectives. Further, among its various features are a propensity for violence and explicitly hostile responses to being ‘called out’ by rivals. In sum, many of Maxwell’s young men surmised that they had little choice but to carry knives or associate with knife carriers. In this latter instance, peer pressure ensures that many young men lean towards knife-carrying as something socially acceptable and expected. The availability of knives around Maxwell meant that young men encountering trouble would expect confrontations to involve knives rather than fists. Therefore, knife-carrying was responsible and a necessary means to display strength and to protect oneself (and one’s peers as a show of loyalty) – both features of Maxwell’s HM.

**Key Findings**

I posit that this study has 11 key findings, emerging from young men’s narratives and my methodological approach(es).

1. Many of Maxwell’s young men associate knife-carrying with behaving responsibly or diligently given the risks of violent victimisation and the propensity of others to carry knives.
2. Young black men in inner-city spaces such as Maxwell often feel that the police are ‘not for them’. The absence of this protection increases young men’s sense of vulnerability and the chances of them knife-carrying.

3. HM is a useful theoretical lens for understanding how and why Maxwell’s young men idealise the estate’s inherently violent masculine form. A central aspect of Maxwell’s HM is the adornment of oneself with expensive clothes and jewellery, which many young men see as emblematic of success. This sense of achievement should appear in the context of the lack of availability of traditional sources of success (e.g., educational achievement, legal gainful employment and affluent living conditions).

4. Many of Maxwell’s young men attempted to construct their masculine identities as per the estate’s hegemonic form. Young men unable to achieve it (perhaps because they lacked ‘on-road’ authenticity or physical stature) perform the estate’s complicit masculinity, which satiates their vulnerability.

5. Maxwell’s HM is, like most masculine identities, heavily contextualised. Whenever Maxwell’s young men left the estate, their sense of vulnerability increased because of challenges to their HM status and the lack of protection. This situation meant that they were more likely to carry knives when moving through unfamiliar spaces.

6. Maxwell’s HM – and its prominent status in the estate’s public spaces – meant that some young men reserved more inclusive masculinity performances for private. Frequently, young men saw the features of inclusive masculinities (e.g., caring, sensitivity and emotional closeness) as ‘weak’ and opposing the dominant masculine form.

7. While Maxwell’s HM featured objectification of females, many young men reified female family members in public spaces. These females (predominantly mothers and sisters) were ‘off-limits’ from the slurs and insults propagated among male peers.

8. Despite the predominant street masculinity, some participants were seemingly on journeys to create a new hegemony. In Charles and Darius, Maxwell’s young men had blueprints for more inclusive features such as emotional sensitivity, empathy and warmth – characteristics commonly derided as ‘weak’. In this way, Darius and Charles were champions of a different street masculinity, one gaining traction due to their authenticity and
status around Maxwell. Thus, my work goes some way to positing that Maxwell has two localised forms of HM – one violent and one organically growing and more inclusive. Further, this emergent HM offers up opportunities for young men to change from a violent or criminal lifestyle to a more prosocial one.

9. If one accepts that Maxwell’s emerging ‘inclusive street masculinity’ is preferential to its violent form, there is a strong argument for showcasing those performing these features. While social media may facilitate violence, policy makers, academics and youth work organisations may use such platforms to share performances of more inclusive features.

10. Despite the challenges, some of Maxwell’s young men were able to remove themselves from the estate’s violent street code. To do so, young men needed motivation, resilience and the availability of appropriate (and authentic) role models.

11. Detached youth workers – those practising in inner-city spaces – provide researchers with multiple opportunities to engage with marginalised young men. With care, researchers can leverage the ‘gatekeeping’ role that youth workers play and raise their researcher credibility through building relations with them. Moreover, researchers with some connection to the community they are researching can, through various approaches (e.g., researcher disclosure), foster rapport with marginalised communities.

**Contribution to Knowledge**

I argue that my research makes an original contribution to the fields of gender studies, youth studies and criminology and sociological and youth work disciplines. The notions of hegemonic and complicit masculinity offer a lens for understanding inner-city young men’s masculine performances and the prominence of knife-carrying. While my study describes the contours of Maxwell’s idealised street masculinity, this form is, nonetheless, out of reach for many. Subsequently, many of the young men I met practised a complicit masculine form.

While my study depicts a specific space and time, the issues confronting Maxwell’s young men are, perhaps, characteristic of growing up in SED inner-city spaces. I argue
that my findings speak to the lived experiences of young men in urban milieus elsewhere (although additional research would need to demonstrate this).

Much research on inner-city (predominantly black) young men focuses on defining behaviour using an outsider perspective. Whereas my research offers a closer, albeit partial, insider perspective. This street-level view generates knowledge of the texture and meaning in the experiences of an often-misunderstood culture. My ethnographic approach looks beyond inner-city male epithets (e.g., gangsterism) in favour of immersing myself among a community on society’s margins. During my fieldwork (and proximity to the research site), I gained enough experienced to appreciate, and to an extent interpret, the social worlds of Maxwell’s young men. Subsequently, my study accommodates subjectivity and emphasises understanding young men’s culture using their positioning and meanings.

A primary objective of this study was to explore the experiences and processes that lead to young men’s knife-carrying. Maxwell’s young men related these behaviours to their experiences of, and concerns about, violent victimisation in their spaces. Young men explained knife-carrying with (implicit and explicit) reference to ‘street codes’, vulnerability and street masculinity. My findings suggest that knife-carrying and violence were common in the communities and spaces that participants occupied.

My study also makes several empirical contributions. First, my findings contribute to the knowledge of social contexts (the where and when) of young men’s knife-carrying. Next, my study informs the knife-carrying research by giving a voice to knife-carriers, past and present. My findings also contribute to the knowledge of the processes that lead young men to stop knife-carrying. I found that some young men were able to resist or exit Maxwell’s violent street code, which may inform policies on preventing knife-carrying. Engaging with young men in the broader sense means that my research contributes to the body of work on why some young men in violent communities choose not to carry knives. Thus, my study has given a voice to young men nominally omitted from knife crime discussions.

In terms of theoretical contributions, the concepts of street codes and street masculinity may enhance the literature on knife-carrying and youth violence more broadly. At the outset of this thesis, I linked knife-carrying with a ‘street lifestyle’ (life
‘on-road’ in young men’s vernacular). Still, it appears more nuanced than I anticipated. Indeed, my findings may challenge some pre-conceptions of those carrying knives and how their collective and individual masculine identities evolve in SED. By looking at these concepts, my study enhances research on the use of knives for ‘self-defence’ by illustrating the complex nature of knife-carrying. Moreover, a two-sided localised hegemonic masculinity is an emerging theoretical concept. While gender studies have long argued for contextual masculine performances, few posit two hegemonic forms existing simultaneously in spaces like Maxwell. Thus, my work appears to make a significant contribution to the study of masculinity and offers an exciting direction of travel for further research.

In addition, my study also makes methodological contributions. My use of creative and innovative methods (e.g., photos and community mapping) gave a voice to passive or marginalised groups. In this way, my starting point is not to over-generalise about specific populations. Instead, my intention was on engaging those involved in the living of knife-carrying. Importantly, my research shows that this engagement can occur in the face of ethical and methodological challenges (not to mention my initially problematic ‘whiteness’). Also, through my methodological approach, I was able to gain access to some of Maxwell’s private spaces and provide subsequent insight into their influence. Such spaces, and young men’s performances in them, are often hidden away from researchers. Finally, researchers struggling to gain access to marginalised young participants may consider using youth workers (or similar community-based practitioners) as gatekeepers. The success of my rapport-building was, in the early stages, a direct result of the introductions and interventions made by youth workers. Furthermore, their presence allowed me to gain access to spaces and conversations that otherwise may have been out of reach.

**Implications for Personal and Professional Practice**

If one preferences inclusive street masculinities over violent street masculinities, there is a strong argument for giving them an appropriate showcasing platform. As Charles and Darius show (albeit in different roles), males with street authenticity or credibility, and who practise inclusive masculinity features, provide credible models for young men in spaces like Maxwell. Such characters, acting as youth workers or community activists, are well-placed to offer blueprints for young men lacking positive black male
role models. In this way, the recruitment and deployment of, in Darius’s case, detached youth workers, can commence in a specific direction.

As an academic, I have grown throughout this research. Having undertaken the design of this study, negotiated access to the participants, carried out fieldwork and analysed participants’ data I have acquired or developed many skills. These skills have given me a deeper appreciation of the research process and the tools to (hopefully) overcome future research challenges. Further, I hope to write several articles or papers on some of the critical research challenges I have faced during this research (e.g., urban ethnography, use of informal conversations and gatekeepers).

In professional terms, I have gained an understanding of the daily activities of marginalised young men – those I may have been guilty of not listening to or representing in my ‘desk-based’ evaluation capacity. As a result of my engaging with Maxwell’s young men, I feel better positioned to represent their voices and build organisational capacity to coproduce and involve such communities in the planning and delivery of future interventions.

**Further Research**

While acknowledging the challenges that ethnographic researchers face in the wake of a global pandemic, there are many avenues for future work in spaces like Maxwell. For one, I am confident that there are other inner-city spaces out there with their own Azeez, Bankz, Charles or Darius. Their stories point towards an emerging form of street masculinity, which appears to tap into stocks of street capital while simultaneously exalting features that are often feminised or dismissed as ‘weak’. This alternative HM, the other side of the coin to Maxwell’s violent street masculinity, is of interest given its underexposure in the literature. Using urban ethnography, I would also be keen to explore further into young men’s private spaces. As my study shows, this is often where young men hide their inclusive masculinity performances from derision.
References


https://doi.org/Reports-Descriptive


https://doi.org/10.1037/10430-000


https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203485781


https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X00002003003


163


Appendix

1.0 Interview Questions

Life on Maxwell

- Have you always lived in or near Maxwell?
- If you haven’t always lived here, what brought you to live on Maxwell?
- What are your earliest memories of Maxwell?
- Who else do you live with on Maxwell?
- What is Maxwell like compared to other areas of London that you know?
- What happens in a typical day on the estate?
- Circle the most appropriate words that describe Maxwell:
  - Fun / Boring / Dangerous / Safe / Miserable / Happy / Sad / Lots to do / Nothing to do

Facilities

- How would you describe the facilities here on Maxwell? Good? Bad?
- Is there enough to do on Maxwell to stop you being bored?

Peer groups

- How many are in your group of friends? Are they male, female? How old are they?
- How did these people become your friends?
- What do you like about your friends? What do you dislike about your friends?
- What makes your group different from other friendship groups?

Relationships

- How would you describe your group of friends’ relationships with other groups on the estate? Good? Bad?
- Are there any people or groups on the estate that you look up to or admire? If so, what makes them so admirable?
- Are there any people or groups on the estate that create fear for you or anyone else? If so, what makes them so intimidating?

Vulnerability

- In what parts of Maxwell do you feel safe? Where on Maxwell do you feel unsafe?
- What is it about these spaces that make you feel safe/unsafe?
- Do your feelings of safety change during the day or at different times of the year?
- Do you feel safer on Maxwell than anywhere else? If yes, why? If no, why?

Masculinity

- Fill in the blanks statements:
  - A real man needs to be good at …. 
  - A real man needs lots of …. 

• A real man should...
• A real man shouldn’t ....
• A real man is ....

Do you think it’s OK for a man to cry in private? What about in front of their friends? Is there someone that you would describe as a ‘real man’? If yes, what makes them a real man?
2.0 Participant Information Sheet

Research Study Title: How do young black men in London experience vulnerability in their urban spaces and create 'knife-carrying masculinities'?

Primary Researcher: Brendan King

You have been chosen to participate in a piece of research about how young men experience the spaces in their communities and whether this influences their participation in weapon-carrying behaviours. If you would prefer not to take part, you can refuse without having to give a reason. If you choose to take part, but later change your mind, you can leave the research without having to give a reason as to why.

The rest of this document talks about the what the research focuses on. It will help you to decide whether you want to take part. It will also give you some information about what you can expect if you do take part. You may want to take some time to think about your participation – feel free to ask the researcher, the youth worker or another appropriate adult any questions.

Study Information

What is the research study for?

The research is part of the researcher’s study at the UCL Institute of Education. The final report will be submitted for marking to the University. The research may also help carry out a larger piece of research in the future. The results from this research will help others to understand why some young men choose to carry knives and what is important or influential in their decision.

What does my participation involve?

If you decide to participate, you will take part in either an informal recorded conversation (about 20-30 minutes long), a group discussion with your friends, or both. During the interview you will be asked for your opinions and experiences of living in your community and of youth violence.

What are my ‘rights’ as a participant?

If you decide to participate you will have several ‘rights’:

- Your participation is voluntary – there is no pressure on you to participate;
- You are able to decline participation at any time;
- You are able to withdraw your participation if you start and then change your mind;
- You will not experience any disadvantage or harm at any point of your participation
- Your personal information will never be revealed to anyone outside of the study
• Your name will not be used in any reported or published findings
• You will be kept anonymous – your name and personal details will be protected at all times

What happens once the research is completed?

The study will be written up as part of an assignment. The findings may also be used in a future piece of research. Any information that is collected as part of the research will be kept for a maximum of five years on a secure computer or device before being destroyed. Data will be stored based on the recommendations of laws and regulations.

Once your participation is finished you can request a summary of the data you provided. Apart from this, you are not required or expected to do anything. If anything about your participation is unclear after reading this information sheet, please speak with the youth worker allocated to work with you. They can contact the researcher using the details below.

Brendan King
xxxxxx.xxxx@ucl.ac.uk

Participant Consent – Please Complete

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About my participation</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have understood the Information Sheet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that participation includes being interviewed and audio recorded.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that my participation is voluntary; I may leave the study at any time without giving reason.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The data I provide during my participation</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand that my personal details will not be revealed to anyone outside the research team.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that my words may be used in other research outputs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that other genuine researchers may use my data for other research outputs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using the information you provide legally</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I give permission for the primary researcher to use any materials developed as part of the research.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Please sign and return to the youth worker or the researcher:

Your name:

Date: 

Signature:
3.0 Community Maps

The community map below provides another example of a participant's perceptions of spaces that are ‘safe’ (blue) and unsafe (red). While many other community maps were completed, within them, there is a risk that Maxwell is identifiable. I have thus chosen to remove them from this thesis.
## 4.0 Glossary

The following terms appear throughout this thesis, particularly in the findings chapter. To preserve young men’s stories, I have kept their words as close to verbatim as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arms (bearing/coming with)</td>
<td>Carrying weapons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backed up</td>
<td>Carrying a knife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bait</td>
<td>Derogatory – usually associated with undesirable or stupid behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef/Squashing Beef</td>
<td>Trouble or friction with others. When trouble is resolved (amicably or otherwise), it is ‘squashed’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaze/Blazin’</td>
<td>Smoking weed/cannabis/skunk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brothas/Sistas</td>
<td>Young black males/females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burner (phone)</td>
<td>A cheap and basic phone that one can easily discard - usually reserved for illegal activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call out/Calling out</td>
<td>Antagonise or goad others often on social media - usually the precursor to violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatting shit</td>
<td>Talking nonsense – usually associated with hollow or superficial threats of violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creps</td>
<td>Trainers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dope</td>
<td>Looking or appearing good – something or someone can appear ‘dope’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill</td>
<td>A hyper-masculine genre of urban music often associated with violence, criminality and young black male culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTB (Dock Town Boys)</td>
<td>A well-known local gang formalised in the early 1990s and who recruit from postcodes around Maxwell. DTB are renowned for their extreme violence and involvement in organised crime and drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elder(s)</td>
<td>A senior member of a formalised gang. An elder has several affiliated youngsters who they protect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fam</td>
<td>Abbreviated form of ‘family’ – often used to refer to a friend but also as an expression of surprise or indignation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feds</td>
<td>The police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>A gangster. Someone can be a ‘young G’ or an ‘O-G’ (old gangster) – it is usually a respectful term for someone who has a degree of street capital or status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangsterism</td>
<td>Whittaker et al. (2020) define gangsterism as urban identities occurring along lines of race and economics; it includes groups forming with the intention of committing acts of criminality or violence, and to defend themselves against the violence of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garms/Threads</td>
<td>Clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghetto</td>
<td>Denoting a toughness or street-savvy (someone being 'ghetto’) or a shoddiness in appearance (shabby-looking shoes look ‘ghetto’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gripped</td>
<td>Being roughed-up (usually by police following a stop and search)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heat (coming with)</td>
<td>Surveillance – usually involving the police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacked</td>
<td>The act of robbing or mugging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandem</td>
<td>Young men on-road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYC (Maxwell Youth Club)</td>
<td>The solitary community space on Maxwell. MYC holds small gatherings and events and is the de facto administrative headquarters of MYP’s detached youth workers in the area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYP (Mentoring Youth Project)</td>
<td>The youth work organisation that supported this thesis and which provides the youth workers who were gatekeepers for this study’s participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the regs</td>
<td>All the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-road</td>
<td>The behaviours, attitudes and expectations of the street life subculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers (stacking/making)</td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peepin’</td>
<td>Looking – usually in a suspicious manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peng</td>
<td>Attractive (normally females)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poppin tags</td>
<td>Wearing expensive high fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps and Qs</td>
<td>Business – as in “I'm minding my own Ps and Qs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pussy</td>
<td>Someone or something weak or effeminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roadman/Roadmen</td>
<td>A young man who is a visible presence ‘on-road’. They are generally considered to be among the...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lower strata of local informal and formal gangs and are known for carrying small amounts of drugs to sell on the street or ferry from one place to another</td>
<td>Rush(ing) Ambush, usually in a violent manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shank</td>
<td>A knife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shottin’</td>
<td>Selling (commonly drugs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat/Insta(gram)/BBM (BlackBerry Messenger)</td>
<td>Social media platforms – sometimes used to negotiate meetups or confrontations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stash</td>
<td>Drugs – usually sold by roadmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swagger</td>
<td>A respected presence or demeanour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The struggle</td>
<td>Life on-road – usually denotes an authenticity to one’s on-roadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The/my ends</td>
<td>The local neighbourhood. Ends can also belong to someone else, e.g., “I’m meeting Jay in his ends.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threads</td>
<td>Clothes – often high-end fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tight</td>
<td>A close association or friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tooling up/Tooled up</td>
<td>To arm oneself with a weapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wet/wetted</td>
<td>Stab with a knife or bladed weapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whip(s)</td>
<td>Car(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>A junior member of a formalised gang closely associated to an elder. Youngers have their mettle tested before becoming elders. Youngers usually run errands for elders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>