Violence Among Australian Youth of African Descent: Is Peer Mentoring the Answer? Commentary on Initial Findings of 'Stop the Violence Programme' in Western Australia

Kwadwo Adusei-Asante, Ph.D.
School of Arts & Humanities,
Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

ABSTRACT

Recent episodes of violence among Australian youth of African descent have been a concern for politicians, the police, policymakers and the African communities in the country. In Western Australia, the police and African communities have been searching for ways to reduce and prevent the recent spate of violence among Australian youth of African descent. This exploratory evaluative case study presents preliminary findings on the nature of violence committed by Australian youth of African descent and examines the impact of the 'Stop the Violence Programme', a pilot youth mentoring initiative for creating awareness among African youth in Western Australia about crime prevention. In Phase One of the programme, 18 young people were trained and resourced as local champions to mentor their peers on preventing antisocial behaviours. The study found three main forms of violence occurring among these youth: inter-African country violence, same-nationality ethnic conflicts and leave-my-territory fights. Post-training focus groups also revealed that many of the mentors have gained increased awareness of behaviours that constitute a crime in Australia. Initial findings suggest that prevention, rather than punishment, may prove a more successful approach to mitigating future violence, and that African youth can communicate positive conflict resolution to their communities.

Key words: African youth; African youth gang; peer mentoring; violence prevention

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 population census revealed that over 317,182 Australian residents were born in sub-Saharan Africa. This population, which constitutes 5.1% of Australia's overseas-born population is diverse, comprising: (1) White Africans born in, or connected to, South Africa and Zimbabwe, (2) North Africans from the Maghreb and Egypt and (3) Black Africans born in, or with ancestral ties to, sub-Saharan Africa (Adusei-Asante, 2018). Black Africans are further classified into five categories: middle-class professionals, humanitarian entrants, Australian-born Africans, family reunion arrivals and international students (Adusei-Asante, 2018; Hugo, 2009; Jakubowicz, 2010).

In recent times, a section of Australia's media and politicians have presented Australian youth of African descent who commit crimes, specifically South Sudanese and Somalians, as violent or belonging to African youth 'gangs'. Youth violence refers to:

> *violence that occurs among individuals aged 10–29 years who are unrelated and who may or may not know each other, and generally takes place outside of the home … [including] bullying, physical assault with or without a weapon, and gang violence. (Krug et al., 2010, p. 5)*

While street gang theory and research evidence would problematise or even contradict the deafening 'gangsterisation' of violence crimes committed by Australian youth of African

descent in Western Australia (WA) and other states (O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, & Thomas, 2013; White 2007; Wood & Alleyne, 2010), the 'African youth gang' narrative has dominated discourses in the media and Australian politics. Some have argued that violence committed by African youth are isolated cases and do not warrant its characterisation as 'gang violence', whereas others argue that it is an 'African gang problem' and even question the integration of all African migrants into Australia (Koziol & Cunningham, 2018; Ryan & Stayner, 2018). For example, Ms Pauline Hanson, the leader of the One Nation Party, has called for the deportation of African gang members (see Stephens, 2017). Mr Peter Dutton, the Home Affairs Minister, argued that people were scared to go out for dinner in Melbourne owing to 'African gang violence'. Mr Greg Hunt, the Health Minister stated that, 'African gang crime' was 'completely out of control' (see Plummer, 2018). Two former Prime Ministers of Australia, Mr Malcolm Turnbull and Mr Tony Abbott, have also recently waded into the African youth 'gangs' fray. Mr Turnbull argued that 'Melbourne can't pretend Sudanese gangs don't exist', while Mr Abbott was quoted in a radio interview as follows:

> So there is a problem ... It's an African gang problem, and the Victorian socialist government should get real and own up to the fact that there is an African gang problem in Melbourne ... I guess the big question though is: why do we store up trouble for ourselves by letting in people who are going to be difficult, difficult to integrate? ... And this is why I think all credit to Peter Dutton, who is doing his best to manage our immigration program in our national interest – not in the interests of all sorts of people who might simply want to come here. (Koziol & Cunningham, 2018)

Interestingly, some politicians, a section of the media, community groups, the police administration and some academics disagree with the blanket 'gangsterisation' of crimes committed by Australian youth of African descent. The Labour government of Victoria has debunked the existence of African 'youth gang' violence, accusing the 'gangsterisation' crusaders as playing political games with crime (Plummer, 2018; Preiss, Hunter, & Koziol, 2018). Leaders of African communities in various states have also condemned as racist and baseless the broad-brush depiction of violence committed by Australian youth of African descent as 'gang violence'—blaming it on their visible distinctiveness (ABC News, 2018). A section of the media has also attacked such views as dishonest and statistically baseless (see Paine, 2018). A recent documentary aired by the Special Broadcasting Services titled 'Apex Gang: Behind the Headlines' presents facts that negate the existence of so-called gangs within the South Sudanese Community in Australia (SBS, 2018). Further, the Victorian police commissioner argued recently that being a young criminal could not be equated to being a part of a youth gang (Plummer, 2018). Some academics have argued that while labelling Australian youth of African descent offenders may be politically appealing, it will perpetrate violence (see Plummer, 2018). Mr Jarryd Bartle, a former criminal lawyer and policy consultant mocked the gangsterisation of violence committed by Australian youth of African descent in Victoria as follows:

> One thinks of south-central Los Angeles, where there are established gangs that recruit members – nothing like this is happening in Victoria... the higher rate of offending among African immigrants and their children was real and worthy of targeted intervention ... but mythologising a fictional gang just makes crime more appealing to status seeking young people. (see Plummer, 2018)

Data that precisely measure the nature and extent of violent behaviour among various ethnic groups in WA is limited. However, crime statistics published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the WA police show that criminal activities in the state have increased since 2010–2011, although the figures show some reduction in crime activities between 2015–2016 and 2017–2018 (see Figures 1 & 2). WA recorded the highest proportion of youth

offenders to total offenders in Australia, with those aged 10–17 years representing 16% of total offenders for the state in 2016–2017 (ABS, 2018). WA and New South Wales recorded the highest proportion of youth offenders nationally.

Figure 1: Number of Offences Per year in Western Australia
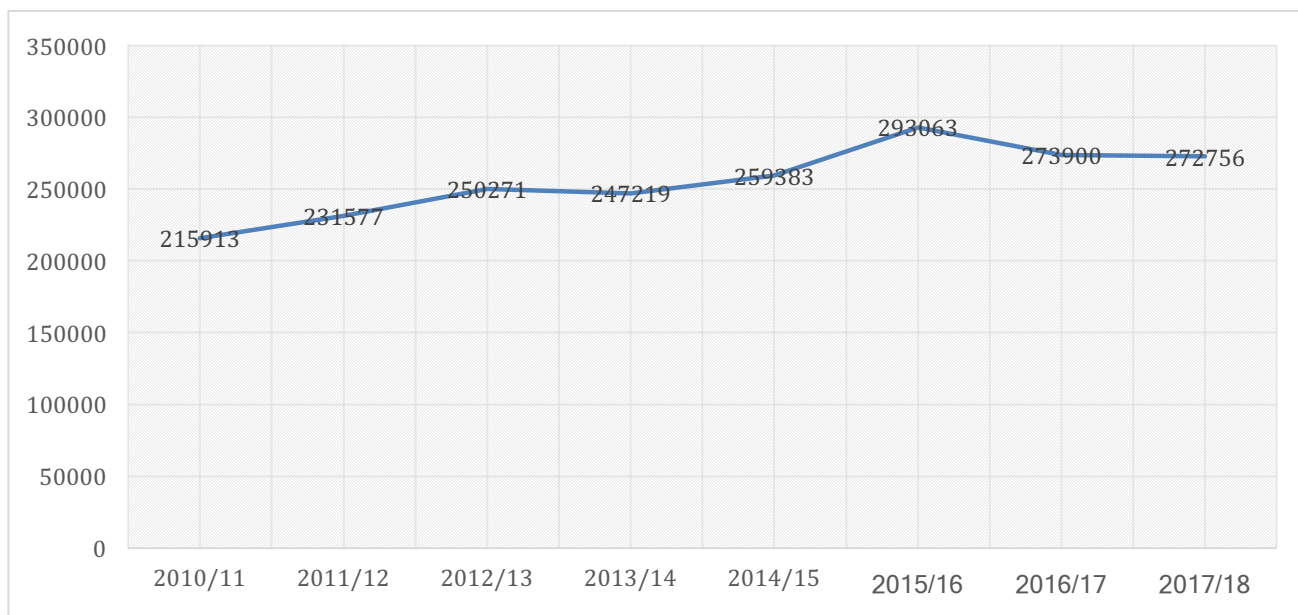
Source: Available at https://www.police.wa.gov.au/Crime/CrimeStatistics#/start.

Figure 2: Number of Youth Offenders in Western Australia
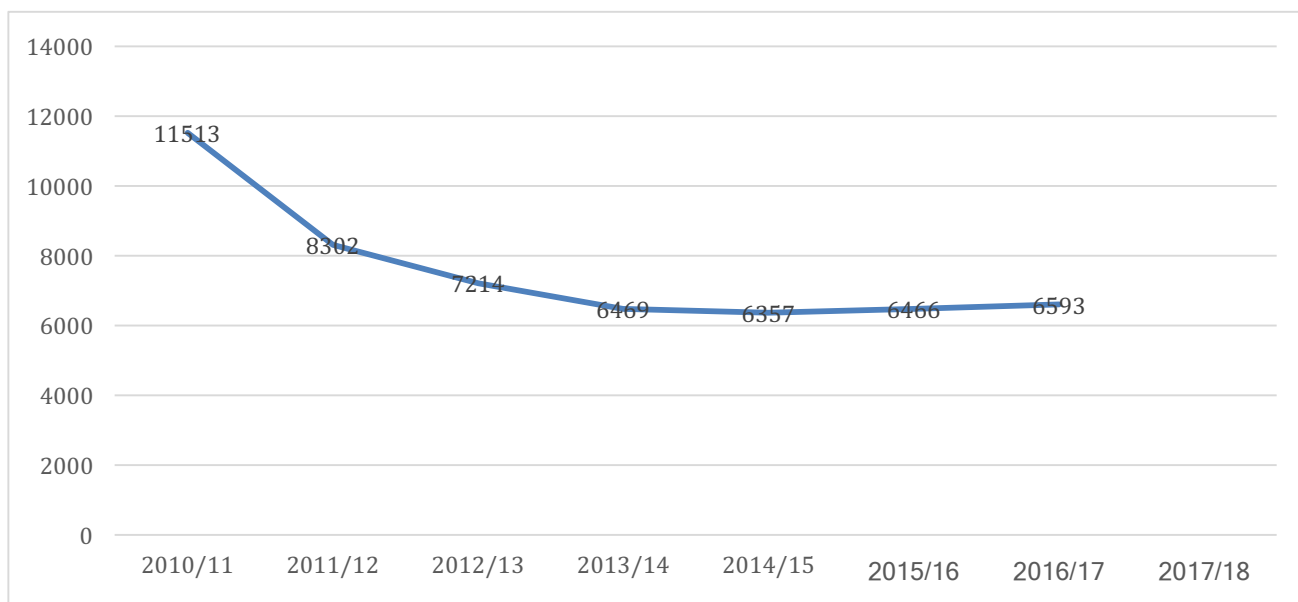
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018.

It has been estimated that crime costs Australia AU$47.5 billion in 2011, that is, over 3.4% of the country's gross domestic product (Smith et al., 2014). It is within this context that recent occurrences reported in the media of violence perpetrated by Australian youth of African descent in Perth and Melbourne have raised concerns about security in African-populated suburbs in Australia (see Adhead, Clarke, & Walsh, 2017; McNeill, 2016; Twentyman, 2016). In this regard, the WA police have been engaging with African communities and have undertaken

several initiatives (including through sports and community fora) aimed at preventing crime among African migrants. In 2017, the Organisation of African Communities of Western Australia (OAC-WA) was funded by the Office of Multicultural Interests (WA government) to pilot a peer-mentoring violence prevention programme, 'Stop the Violence Programme', as an alternative crime prevention technique.

This research was designed as an explorative evaluative case study to 1) examine the nature of the violence among Australian youth of African descent and 2) the difference the programme would make in the lives of mentors and their communities in WA over a period of three years (2017–2020) (Liamputtong, 2009; Natallier, 2013; Patton, 2002). Data collection occurred before and after the training of the 18 mentors. All 18 mentors and their three facilitators who took part in focus group discussions signed informed consent forms, as per the requirements of the ethics clearance obtained from Edith Cowan University's ethics committee. Separate focus group discussions were conducted with the programme's team, facilitators and mentors before, and at the end of, the training. The discussion related to the nature of violence committed by Australian youth of African descent and the difference the programme had made in the lives of the mentors and their readiness to engage with their peers. The data were first organised and then coded, following several rounds of manual reading (immersion) (Liamputtong, 2009; Patton, 2002). Patterns identified were developed as key themes, some of which are discussed in this paper.

Experts on violence prevention concur that the impact of programmes is felt after two to three years (Hemphill & Smith, 2010; Krug et al., 2010; Tolan, Schoeny, & Bass, 2006). Thus, the present study acknowledges that the programme is ongoing and that its effects may not yet be realised fully (within 12 months of implementation). Hence, this paper focuses on the Stop the Violence Programme's impact on the trainee mentors. It provides a commentary on the initial findings of the programme to date relating to the nature of violence among Australian youth of African descent. Further, the evidence on change in knowledge of the mentors as regards violence is an extension of a conference paper presented at the 2018 International Association for Impact Assessment in Durban, South Africa.

STOP THE VIOLENCE PROGRAMME

The OAC-WA's Stop the Violence Programme is designed and implemented as a peer-mentoring programme. Therefore, it is important to situate it within a broader context. Peer mentoring is an agented social development approach for preventing violence through strengthening protective factors and reducing risk factors aimed at facilitating overall healthy youth development (Bradley, 2018; Hemphill & Smith, 2010; World Health Organization [WHO], 2015). The concept of mentoring refers to a 'partnership through which a more experienced person shares knowledge, skills, information and perspective to help a young person's positive development' (Tolan et al., 2006, p. 16). Mentoring programmes target youth engaged in, or believed to be at risk of, delinquent behaviour. Proponents of the mentoring approach to violence prevention argue that social learning processes occur in the relationship between a mentor and mentee and that the mentor can provide support in handling day-to-day problems and guidance on alternative ways of dealing with situations likely to lead to violence (Hemphill & Smith, 2010; Krug et al., 2010; WHO, 2015).

Effects of peer-mentoring programmes in preventing youth violence have been documented in other countries. For example, an evaluation of the US 'Big Brothers Big Sisters of America' mentoring programme found that it reduced illicit drug initiation by 46% and alcohol initiation by 27% and increased protective factors, such as school attendance, improved relationships with parents and commitment to engage in school tasks (WHO, 2015, p. 42). The Youth

Inclusion Programme established by England and Wales in 2000 is another case in point. It targeted at-risk young people aged between 13 and 16 residing in 'troubled neighbourhoods' (Bradley, 2018). It applied a model that individualised the needs of participating young people in a structured plan (see Bradley, 2018; Smith, 2006). Burrows (2003) evaluated this programme and based on an experimental ex-ante and ex-post design reported that the arrest rates for the top 50 at-risk youth were reduced by 65%, while 44% of those who were not engaged had a 44% decrease in offending. Further, 60% of the top 50 were not re-arrested (see Bradley, 2018). Examples of other successful crime prevention youth mentoring programmes include Mentoring Plus in the United Kingdom and Quantum Opportunities Program in the United States (Bradley, 2018).

As a concept, the OAC-WA's Stop the Violence Programme is the brainchild of Ibrahim Kerbe, a Sierra-Leone–Australian who was a victim of youth violence in Perth. He relived the experience as follows:

> *The issue of violence has gone on among our African youth for a long time. I was in a club one night when a fight broke out with a few people. Some of my friends were injured, and I was injured as well. I came home and decided we need to create a platform on how we can reduce violence within our community. I made a page on Facebook and called it 'Stop the Violence'.*

The Stop the Violence Programme was launched in 2016 under the auspices of the City of Stirling, although its operations started only in 2017. The OAC-WA designed this programme as an intervention to create awareness and address the rising incidence of violence among Australian youth of African descent in Western Australia. The OAC-WA invited expression of interest from all young Africans who felt the need to obtain leadership training and had a sense of duty towards their communities. The OAC-WA received many applications but owing to limited resources, selected only 18 youth through a screening process. The programme is different from most models of peer-mentoring approaches in the sense that it did not target at-risk youth as the mentors. All the mentors were law-abiding African youth who wanted to be involved in creating safer communities and educating their peers. However, as community members, they were aware of the issues—and some were victims of violence as well. They received training to identify and mentor at-risk African youth and create an awareness of violence prevention. Most mentors interviewed for the present study joined the programme to make a difference in their communities. As one of them stated:

> *Everything that happens to an African youth affects us all... I mean the image and profiling. So, we must do something about the violence ... we know our people ... they can understand us when we mentor them.*

The programme was implemented in two phases. Phase One was the 'train the trainers' component and involved the selection of 18 mentors, who were trained to champion crime prevention among their peers in Perth. These mentors took part in a six-month structured training session. The topics discussed over a six-month period included understanding assault, conflict resolution, self-esteem, identity, the history of African migration to Australia, the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse, financial management, leadership, violence, importance of formal education and event management. The sessions were delivered by three facilitators and people from the community including the WA the police. The programme is in Phase Two at present, in which the 18 mentors, who successfully completed the training, are out in their respective communities promoting violence prevention awareness. The mentors lead by example and implement programmes that address club violence, family and domestic violence, use of alcohol and other drugs, antisocial behaviour and violence against women. The mentors work on their individual programmes and in groups of six members with other mentors. OAC-

WA employs a coordinator, who provide administrative and ancillary support to the mentors. The organisation and their funding partners also allocate seed funds to the mentors to support their programmes.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Data obtained to date reveal three main forms of violence occurring among Australian youth of African descent in Perth: (1) inter-African-country violence, (2) same-nationality ethnic violence and (3) 'leave-my-territory' fights. Inter-African-country violence refers to instances when people from different countries living in Perth engage in brawls. These are usually isolated incidents and tend to transpire at sporting events. An example is the 2016 brawl between the sporting teams of Ghanaians-Australians and Sierra Leonean Australians during the local version of the African Cup of Nations' soccer competition in Perth. Same-nationality ethnic conflicts occur among African-Australian residents from the same African country. Insights obtained reveal that same-nationality tribal conflicts are sometimes an extension of fights occurring in their native African countries. The data showed that these conflicts are widespread among African youth from war-prone countries, as captured in the quotes below:

> *Some of conflicts here are taken from what is happening back home in Africa. Although we are in Australia you hear friends telling you about how their parents and elders have advised them not to associate with people from a particular tribe...such people would want to take it the streets and take their anger on people their parents don't approve of.*

> *Recently I met two African youth in a corporate organisation here in Perth who didn't talk to each other. I thought I had met my brothers so we would link up. I asked them why they didn't talk each other. One of them told me that it's because the other person's tribe attacked their cows in [Africa during a tribal conflict] and that is why they don't talk to each other. I was really surprised to hear that people would want to lock horns in Australia because of cows in Africa.*

Territorial fights occur when a group feels that 'strangers' have threatened or entered their 'spaces'. Informants described 'spaces' as night clubs, symbols and females. Two forms of 'leave-my-territory' fights were identified in the data. Conflicts between Australian urban Aboriginal youth and Australian youth of African descent constitute the first type. The most classic is the brawl in Girrawheen in 2015, which led to the tragic death of an African male teenager. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2008, p. 1) argued that the phenomenon is deeply embedded in class and race issues, rather than simply in youth violence, and that the relationship between the two groups reflects the history of strained race relations in modern Australia and a growing antipathy to multiculturalism. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2008) further stated that the reasons for the tensions between urban Aboriginal and African youth are related to perceptions of competition for material (housing, welfare and education) and symbolic (position in a racial hierarchy) resources.

The second form of territorial fights that Australian youth of African descent engage in is with non-Australians (visitors). Informants cited examples from 2007 and 2008, when some African youth clashed with African-American sailors visiting Perth. A young man who had previously been involved in this type of brawl described it as follows:

> *Occasionally, we fought with African-American sailors who docked in Fremantle. These 'stopover' sailors would come down to the nightclubs in Northbridge for social stuff. But we felt threatened by the fact that they were stepping into our territory, especially when they were interacting with our local African girls.*

The mentors attributed the incidence of violence to several factors, but most commonly, drug and alcohol abuse, lack of parental support, unemployment, financial hardship, miscommunication, youthful exuberance, ignorance of the law, personal hardships, mental health and seemingly 'let's get along' attitudes, described by some of the mentors as follows:

> *Low self-extreme is one of the causes of violence in our community…it's about the need to belong.*

> *When African boys hang out together, they go like, this is my crew and they, when they go to a place and something happens, they will back each other up for the sake of it. A lot of these are influenced by alcohol.*

> *When people get drunk at parties, they disturb the peace of other people. In the process, they make small things big and because we may be walking in groups, people join fights just to back their friends up.*

> *Sometimes friends want you to back them up. We were at a party recently and one of our friends accidentally stepped on another person, and I said sorry on behalf of our friend. Our friend got angry that we didn't back him up to fight the guy. And I said how we fight because of this minor issue? Our friend didn't move with us again. He joined another group whom he felt would back up when someone offended him.*

> *At times violence starts as miscommunication. Once we were at a party. Someone pushed me [unconsciously], so I ran into a lady close by. Then I saw this tall guy requesting that we go outside and fight because I have pushed his girlfriend. I apologised to him and that settled it. If I had chosen to fight I would have gone outside with him and there would have been violence, spoilt the party, police will come and their dogs will be there.*

> *Part of the problem has to do with our homes…African youth who have been raised here with domestic violence and abuse tend to think it's normal to attack another person when offended. But this is wrong.*

The second major finding thus far relates to an awareness of issues on violence that the mentors had taken for granted or considered 'normal'. Incidents of assaults is a case in point. Before the training, most thought of assault only in terms of physical contact. However, focus group discussions with the participants after the training showed that most had verifiable knowledge of physical contact and noncontact assaults as captured below:

> *I didn't know about the difference between insult and assault. I didn't know that touching a person could be a crime and the law is against it … back home, we touch people freely … but it's not ok here…*

> *Sometimes we don't know the gravity of what we are doing. We tend to think that we are fighting for a good cause.*

> *Before the training, I thought that hitting my girlfriend was not a big deal, because it was not reported. But I have now realised how serious this is.*

Other mentors related their experiences as follows:

> *I knew about resolving conflict, but I would do it my own way, which usually involved the use of force. But the facilitators … explained them systematically in a way that made sense and is very applicable to us. I have learned that before violence breaks out, it goes through stages before escalating into aggression. Through this programme, I*

have gained an understanding, so I know when violence is about to happen before a punch is thrown.

A key discovery for me was that breakdown of communication leads to violence. This program has been great. It has taught us about triggers of violence … for example, breakdown in communication and when having personal issues. We also learned about how to deal with personal issues. With this knowledge, I will be able to mentor more young people and my peers. I want to organise seminars and educate young people about alcohol and drugs.

These quotes confirm the views of several scholars who have argued that African youth who migrated to Australia received inadequate orientation on the country's laws (see Hugo, 2009; Jakubowicz, 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). Meanwhile, during the discussion, most of the participants cited examples of noncontact scenarios that could pass for assault under the WA criminal code. Several participants who took part in the focus group discussions were able to cite aspects of the WA criminal code on assault and associated violent crimes and redress. These are examples:

Rising your voice could be an act of violence…but may just want to make your voice heard.

We learned about the law protecting all of us and the need to follow procedures and not taking the law into our hands.

One module focused on the relationship between alcohol, violence and the cost to the WA economy. Before the training, while most of the participants were able to explain the effects of alcohol on violence, their knowledge on how violence affects the economy was limited. After the course, the Stop the Violence Programme participants were able to demonstrate and discuss the effects of violence on the economy and the collateral negative impact on the image of African migrants in Australia.

The programme participants have launched two concurrent peer-mentoring programmes in Perth. The first is school-based mentoring programmes, through which the participants engage African primary and high school students and mentor them. Currently, three schools are involved in the school-based programme: Balga Senior High School, Girrawheen Senior High School and Dianella College. The other programme is community-based work in conjunction with local police (Mirrabooka Police) and the Department of Child Protection. The participants in the Stop the Violence Programme identify at-risk young Africans likely to commit violent crimes. They support these at-risk youth and/or link them with appropriate local social support services. Since these programmes are currently in their infancy, they will be monitored for impact over the year. However, some of the mentors have shared their experiences as follows:

I have engaged youth in my community in cultural dance practice as a strategy to keep them of the street and falling into the hands of wrong people.

The program has made me a better leader and taught me how to take control in terms of preventing violence. I have been able to establish networks of young people that look up to me and other Africans I look up to.

We have been taught how to set up our lives, be financially wise and how to communicate with other young people and make a difference in their lives. At first

> *when I see violence about to start or people arguing I was confused and didn't know what to do. But I have learned techniques to calm them down.*

During the six-month Stop the Violence Programme training, the participants learned about event management, project management, financial management and people skills. These were necessary to prepare them as ambassadors going into the community to educate their peers on nonviolence. As proof of their knowledge acquisition and readiness to implement community programmes, the participants were given the task of organising events. The mentors, who until the advent of the Stop the Violence Programme knew little about event management, have successfully planned and implemented three important events, namely: the 2017 African Youth Summit, 2018 Jambo Africa and 2018 African Day. The 2017 African Youth Summit focused on creating increased understanding on issues affecting African-Australian youth. Jambo Africa is the largest annual African festival in WA, and it showcases African music, dancing, diverse arts, cultural performances and authentic African food. The mentors also organised the 2018 Africa Day in Perth and are currently working on launching an online television network to discuss nonviolent ways to resolving conflicts.

CONCLUSION

This study presented preliminary findings on the nature of violence among Australian youth of African descent and the impact of the Stop the Violence Programme implemented in Western Australia to address recent episodes of violence among African youth. The programme is a collaboration between Organisation of African Communities and Western Australia and the Office of Multicultural Interests. It trained 18 young Africans, who were supported to champion nonviolence in African communities in Perth through various peer-mentoring programmes and events. The initial data collected and analysed provide insights into the complex nature of violence among Australian youth of African descent (consisting of three main domains). The study also sheds light on the demonstrable knowledge on violence acquired by the mentors and the ways in which they put it into practice through their organisation of various events and school and community-based peer-mentoring programmes aimed at addressing antisocial behaviours in African communities in Perth. While it is early to make any significant claims, the findings show that agented intervention programmes, such as the Stop the Violence Programme, can achieve positive outcomes in milieus in which youth violence thrives, if these are community supported, funded and sustained. The findings also suggest that Australian youth of African descent will be far better at communicating positive conflict resolution to their communities than would politicians and policymakers.

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