COMMUNITY SAFETY: Experiences, Observations, and Insights from Mayor's Community Weekend at RJ4All

A Qualitative Research Report

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Executive Summary

On 13th September 2025, Restorative Justice for All International Institute (hereafter RJ4All) hosted the Mayor's Community Weekend event in London under the theme of **Community Safety: Experiences, Observations, Expectations**. This comprehensive report synthesises insights from three key data collection activities of the day: a Youth Wellbeing Circle with children under the age of 12, a Wish Tree survey capturing community safety aspirations, and participant observations and interviews held throughout the day.

Key Findings

Children's Perspectives on Safety: The Youth Wellbeing Circle revealed that children's understanding of safety is concrete, experience-based, and deeply relational. For participants aged under 12, safety meant "being protected" from "bad things," with family presence and the home environment serving as primary protective factors. Children identified specific vulnerabilities, including being alone at home, encounters with strangers, and quiet or unfamiliar spaces. Their adaptive strategies ranged from seeking parental comfort to adopting online safety practices like using different user-names. Notably, children's concept of 'community' centered on gatherings and mutual help rather than being directly linked to safety concerns.

Adult Perspectives and Community Concerns: The Speak Up! Circle[1], held on the same day, along with responses gathered from the Wish Tree and participant interviews, showed that adult participants highlighted more systemic safety concerns, including street crime (particularly phone theft), gender-based violence, drug-related issues affecting youth, and tensions around migration and cultural diversity. Unlike children's focus on immediate protection, adults expressed frustration with perceived ineffective local authority responses and advocated for collaborative, community-led solutions. A 22-year-old participant captured this sentiment: "*(I feel) safest in a community where neighbours know each other*", while a 28-year-old male said "*people feel confident and comfortable to fix community problems in a collaborative way*". Adults consistently favoured restorative approaches over punitive measures, with one participant explicitly stating: "*Not more police, more social workers*".

The Role of RJ4All in Community Building: The Community Centre[2] emerged as a vital hub for building trust and social cohesion. While many participants were unfamiliar with the theoretical framework of the Restorative Justice Postcode Project, they highly valued the tangible activities and services, including community fridges, shared spaces, dialogue circles, and regular events. Participant observation revealed how informal interactions (chatting, playing music together, collaborative cleaning) alongside structured activities fostered both bonding and bridging social capital. The Centre

[1] Please see the full report at: https://rj4all.org/restorative-justice-postcode/#impact
[2] For more information: https://rj4all.org/ukservices/

successfully created an inclusive environment where families felt secure, children were safely engaged, and adults could participate in meaningful dialogue about complex social issues.

Critical Insights

The research reveals that community safety is fundamentally **relational, experiential, and place-based**. Both children and adults consistently linked safety to trusted relationships and familiar environments, while feeling vulnerable in situations of isolation or exposure to unfamiliar people and spaces. **This challenges traditional crime-focused approaches to community safety, highlighting instead the importance of social connections, inclusive spaces, and collective responsibility.**

At the same time, a generational difference in safety conceptualisation was also noted: children focused on immediate, tangible protection within family and home contexts, as adults understood safety through systemic and intersectional lenses, recognising how identity factors (gender, race, class) shape safety experiences[3]. While employing differing internalised meanings of community safety, both groups emphasised the critical importance of community connection and support networks.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings, based on the Youth Wellbeing Circle, Wish Tree responses, participant observations, and informal interviews, point toward several key policy and practice implications. First, **community safety strategies should prioritise strengthening existing protective factors** – family networks, inclusive community spaces, and well-maintained public areas – rather than relying primarily on enforcement approaches. Second, **interventions must address structural risk factors** including unsafe public spaces, gender-based violence, discrimination, and inadequate support for vulnerable populations.

Most significantly, the research demonstrates strong community preference for **legitimate, non-oppressive authority** that prioritises prevention, collaboration, and social wellbeing. Participants consistently advocated for community-led solutions, meaningful participation in local decision-making, and restorative justice approaches that emphasise dialogue, relationship repair, and collective accountability.

The Mayor's Community Weekend event and RJ4All's ongoing work illustrate how inclusive, participatory events can strengthen community resilience. When residents feel ownership over safety initiatives and are provided with genuine opportunities to voice concerns and co-create solutions, trust grows and interventions become more sustainable. **The success of the Community Centre's**

[3] Based on insights from the Speak Up! Circle, Wish Tree responses, informal interviews, and participant observations.

approach – combining practical support with dialogue opportunities – demonstrates that safety is built not simply through enforcement, but through belonging, inclusion, and shared responsibility.

In sum, this report confirms that effective community safety requires moving beyond policing-first models for empowerment, prevention, and collaboration. By embedding restorative justice principles into local safety policies and creating spaces for meaningful community participation, neighbourhoods can move from fear and fragmentation toward a future where safety is collective, empowering, and inclusive. The work of RJ4All provides a compelling model for how communities can take active ownership of their safety while building the social capital necessary for long-term resilience and wellbeing.

Section A. Introduction

On 13 September 2025, RJ4ALL hosted the Mayor's Community Weekend event in London under the theme of *Community Safety: Experiences, Observations, Expectations*. The gathering created a space for dialogue, bringing together residents – particularly from the SE16 area – to share their personal experiences and perspectives on what community safety means to them. Through conversations, observations, and collective reflection, participants explored how issues of safety shape their daily lives, the challenges their communities face, and the aspirations they hold for a safer and more inclusive future.

This report aims to identify experiences, attitudes, and expectations towards community safety, based on data collected during the Mayor's Community Weekend event hosted by RJ4All. The event engaged participants in three key activities:

- Youth Wellbeing Circle: A focus group exploring the views of the younger generation on (community) safety.
- The Wish Tree: A brief survey activity inviting participants to share their wishes and suggestions regarding safety in their community.
- Informal Interviews and Participant Observations: Data collected through participant observations and five semi-structured interviews throughout the event.

A Speak Up! Circle was also held during the event, continuing to provide valuable insights into community perspectives[4]. However, this report mainly emphasises activities listed above, including the Youth Wellbeing Circle, the Wish Tree, participant observations, and informal interviews, bringing together participants of diverse ages and backgrounds to discuss their experiences and expectations around community safety. This **multi-method approach supports RJ4All's objectives of fostering community dialogue, understanding local safety concerns, and developing collaborative solutions**

[4] A separate report has been prepared for the Speak Up! Circle, please see: https://rj4all.org/restorative-justice-postcode/#impact

through restorative justice approaches. By creating spaces where community members can share experiences, exchange ideas, and collectively reflect on challenges, RJ4All aims to strengthen social cohesion and inform future interventions.

The report is organised into several sections. It begins with a brief review of literature and national data to provide context on community safety in the UK. This is followed by an overview of the methodology of the activities, including focus group (Youth Wellbeing Circle), survey responses (the Wish Tree), and informal interviews and participant observations. Next, we deep dive into insights from the Youth Wellbeing Circle, also highlighting how children's perspectives contrast with adults' perspectives on community safety and empowerment[5]. The role of the Restorative Justice Postcode Project in promoting community safety is then examined, with attention to how participants perceive RJ4All's activities and services, based on informal interviews and participant observations conducted on the day. Finally, the report concludes with key reflections, recommendations, and implications for future community initiatives and policy development.

By focusing on the qualitative data collected during the Mayor's Community Weekend event at RJ4All, this report mainly captures real-time community insights on safety concerns, expectations, and aspirations. These findings contribute directly to RJ4All's mission of empowering communities, fostering dialogue, and supporting evidence-based approaches to building safer, more inclusive neighbourhoods.

Section B. Community Safety in the UK: What We Know

Community safety is a multidisciplinary concept that encompasses crime prevention, social cohesion, and the creation of environments in which people feel secure and supported. According to the UK Home Office (2018), community safety refers to strategies and actions that reduce crime, anti-social behaviour, and the fear of crime while improving quality of life. This definition highlights both objective outcomes (reducing harm) and subjective perceptions (feeling safe). Scholars emphasise that community safety extends beyond traditional law enforcement. Hughes (2007) argues that it integrates public health, urban planning, education, and social services, reflecting a shift from reactive policing to proactive prevention. This broader view recognises the role of social determinants such as poverty, housing, and employment in shaping safety outcomes.

Restorative justice literature adds a relational dimension to the field of community safety. Zehr (2002) frames community safety as emerging from strong social networks, dialogue, and collective responsibility rather than reliance solely on punitive measures. Similarly, Gavrielides (2008) defines restorative justice as an ethos grounded in voluntary, honest dialogue among those affected by harm, aiming to repair relationships and foster coexistence. To some extent, this definition aligns

[5] Based on responses gathered from the Wish Tree and participant interviews, along with brief notes from the Speak Up! Circle.

with certain UK policies that aim to promote community participation and local responsibility for safety. However, strategies concerning community safety in the UK mainly emphasise measurable outcomes – such as crime rates and reductions in anti-social behaviour (ASB)– while restorative justice prioritises relational outcomes including trust, reconciliation, and shared accountability. Embedding a restorative ethos in community safety policy entails moving past mere consultation toward true co-design and the systematic incorporation of restorative practices—such as dialogue circles and mediation.

In the UK, 48% of the population considers crime and ASB to be the primary concern they have (UK Home Office, 2023). The statistics also show that, even though 78% of the entire population feels safe, ethnic minorities and those living in the most deprived areas are significantly less likely to feel safe. To elaborate, while 80% of white people feel safe, 63% of ethnic minorities feel the same way. Similarly, 89% of people living in the least deprived areas feel safe, compared to 62% of those living in the most deprived areas of the United Kingdom. Regarding the types of more concerning crimes, 60% of the population highlights ASB as their primary concern, followed by burglary/theft and stealing with 59%. Also, 34% of the population considered drug offences (such as drug possession or supply) as the main crime in the UK, while for 19% of the respondents, this was violent crime/crime against the person. In 2025, community safety in the UK presented a nuanced picture, with certain crime categories experiencing fluctuations. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2025), there were approximately 9.4 million incidents of headline crime in the year ending March 2025, marking a 7% increase compared to the previous year. Regarding ASB, the ONS reported that 35% of individuals experienced or witnessed ASB, maintaining the same rate as the previous year.

These statistics indicate that, for the majority of the population, crime and ASB constitute the primary concern, with crimes such as theft and drug-related offences being most prominent. Furthermore, a significant portion of the population perceives themselves as safe; however, this perception varies in relation to ethnicity and place of residence, with non-white individuals and residents of more deprived areas experiencing greater insecurity. As we will see below, these variables also appear as the main issues for the participants of the Mayor's Community Weekend event.

Section C. Methodology

This report synthesises insights from three data sources: (a) a focus group with children (The Youth Wellbeing Circle), (b) brief survey responses (the Wish Tree), and (c) informal interviews and participant observations conducted during the event. This section provides a detailed description of each method.

Methodological tool 1: Focus Group with Children – The Youth Wellbeing Circle

The focus group discussion (FGD) engaged a group of children under the age of 12, 5 girls and 2 boys, whose reflections provided important windows into how ideas of safety begin to take shape

from an early age. Their accounts also highlighted the interplay between personal resilience, relational support, and community environments in shaping a sense of security.

FGDs are a widely used qualitative research method in which a group of participants engages in a moderated discussion around a specific theme. This method enables participants not only to express their individual views but also to listen, respond, and reflect on one another's contributions. As such, FGDs often generate a collective narrative that captures shared perspectives, disagreements, and the nuances of lived experience. By using this method, the research explored the theme of community safety while allowing for the emergence of unexpected insights shaped by group dynamic (Robinson, 2019).

Circle Seating Arrangement - Importance in Justice and Power Frameworks: The FGD was adapted into a circle format, drawing inspiration from *restorative justice practices*. **The circle method places stronger emphasis on equality, inclusivity, and relational dialogue.** All participants and facilitators were seated in a circle, symbolising that each person's voice carried equal weight – including the facilitator. This was especially important when working with younger children, who may otherwise view the facilitator as a power figure and adjust their responses accordingly.

The use of a talking piece reinforced this ethos by ensuring that only the person holding it spoke, while others actively listened. This practice encouraged thoughtful sharing, prevented interruptions, and created space for quieter voices to be heard.

Participant Information: A total of seven children took part in the Youth Wellbeing Circle, aged under 12. Although the circle was originally intended for youth aged 12-25 years, turnout in this age group was lower than anticipated at the event. To address this, younger children who were present on the day were invited to participate. **This decision reflected RJ4All's ethos of inclusivity and the belief that children's voices are equally vital in shaping safer communities.** Their participation provided valuable insights into how perceptions of safety and unsafety begin to form at an early age.

Flow of Discussion: The session began with a brief rapport-building activity. The moderator invited participants to share something they had enjoyed during the Mayor's Community Weekend event, and to speak about their favourite animal. This warm-up activity helped ease participants into the discussion and created a friendly, trusting atmosphere.

Following this, ground rules for participation were co-created with the group. A talking piece was introduced as a metaphor and practical tool to ensure respectful turn-taking – only the person holding the talking piece was invited to speak, while others listened.

Once rapport and ground rules were established, the moderator introduced the central theme of the discussion: safety and community. The conversation was guided by eight open-ended questions, which provided a structure while leaving space for participants to elaborate freely:

1. What does the word *safety* mean to you?
2. What does *community* mean to you?
3. When do you feel safe?
4. Do you feel safe in your community?
5. What do you do to feel safe?
6. When do you feel unsafe?
7. Can you recall a time when you felt unsafe, and what you did to make yourself feel safe again?
8. Do you feel safe in your community? *(Repeated to encourage further reflection)*

These questions were framed in accessible language and designed to elicit both personal experiences and collective reflections. By the end of the circle, participants had engaged in a rich dialogue that highlighted not only their individual definitions and experiences of safety but also their shared aspirations for safer, more inclusive communities.

Methodological Tool 2: Survey Responses – The Wish Tree

A Wish Tree box was displayed at the event to engage community members in reflecting on issues of community safety. Participants were invited to write down their personal wishes, suggestions, or ideas on paper leaves, which were then put in a box attached to the tree centring the garden of the Community Centre. This method was chosen for its accessibility, interactive, and participatory nature, allowing participants of varying ages to contribute in a non-intrusive and engaging way. A total of **16 wishes** were collected, with responses ranging in length from 5 to 120 words, reflecting both brief impressions and more detailed suggestions regarding community safety.

Participants and Demographic Information: Demographic information was collected voluntarily to provide context for the responses, although some participants chose not to specify certain details. The gender distribution of participants was as follows: 11 female participants, 3 male participants, and 2 participants who did not specify their gender. Age distribution varied, with 1 respondent aged 10–18 years, 3 participants aged 19–25 years, 5 participants aged 26–40 years, 3 participants aged 41–65 years, and 4 participants who did not specify their age.

Specific data from participants located in the SE16 area was recorded where provided. Participants from SE16 included: an 11-year-old male, a 39-year-old female, a 64-year-old female, and an additional female participant whose age was not specified.

Methodological Tool 3: Informal Interviews and Participant Observation

Interviews and participant observation aimed to identify participants' perceptions of community safety, the Restorative Justice Postcode Project, and the Mayor's Community Weekend event.

Participant Observation: During the activities of the Mayor's Community Weekend event, participant observation was conducted to explore the attitudes, behaviours, and interactions of

attendees. Observations focused on how participants engaged with one another as well as with the RJ4All team, capturing both verbal and non-verbal cues that indicated levels of interest, engagement, and participation. This approach allowed gaining contextual insights into participants' experiences and social dynamics during the event, complementing data collected through more structured methods described above.

Interviews: Additionally, during the event, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews aimed to gather more in-depth reflections on participants' experiences, perceptions of the event, and thoughts about community engagement and local safety. The questions were open-ended to encourage participants to share their views freely, while allowing facilitators to probe for additional details where appropriate.

Participants: Five semi-structured interviews were conducted, divided into four female participants and one male participant, who agreed to give the interview voluntarily and anonymously. No further personal details were requested in order to follow the ethical considerations of the report.

Ethical Considerations

Across all methods, care was taken to ensure that participation was voluntary, informed, and respectful of privacy. For both interviews and survey activities, participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of their involvement, with oral consent obtained prior to interviews and no identifying information collected beyond optional demographic details. This approach ensured that individuals could engage freely while maintaining their anonymity and safety.

For the Youth Wellbeing Circle, additional safeguards were put in place given participants' age. Two trained facilitators supported the discussions, simplifying questions, and providing examples to encourage engagement, while a live notetaker captured contributions accurately. No audio or video recordings were made, in line with child protection principles, the sensitive nature of the discussions, and the absence of explicit parental consent for recording. Instead, detailed real-time notes preserved the integrity of participants' voices while prioritising their comfort and protection.

Together, these measures upheld ethical standards of consent, confidentiality, and child safeguarding, ensuring that participants across age groups could share their perspectives in a safe and respectful environment.

Analytical Approach

Data from multiple sources – including observational notes, interview transcripts, contributions from the Youth Wellbeing Circle, and survey responses – were collated and analysed qualitatively. This process focused on identifying recurring themes, patterns, and unique perspectives across different participant groups. Attention was given to experiences of Mayor's Community Weekend event, attitudes towards community engagement, and perceptions of safety, wellbeing, and community life. While some data sources involved small samples not statistically representative of the

wider population, together they provided rich insights into the concerns, aspirations, and lived experiences of community members, including children and young people, in relation to safety and engagement within their local environment.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged across the data collection methods. First, the Youth Wellbeing Circle involved children of young age, some of whom had relatively short attention spans, making it challenging to elicit detailed or nuanced responses. Consequently, their contributions often reflected immediate impressions of questions asked. Second, due to ethical considerations surrounding the involvement of minors, demographic information was not recorded in detail. While this safeguarded participants' privacy, it limited the ability to contextualise findings in relation to broader population characteristics and to make generalisable claims. Third, the survey responses were based on a small, self-selected sample, meaning that the views expressed cannot be assumed to represent the wider community. Similarly, observational notes and interviews captured experiences and perspectives in the context of specific events, which may not reflect attitudes or behaviours in other community settings.

Despite these limitations, the combination of methods generated valuable and multi-layered insights into community engagement, perceptions of safety, and young people's experiences of wellbeing. The findings highlight the importance of creating spaces where diverse groups – including children, young people, and adults – can articulate their concerns and aspirations. Future research should consider longitudinal and larger-scale studies, alongside more targeted demographic data collection, to deepen the understanding of how perceptions of safety and community engagement evolve across different ages and contexts.

Section D. Community Safety: What Do Children Think?

The Youth Wellbeing Circle generated rich insights into how young children understand and experience safety, vulnerability, and community. Children revealed a striking awareness of risks and protective factors in both physical and digital environments. This section provides a detailed analysis of insights gathered, arranged in five emerging themes: (a) participants' understanding of safety, (b) their sources of safety, (c) safety vulnerabilities and concerns, (d) adaptive strategies, and finally (e) understanding of community. These are detailed below.

Understanding of Safety

Participants' conceptualisations of *safety* consistently revolved around the notion of protection. When asked 'What does the word safety mean to you?' one participant responded simply: *"when you are protected."* This articulation reflects a core association between safety and being shielded from harm or danger – often described in the group as protection from "bad things".

The idea of protection was framed in multiple ways. For some participants, it implied the presence of a trusted figure, such as an adult or caregiver, who could step in to safeguard them. One participant explained, "*feel safe with my mum*", when asked 'When do you feel safe?'. According to Imanian (2014), children, much like adults, are concerned about their personal safety and security. They often rely on their parents to feel protected – as exemplified in participant responses. In addition, two participants highlighted friends as another source of safety, noting that they feel secure "*when I am with my family and friends".*

For others, protection was linked to the qualities of the environment itself – for example, being in a secure or familiar place where the risk of harm felt minimised. One participant said, "*I feel safe at my house*", in response to the same question. Together, these views suggest that participants' sense of safety emerged from external supports – relationships and spaces.

At the same time, a strand of the discussion revealed an emphasis on self-reliance in ensuring safety. Two participants highlighted the role of personal strength in feeling secure. One remarked: *"When you are the world's strongest person, if someone tries to rob you with a gun, then you would feel safe if you were strong."* Another added: *"Safe without someone protecting you as well."* These perspectives underscore a dual dynamic: while protection from others is valued, the ability to protect oneself independently was also seen as crucial by some.

These ideas are represented in the image below (Fig. 1), sourced directly from participant responses.

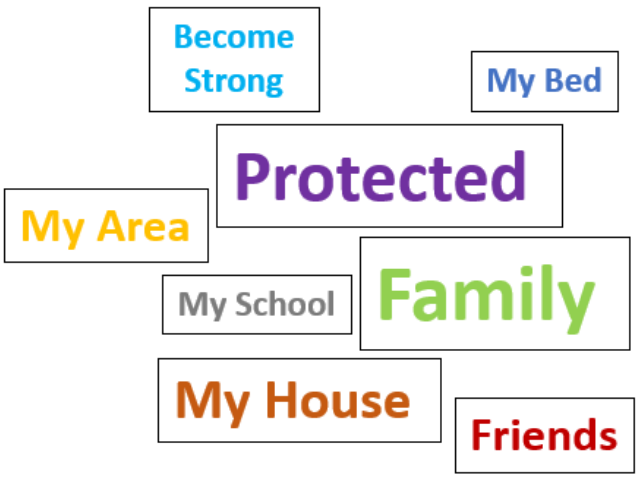

Figure 1. Associations with 'safety'

This blend of reliance on external protection and aspiration for self-protection suggests that participants' **sense of safety is situated within both interpersonal relationships and broader**

structural risks they perceive or encounter in daily life. These factors are recurring across themes of safety, elaborated in findings below.

Sources of Safety

Across participants' responses, family consistently emerged as the primary source of safety for children. This was expressed most clearly when two participants answered the question 'When do you feel safe?' by saying, *"…protected by my family".* The presence of trusted relationships, particularly with close family members, was repeatedly cited as a protective factor that created a sense of comfort and security.

For several participants, safety was not only tied to *people* but also to the spaces associated with them. One participant responded, *"I feel safe…in my area"* – linking a sense of security both to the physical environment of the home and neighbourhood, and to the emotional reassurance of maternal presence[6]. Similarly, other participants emphasised the home environment as a safe physical space. This was sometimes directly connected to family presence and sometimes to the *physical boundaries of the house itself*. One participant described: *"I feel safe in my bed because no one can get in the house",* highlighting both the protective role of the home and an underlying fear of intrusion by outsiders.

Although home and family were dominant themes, safety was also associated with institutional settings. One participant, when asked 'Do you feel safe in your community?' responded, *"At school and at my house, I do."* Here, school joined the home as a secure site – likely reflecting its role as a structured environment with familiar figures.

Taken together, these responses further suggest that for participants, safety is rooted in proximity to trusted caregivers and familiar environments, as also noted in the finding above. Family provides the relational reassurance of being looked after, while the home (and to some extent, school) offers a physical space where external threats are perceived as less likely to penetrate. In other words, family bonds and the home function as a secure base – a foundation from which children and young people make sense of safety in the wider community.

González-Carrasco, Bedin, and Casas (2023) emphasise that a sense of safety across key environments – such as home, school, and the neighbourhood – is fundamental to children's subjective wellbeing. This multidimensional sense of security allows children to explore, learn, and engage confidently in their daily lives. The importance of these environments is illustrated in participants' accounts: they frequently express feeling safe and protected within the home and at

[6] As noted in the section above: One participant explained "*feel safe with my mum*" when asked 'When do you feel safe?'

school, yet they are also aware of potential dangers that may exist outside these familiar spaces – explored next.

Safety Vulnerabilities and Concerns

While participants identified clear sources of safety, they also articulated several contexts and conditions in which they felt unsafe. These vulnerabilities highlight both personal and environmental dimensions of risk.

1. Being Alone: Feelings of unsafety were frequently associated with being alone, particularly within the home. One participant explained that they felt unsafe *"when I am home alone."* This response reflects the contrast between safety derived from family presence and the vulnerability experienced in its absence. The home, while generally considered a protective environment, became a site of fear when familiar protection was removed.

2. Unfamiliar people: Strangers, especially those perceived as threatening, were another major source of insecurity. For example, one participant said they felt unsafe *"when someone I don't know is chasing me."* Such descriptions point to an underlying fear of being pursued, harassed, or attacked by unknown individuals within the local area.

3. Being outside the immediate community and in isolated spaces: A third recurring theme was discomfort in spaces beyond the participants' immediate community, or in isolated and quiet areas. One participant remarked, *"When I'm far away from my community,"* while another said they felt unsafe *"when it is really quiet, alley off the main street."* Similarly, a participant reflected: *"Sometimes [I feel unsafe in my community], because a man was chasing us."* These accounts suggest that safety was fragile and conditional, often undermined by exposure to strangers or environments where surveillance and support from trusted others were absent. This finding is further supported by Enskar, Isma, and Ramgard (2021), who observed that 9-year-old children tend to perceive bright and aesthetically pleasing places as safe, whereas quiet and dark environments are associated with a heightened sense of risk.

Taken together, these narratives indicate **mixed and ambivalent feelings about community safety.** Participants described feeling secure at times, but this security was fragile – qualified by "sometimes" and contingent upon context. Fear of strangers, the threat of being chased, and anxieties about armed robbery or other forms of street crime were woven through these accounts. According to Home Office (2023), 48% of the UK population identifies crime and anti-social behaviour as their primary concern, as highlighted above. This worry is shared by children as well, who often expressed fears about becoming victims of crime or finding themselves in crime-related situations during the focus group.

Ultimately, vulnerabilities were most pronounced outside the protective spheres of family and home, especially in situations of isolation or exposure to unfamiliar others. This highlights how

participants' sense of safety was relational and place-based – strengthened by proximity to familiar people and environments, but weakened in their absence.

Adaptive strategies

In addition to describing experiences of safety and vulnerability, two participants also highlighted some strategies they use to manage feelings of unsafety. Two distinct types of strategies emerged from their responses:

1. Online safety practices: One participant described adopting protective measures in digital spaces, noting: *"Online I use a different name."* This response demonstrates some awareness of risks associated with online exposure and the proactive use of identity-masking as a means of minimising harm.

2. Seeking comfort and support from family: Another participant recounted a personal experience of fear – *"Scary dream and my mum comforted me"*, when asked to 'describe a time you felt unsafe and what you did to make yourself feel safe again' – illustrating reliance on family members, particularly caregivers, as a strategy for coping with distress. Imanian (2014) also found that children often take refuge in asking parents for security when they feel anxious or unsafe.

Together, these examples show that participants' adaptive strategies range from individual protective behaviours (managing digital risks) to relational coping mechanisms (seeking support from family). The duality of these strategies underscores how safety for young people is both a personal responsibility and a collective experience, heavily reliant on family presence and guidance.

Understanding of Community

When asked 'What does community mean to you?', participants' responses were less directly linked to safety and instead underlined togetherness and collective activity.

- One participant defined community as: *"When lots of people [are] together at an event,"* suggesting an understanding of community as gatherings, celebrations, or shared spaces of participation.

- Another described it as: *"It's a center where events happen and we help each other,"* which not only emphasises the importance of communal spaces but also highlights reciprocity and mutual support as defining features of community life.

These responses position ***community* as a social and relational concept**, grounded in connection, cooperation, and shared experiences within the context of our Community Centre as well. Importantly, **understanding of community remains conceptually distinct from participants' reflections on safety**. While safety discussions centered on protection, family, and vulnerabilities,

responses to questions about community spoke instead to the community centre and events. This suggests that community and safety are not automatically intertwined concepts for participants of a young age.

Insight Implications

The findings from the Youth Wellbeing Circle highlight that children's sense of safety is highly practical and experience-based, grounded in their everyday physical environments – most notably their homes, schools, and the streets of their communities. Safety and unsafety were described through concrete situations (e.g. being alone at home, being chased by strangers, feeling secure with family). This suggests that children's understandings of safety are shaped by direct experiences and observations in their immediate surroundings.

The responses point toward a combination of protective factors and risk factors. **Protective factors** include strong family relationships, parental presence, and the symbolic and practical protection offered by the home environment. Schools also emerged as secondary safe spaces, reinforcing the role of structured, supervised institutions in creating a sense of security.

Risk factors include community-level safety concerns such as the presence of strangers, fear of being chased, robbery, or other street crimes. Feelings of unsafety were amplified in situations of isolation, in unfamiliar and quiet areas.

In sum, the circle revealed that children's sense of safety is relational, contextual, and experience-driven. Interventions that build on protective factors (family, home, school) while addressing risk factors (unsafe community spaces, threats from strangers, digital risks) can more effectively support children in feeling safe both inside and outside their immediate environments.

Comparing Young People's and Adults' Views on Community Safety

In this section, we utilise the findings from this report (based on the Youth Wellbeing Circle, Wish Tree and participant observations, as well as informal interviews), and draw briefly on insights from the Speak Up! Circle[7] to examine how children's perceptions of safety differ from those of adults, with the aim of fostering a more inclusive and community-based understanding of what safety means across generations.

Table 1. Children vs. adult views on community safety

	Children	Adults
Understanding of safety	• Concrete: Safety means 'when you are protected' from 'bad	• A state of mental ease: Safety means absence of being 'on edge'

[7] A separate report has been prepared for the Speak Up! Circle, please see: https://rj4all.org/restorative-justice-postcode/#impact

	Children	Adults
	things' ● Based on direct, tangible and present situations, e.g. 'man chasing us down a street'	● Intersectional and systemic: Safety experiences differ based on one's identity (gender, race, class)
Sources of safety	● Family centred: Parents and family members are primary protectors ● Place-based: Home as ultimate safe space, school as secondary	● Community centred: Feeling secure walking on the streets, and also knowing some people ● Institutional: Reassurance from work of police, council, charities
Safety risks and concerns	● Personal and immediate: Being alone at home, from strangers	● Structural issues: Drug use in the neighbourhood, phone snatching, social housing issues with inadequate support services
Coping strategies	● Seeking comfort from family	● Demand systemic solutions: More visible police presence, better funding for public services ● Community organising: Forums, circles, collective action

While there are aligning views of children and adults concerning community safety (such as need for well-lit and crime-free neighbourhoods), the co-existing contrasts drawn above (Table 1) show that effective community safety must integrate both perspectives in a holistic way:

- Children offer the emotional and experiential foundation: what safety feels like, and the building blocks of trust – family, home, and relationships.
- Adults highlight the structural and strategic framework: the systems, policies, and resources needed to secure those foundations.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that community safety initiatives are most effective when they address **children's immediate, lived experiences** alongside the **structural changes adults advocate for**. According to the UK Home Office (2018), community safety encompasses strategies and actions aimed at reducing crime, anti-social behaviour, and the fear of crime, while also enhancing overall quality of life. This definition underscores both objective outcomes (such as reducing harm) and subjective perceptions (such as feeling safe), both of which are central to the concept of community safety for children and adults alike.

Section F: Community Safety and Restorative Justice Postcode Project

This section discusses community safety in the framework of the Restorative Justice Postcode Project by RJ4All, drawing from survey responses based on the Wish Tree, interviews held with event participants as well as participant observations. The Restorative Justice Postcode Project aims to establish the world's first restorative justice postcode (SE16), creating a new social contract between communities and governments. In this sense, one of the main pillars of the project is "*empowering local communities to take part in decisions affecting their lives and ensuring service delivery is community-led through power-sharing and decision-making*" (Restorative Justice for All, 2024). This principle underscores a commitment to participatory governance and recognises that sustainable solutions to social challenges require the direct involvement of those most affected. Within this framework, the work of RJ4All has been particularly significant. One illustrative example of this work was demonstrated during the Mayor's Community Weekend event, where, through interviews and participant observations, it was possible to identify that the event participants advocate for a community-oriented approach in addressing safety-related issues.

Views on Community Safety

Firstly, through the interviews, participants of the event highlighted several factors that contribute to feelings of insecurity in their communities. One female participant expressed that her main concern was street crime, especially phone theft. Similarly, another female participant indicated that she feels particularly vulnerable to theft in public spaces, which weakens her confidence in daily safety. Also, this participant expressed her concern about gender-based violence. Lastly, one male participant expressed that his primary concern was the progressively hostile attitude towards migrants. In this way, the interviews revealed that the main concerns of the participants were theft and violent activities directed against groups such as women and migrants.

Secondly, through the data collected using the Wish Tree, many participants expressed desires for collaborative, community-based solutions. For example, a 22-year-old woman wrote that she feels "*safest in a community where neighbours know each other and are held accountable by their social circle, so (…) community knows and respects each other human to human*." Similarly, a 28-year-old man wished that "*people feel confident and comfortable to fix community problems collaboratively.*" A 25-year-old woman stood out for directly challenging the top-down, authoritarian approaches often taken by the state: "*Authority that is legitimate and limited. Not using authority in oppressive manners. Listening to the people and the community. Not more police, more social workers*." Additionally, participants noted that feelings of security vary according to the social and economic background of the population. As one 40-year-old female participant indicated in relation to her wish for her community to be safe: "*for everyone regardless of their age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity to feel safe and the concept of diversity creating a sense of safety in itself*". These participants clearly favoured community-based and restorative solutions that take special account of the feelings and perceptions of disadvantaged populations.

The Role of RJ4All in the Construction of "Community"

During the Mayor's Community Weekend event, using the participant observation method, it was observable how the role of RJ4All influences community dynamics among the participants, through interactions as well as the services and activities implemented at the Community Centre. Firstly, trusting and collaborative relationships were identified between community members and RJ4ALL staff. From the start, it was evident that the Centre fosters an environment of friendliness and mutual respect. Simple interactions – such as a female service user and an RJ4All member chatting about clothes and plants, joking together, and even cleaning the pavement side by side – illustrated the informal yet strong connections within the community. Another moment of comfort and ease emerged when a female service user humorously declined her photo to be taken, explaining that she had not brought any lipstick. These small but meaningful exchanges reflect the underlying trust and sense of belonging that the Centre cultivates.

This welcoming atmosphere is further reinforced by the Centre's strong commitment to inclusivity and accessibility. When a newcomer arrived to explore the space, an RJ4All member of staff took the time to show her the shared areas and explained how she could use them, reflecting a supportive approach.

Children were actively engaged in recreational activities, allowing parents to feel confident about leaving them in a safe and nurturing environment. For parents, the Centre provided not only a secure place for their children but also an opportunity to rest, relax, and connect with the wider community. Spontaneous social interactions, such as participants playing music together on a guitar and harmonica, created informal opportunities for shared enjoyment and collaboration. Alongside these recreational activities, the Centre also served as a venue for reflection and discussion. During the event, two participants engaged in a conversation about political issues, including migration and increasing violence from certain political sectors, expressing concern over the lack of societal response to these challenges. These exchanges reveal that the Centre functions as more than just a recreational space; it also fosters critical dialogue and engagement with broader social issues.

Interestingly, during interviews, when participants were asked about the Restorative Justice Postcode Project, most were unfamiliar with its conceptual framework. However, they were highly aware of the tangible activities it facilitates – such as the community refrigerator, shared spaces like the gym and kitchen, and regular events, especially the circles. This suggests that even when abstract understanding of restorative justice is limited, practical engagement and visible actions can play a powerful role in building trust, understanding, and cohesion (Zehr, 2002). These observations align closely with broader theories of restorative justice and social cohesion. Restorative justice emphasises repairing harm through dialogue, inclusion, and shared responsibility rather than relying solely on punitive measures (Zehr, 2002). The Centre embodies these principles by creating opportunities for collaboration, conversation, and mutual support. Additionally, the interactions observed reflect the concept of social capital, where networks of trust and mutual assistance strengthen community

resilience (Putnam, 2000). By combining recreational activities, practical engagement, and spaces for dialogue, the Centre fosters both bonding social capital – connections among similar individuals – and bridging social capital – connections across diverse groups – both essential for a connected and resilient community.

Overall, the Community Centre and the role of RJ4All emerge as a vital hub of trust, collaboration, and inclusivity in community safety – everyday interactions – whether cleaning, joking, playing music, or sharing space – reinforce social bonds. At the same time, the Community Centre's support for discussion and critical reflection highlights its role as a space for active civic engagement. Through its combination of practical action and opportunities for dialogue, the Community Centre effectively embodies the principles of restorative justice, promoting a cohesive, engaged, and resilient community.

Perceptions of the Mayor's Community Weekend Event

The perceptions of participants regarding the Mayor's Community Weekend event were also identified in the interviews and participant observations. These findings complement and reinforce the earlier observations, highlighting the importance of inclusive, participatory spaces in fostering community cohesion and safety. For example, one interviewed female participant perceived the event as a space that allowed her not only to enjoy recreational activities but also to express their concerns and demands regarding community safety. Additionally, it was observed that many male and female adults actively participated in the circle discussions. One interviewed female participant perceived these spaces as tools for voicing opinions and contributing to solutions for local safety challenges. This aligns with the previous analysis, where the Community Centre provided opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and critical discussion, illustrating how informal and structured interactions both contribute to building trust and social capital.

The inclusion of activities for children was consistently highlighted as a key strength of the event. One interviewed female participant expressed gratitude for the availability of children's activities, which allowed her to attend the event with confidence that her children would be safe. This mirrors the observations at the Community Centre, where parents felt secure leaving their children in a nurturing environment while engaging in other activities. Both contexts demonstrate the dual role of these community spaces: they serve recreational and restorative functions while simultaneously promoting safety and inclusivity for the entire family.

Two interviewed female participants emphasised the self-organising nature of the event, noting that the community itself, rather than governmental authorities, was taking responsibility for safety, particularly regarding youth and children. This sentiment resonates with the findings from the previous section, where participants actively engaged in shared activities, dialogue, and support networks. This sense of ownership and active participation reinforce community cohesion and reflect

the principles of restorative justice, which emphasise collective responsibility, dialogue, and collaboration to address harm and build safer communities (Zehr, 2002).

Finally, one male and one female participant expressed appreciation for the event's open nature, which reinforced its inclusive and accessible character. The ability for all community members to attend, engage, and participate mirrors the open and participatory ethos of the Community Centre, where new visitors are welcomed, activities are shared, and informal interactions – such as playing music, joking, and collaborative tasks – build trust and connectedness. The Mayor's Community Weekend event demonstrated how structured but informally presented activities for engagement can cultivate social capital, strengthen networks of support, and enhance the community's collective capacity to promote safety and wellbeing.

In sum, during the Mayor's Community Weekend event, there was participatory engagement, inclusive spaces, and tangible actions that fostered trust, collaboration, and resilience. This demonstrates that **community safety and cohesion are most effectively developed when community members are empowered to express their needs, participate in decision-making, and create shared experiences that strengthen interpersonal and collective bonds.**

Section G. Conclusion

The findings of this report show that **community safety is fundamentally relational, experiential, and place-based.** Both children and adults consistently linked safety to the presence of trusted people and to familiar, welcoming environments, while also highlighting differences in the way they conceptualise and understand safety (family and place-based for children; systemic and institutional for adults). Close and trusted relationships – both within one's family and the community at large, emerged as the strongest protective factor across age groups. Homes, schools, and well-known community spaces were described as safe havens that provide both emotional reassurance and physical protection.

Conversely, safety was seen as fragile and conditional when individuals were alone, exposed to strangers, or in unfamiliar or poorly monitored public spaces. These patterns emphasise that safety cannot be understood only through crime statistics or policing strategies; it is also about feeling connected, seen, and supported within one's neighbourhood.

Regarding the participants, children's contributions revealed a practical, experience-driven understanding of safety that develops early in life. Their responses focused on concrete situations such as being with parents, being alone at home, encountering strangers, or navigating unfamiliar streets. Even at a young age, some children recognised risks in digital spaces, such as identity exposure online, and described simple but intentional coping strategies like using aliases or seeking parental comfort when frightened. This highlights how children's sense of security is built through lived experiences in their immediate surroundings, as well as the crucial role of caregivers and safe

community spaces in helping them manage fear and uncertainty. On the other hand, adults described broader and more systemic concerns about safety, often shaped by social, economic, and cultural contexts[8]. Street crime, especially phone theft, was cited as a daily vulnerability that undermines confidence in public spaces. Gender-based violence emerged as a significant worry, reflecting persistent safety inequalities for women and girls. Adults also highlighted the impact of drugs on young people and the link between substance misuse and criminal activity, as well as tensions related to migration, cultural diversity, and discrimination. Some expressed frustration with local authorities and councils, noting ineffective responses to neighbour conflicts or homelessness. Hence, their understanding of community safety was rooted in intersectional and systemic understanding of everyday community interactions.

A clear message emerged: many residents want less top-down control and more collaborative, community-led approaches to safety, where neighbours know and support each other and where interventions focus on prevention, inclusion, and social wellbeing rather than punitive measures[9]. Within this context, RJ4All and its Community Centre emerged as a key asset in building safety and cohesion. Even when participants were unfamiliar with the abstract concept of *restorative justice*, they valued the Centre's tangible actions and inclusive environment. Practical resources such as the community fridge, gym and kitchen, and regular dialogue circles helped create a sense of belonging and trust. Informal, everyday interactions – from chatting and joking to playing music, cleaning shared spaces, or helping newcomers feel welcome – strengthened both bonding and bridging social capital. The Centre also provided safe spaces for critical dialogue about local challenges, enabling residents to explore complex issues such as migration, inequality, and political tensions in an atmosphere of respect and mutual learning. These practices embody restorative justice principles by prioritising relationship building, shared responsibility, and repairing harm through conversation and cooperation.

The Mayor's Community Weekend event itself illustrated how inclusive, participatory events can strengthen community cohesion and collective resilience. Attendees appreciated the event's open, welcoming structure, where families could participate together, children were safely engaged in activities, and adults could share their experiences and concerns without fear of judgment or exclusion. The event created recreation opportunities, but also a context for meaningful dialogue about safety issues, allowing residents to voice their perspectives and contribute to potential solutions. Many participants noted that the event felt community-driven rather than imposed by authorities, reinforcing a sense of ownership and empowerment. This is significant, as research and

[8] Based on insights drawn from the Wish Tree, participant observations, informal interviews, as well as the Speak Up! Circle.
[9] Based on insights from the Youth Wellbeing Circle, Wish Tree, participant observations, and interviews, as well as from the Speak Up! Circle.

practice both show that when communities feel ownership over safety initiatives, trust grows and solutions become more sustainable.

These insights point to several important implications for policy and practice. First, **efforts to improve safety should invest in and strengthen the protective factors already valued by residents**: strong family networks, inclusive community spaces, and safe, well-maintained public areas. Second, **strategies must address the key risk factors identified** – including unsafe public spaces, and women's safety. Third, and most importantly, **safety strategies should shift from a policing-first model toward empowerment, prevention, and collaboration**. Residents expressed a desire for legitimate and non-oppressive forms of authority, more social workers and community-led solutions, and meaningful opportunities to shape local decision-making. Embedding restorative justice principles – dialogue, relationship repair, and collective accountability – into local safety policies can help build trust and resilience across diverse groups.

Overall, the Mayor's Community Weekend event and the ongoing work of RJ4All demonstrate that safety is built not simply through enforcement, but through belonging, inclusion, and shared responsibility. When residents are given space to speak, collaborate, and co-create solutions, they become more confident, connected, and empowered to contribute to safety dialogues and action. By combining practical support with dialogue, restorative justice approaches can help communities move beyond fear and fragmentation toward a future where safety is collective, empowering, and inclusive.

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