



Empire Fighting Chance in Bristol: An Example of an Interrelated Approach



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“(...) there are manifold ways to address violence. More-effective policing—a typical first response—has proven a necessary but insufficient intervention to reduce different types of violence. . . . Many local governments do not have their own police force but are equipped with various policy instruments for social prevention, such as public health, housing, sports, culture, and urban infrastructure. . . . Incorporating preventive measures, investing in communities, and kick-starting profound cultural or social transformations should also be among local governments’ priorities.”¹

Research Team

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Introduction and Intervention Overview

National media coverage in England often depicts Bristol as one of the most violent places in the country. Particularly, the communities of Easton and St. Pauls seem to be the two neighborhoods currently most affected by lethal and non-lethal serious incidents of violence.³ Empire Fighting Chance (EFC)—a boxing gym positioned between Easton and St. Pauls—was founded in this context. EFC provides alternatives to youth, helping to reduce engagement in violent behavior and providing a broader perspective than is offered through law enforcement only responses. EFC began in 2006, arising from the Empire Amateur Boxing Club. It aims at breaking the cycles of violence among youth within Bristol’s communities⁴ by combining no-contact boxing with psychologically informed support, thus creating the necessary support for youth to exit cycles of violence. Although mentoring youth is the main goal, through the relationships formed in the gym, EFC staff are often made aware of ongoing and forthcoming disputes and help to negotiate peaceful settlements. Beginning in 2023, EFC recruited a “violence interrupter” to reach more individuals directly involved and to professionalize the conflict management aspect of the program. As a result, EFC in Bristol has been standing out as an institution for conflict resolution and de-escalation of violence. The program has now expanded throughout the United Kingdom, with over 60 boxing clubs and other organizations from across the country delivering its work in their local area.

1 Hernán Flom, *Guiding Principles and Inspiring Actions: Operationalizing the Resolution to Reduce Urban Violence* (Peace in Our Cities, 2022), 13, <https://stanleycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Guiding-Principles-Inspiring-Actions-PiOC.pdf>.

2 Flavia Carbonari contributed with a review of the note.

3 Violence seems to happen both as inter-group community rivalry and also as intra-community violence, as a separate phenomenon.

4 “Who We Are,” Empire Fighting Chance, accessed December 10, 2014, <https://empirefightingchance.org/who-we-are/>.

Background and Rationale

In Bristol, group identity is linked to community post-codes, with groups like the “16s” and “24s.” Located between Easton and St. Pauls communities, which are divided by a highway, EFC is uniquely positioned as it serves both areas. Place-based divisions in the city are tied to a legacy of significant income inequality as well as Bristol’s history as one of the main port cities engaged in the transatlantic trade of enslaved people.⁵ Although Easton and St. Pauls were damaged during the “blitz” World War II bombing campaign, post-war reconstruction resources were targeted to richer post-codes reinforcing place-based inequalities. Also after WWII, Bristol became a main destination for migrants from the Empire Windrush, with many of those from Caribbean countries in the British Commonwealth never given U.K. citizenship. Their unclear migratory status contributed to systemic marginalization and the development of isolated communities.⁶ Confidence between these communities and authorities was also affected by years of racially discriminatory practices from state institutions, reinforcing an overall sense of intergenerational distrust.

Group violence tied to territories in Easton and St. Pauls primarily affects youth and is not exceptionally profitable. Although organized, the type of group violence impacts those most directly involved, their loved ones, and the immediate neighborhood most of all and does not pose a fundamental threat to state authority.⁷ Youth are most heavily impacted by retributory cycles of knife violence. Newspapers reported, on average, an incident involving a knife more than once a week during 2023, with several resulting in deaths.⁸ Official data show the overall crime rate in Bristol was 119 per 1,000 people in 2023, higher than the 113.2 registered the previous year, and with sexual offences representing the most common type of crime (19,646 reported in 2023).⁹ Official figures of non-lethal but serious incidents of violence are probably underestimated due to the youth’s lack of trust in authorities. People involved in knife or gun-related violence often refuse to seek professional medical care for fear that healthcare providers will call the police if they suspect the injury is violence related.¹⁰

In this context, Empire Fighting Chance aims to disrupt the cycles of violence among

5 Hernán Flom and Alfredo Malaret, *Lessons from Effective Offices of Violence Prevention* (Peace in Our Cities, 2024), <https://s42831.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/03/Report-Lessons-from-Effective-Offices-of-Violence-Prevention.pdf>

6 Deportations of the Windrush generation, starting in 2012, continued to erode confidence between these communities and authorities.

7 Flom and Malaret, *Lessons from Effective Offices of Violence Prevention*.

8 Bea Swallow and Dan Ayers, “Knife Crime in Bristol: Your Questions Answered,” *BBC News*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-68478476>; Tristan Cork, “A Year of Tragedy—The 2023 Knife Crime Epidemic in Bristol,” *BristolLive*, December 23, 2023, <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/year-tragedy-2023-knife-crime-8993015>.

9 National Health Service, *Bristol: JSNA Health and Wellbeing Profile, 2024/2025*, May 2024, [https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/1531-jsna-2021-crime-updated-june-2021/file#:~:text=The%20total%20recorded%20crime%20rate,the%20previous%20year%20\(113.2\).&text=21.4%25%20of%20Bristol%20residents%20said,the%20previous%20year%20\(17.4%25\)](https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/1531-jsna-2021-crime-updated-june-2021/file#:~:text=The%20total%20recorded%20crime%20rate,the%20previous%20year%20(113.2).&text=21.4%25%20of%20Bristol%20residents%20said,the%20previous%20year%20(17.4%25)).

10 Flom and Malaret, *Lessons from Effective Offices of Violence Prevention*.

Bristol’s youth population with a strategy focused on preventing emerging conflicts through dialogue and negotiation, providing youth with needed mentorship and support to disrupt individual patterns of violence.

Strategic Vision to Reduce the Cycle of Violence Among Youth - *The What*

Empire Fighting Chance promotes an alternative way of working with young people experiencing disadvantage that recognizes their traumas and personal histories.¹¹ To encourage youth to make positive changes in their lives, EFC combines non-contact boxing with psychologically informed support. The aim of EFC is to deliver programs that combine boxing and psychological support, to train others so they can deliver the work to their local communities, and to fight for systemic change that improves lives. EFC offers pathways to disrupt cycles of violence by helping youth develop self-regulation to manage emotions and behavior. EFC also offers a support network that helps to provide a positive outlook for the future, allowing youth to engage better with education and advance into employment.

Intervention Design With Sports Combined With Psychological Support and Mentorship - *The How*

Boxing offers a unique opportunity to reach youth in Bristol as it provides both “street credibility” and places for relationship building and mentorship.¹² For young people, the platform of boxing can break the stigma associated with professionalized or traditional assistance services, opening an opportunity for receiving support without feeling ashamed of needing help. EFC also provides a place for relationships, where people can enter the gym and feel unconditional support. Importantly, the sport was easily adapted to weave in evidence-based psychological tools, such as acceptance-commitment therapy,¹³ and techniques to improve negative thinking or destructive behaviors. EFC provides both an outlet and emotional and psychosocial support through boxing.

EFC focuses on four main programs to support youth:

- **Box Champions:** EFC’s flagship program features a coach mentoring young people to achieve their goals during boxing sessions. Coaches draw upon session plans that use boxing drills, games, and metaphors to share Empire’s psychological principles for healthy thinking and positive action.
- **Box Therapy:** Boxing is combined with a therapeutic intervention provided by a therapist during the training sessions. Therapists use boxing to connect young

11 Empire Fighting Chance, *Stepping Up our Fight: Our Impact in 2023*, accessed December 10, 2024, <https://empirefightingchance.org/media/caoilwzi/empire-fighting-chance-impact-report-2023.pdf>.

12 “Why Boxing,” Empire Fighting Chance, accessed December 10, 2014, <https://empirefightingchance.org/what-we-do/why-boxing/>.

13 Mark B. Powers, M. B. Zum Vorde Sive Vording, and Paul M. G. Emmelkamp, “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 78, no. 2 (2009): 73–80, <https://doi.org/10.1159/000190790>.

people with rich psychological knowledge and help them use it to improve their lives.

- **Box Careers:** Boxing is combined with support to shift mindsets, and access to career opportunities by a coach who provides support during training.
- **Box Juniors:** Regular boxing sessions, open to all young people, give alumni of EFC programs the opportunity to continue their growth.

Implementation Experience: *The Who*

EFC targets people 8 to 25 years old, who are provided holistic support by trained professionals. These professionals are also in and from the community where they teach, ensuring physical presence, legitimacy, and recognized leadership. Classes meet high-quality boxing training standards to ensure they are attractive to young people, who are also taught the mental and physical health benefits of boxing. In addition to Bristol, EFC operates 15 direct delivery sites outside the city and has partnerships with 32 boxing clubs, 15 youth organizations, and 13 therapeutic organizations, all of which are implementing their methodologies across the United Kingdom.

Initial Impact and Results

With its expansion, EFC methods reached almost 10,000 young people in 2023, including with partner gyms and organizations, double the number in the previous year. An evaluation¹⁴ in 2023 showed significant self-reported improvement by the youth benefited through the different activities provided by the program, including:

- **Box Champions** (2,798 youth trained in 2023): 78% were more confident; 74% felt in control of their life; 80% reported they stopped getting in trouble; 72% were more positive about their futures; 83% of parents said EFC had made a positive impact on their children.
- **Box therapy** (338 youth trained in 2023): 95% felt safe, 81% improved mental well-being, 97% felt heard, understood, and respected; 87% of parents would recommend the program.
- **Box careers:** 150 individuals earned one or more qualifications, 75 progressed into employment, training, or further education.

In 2023, EFC launched a program to support those at high risk by connecting them with violence interrupter mentors in school settings. Initial results include 26 young people participating in the 12-week intensive box mentorship training program, six taking part in box careers, and 15 regularly attending sessions. This work also interrupted retaliatory cycles of violence around a recent murder, with none of the attendees getting involved in further violence.

Lessons Learned and Observations for Replication

After decades of work with at-risk youth and seeing the EFC program develop in other

14 Empire Fighting Chance, *Stepping Up our Fight*.

territories beyond Bristol, a few lessons emerge. First, it is crucial to have focused interventions of this type, targeted at disadvantaged youth, being created and developed in the community and led by credible and legitimate messengers at that location. This step ensures sustainability of the work and connection to the communities it serves, allowing for continuous improvement. Another lesson is that having an authentic and credible program that provides high-quality training and professional knowledge of psychology is crucial. Finally, a focus on building relationships with youth and families is needed, making the program a physically and emotionally safe space for the community.

Conclusion

Evidence has shown that interventions targeted at high-risk groups, such as disadvantaged youth, have great potential to break cycles of and prevent continuous violence.¹⁵ The combination of sports with which various youth in communities can identify, with the right psychosocial and emotional learning tools, such as those provided by EFC, can provide the opportunities for life transformation of young people, their families, and entire communities.

15 Flom, *Guiding Principles*.