Supporting families who experience trauma & overwhelm: learnings from the Greentown Programme

FASN Conference on "Trauma in the Community" 19 September 2024

Carrickdale Hotel, Dundalk, Co. Louth

Jane Mulcahy, PhD

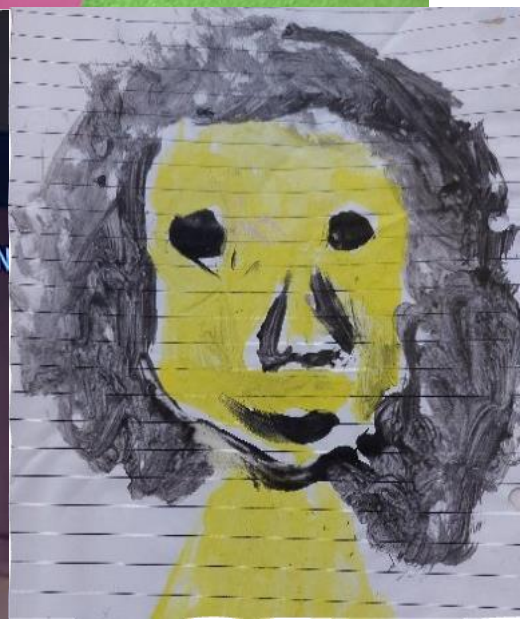
Greentown Team: Sean Redmond (PI), Jane Mulcahy & Catherine Naughton

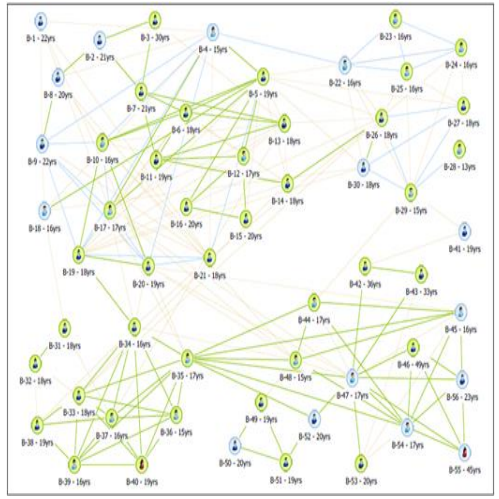
RESEARCH EVIDENCE INTO POLICY PROGRAMMES AND PRACTICE

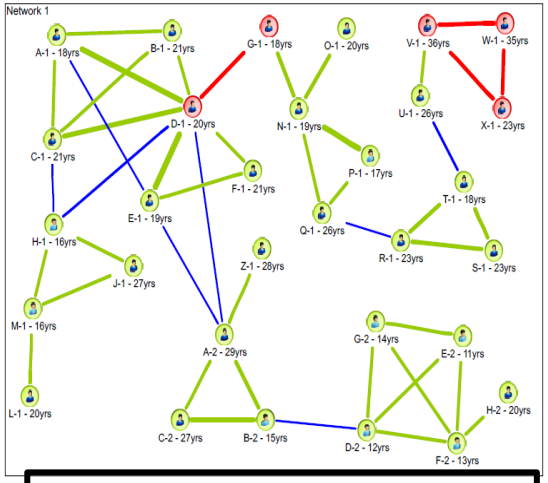
YOUTH CRIME

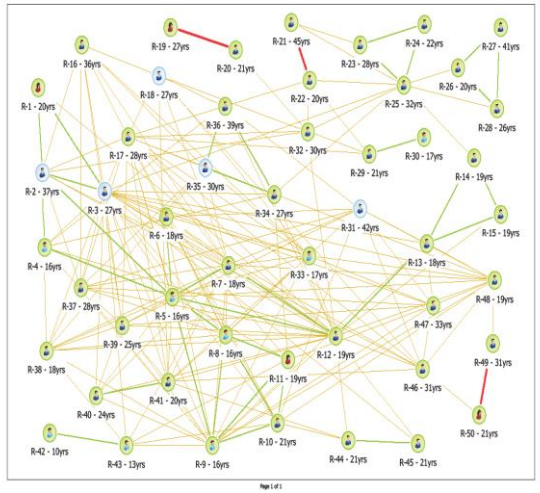
Who am I?

- A mom of two beautiful, smart, funny, frustrating children
- A wife
- A daughter
- A sister
- A friend
- A colleague
- A woman with a PhD in Law (which is very focused on trauma)
- Developer of an eight session course on “Childhood Trauma, Consequences and Essential Responses”
- A Research Fellow in Youth Justice at University of Limerick, working on the **Greentown Programme**
- An activist
- A podcaster - youtube.com/c/JaneMulcahy
- A former theatre-maker (director, actor, playwright)
- A budding Design Thinker
- A member of the Policing Authority
- A Movement Medicine & Holotropic Breathwork enthusiast
- A yoga fanatic
- ***An energetic field*** (Tolle, Hübl, Scharmer)

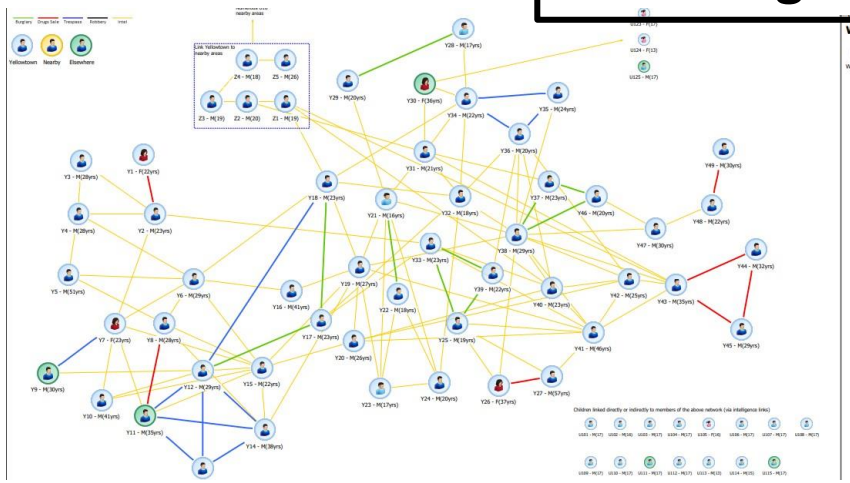


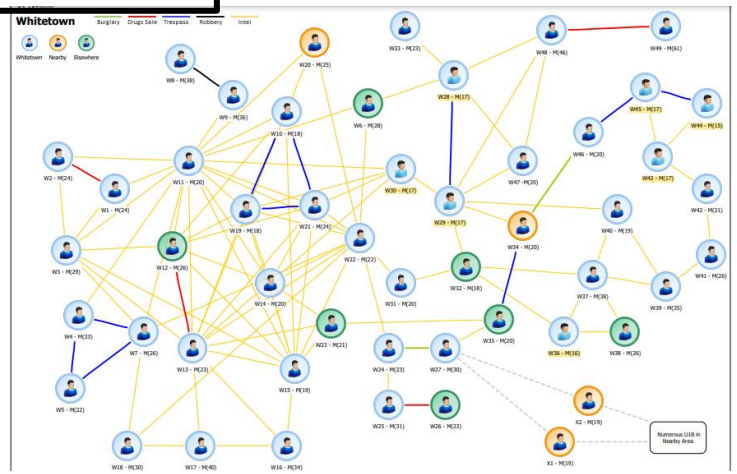


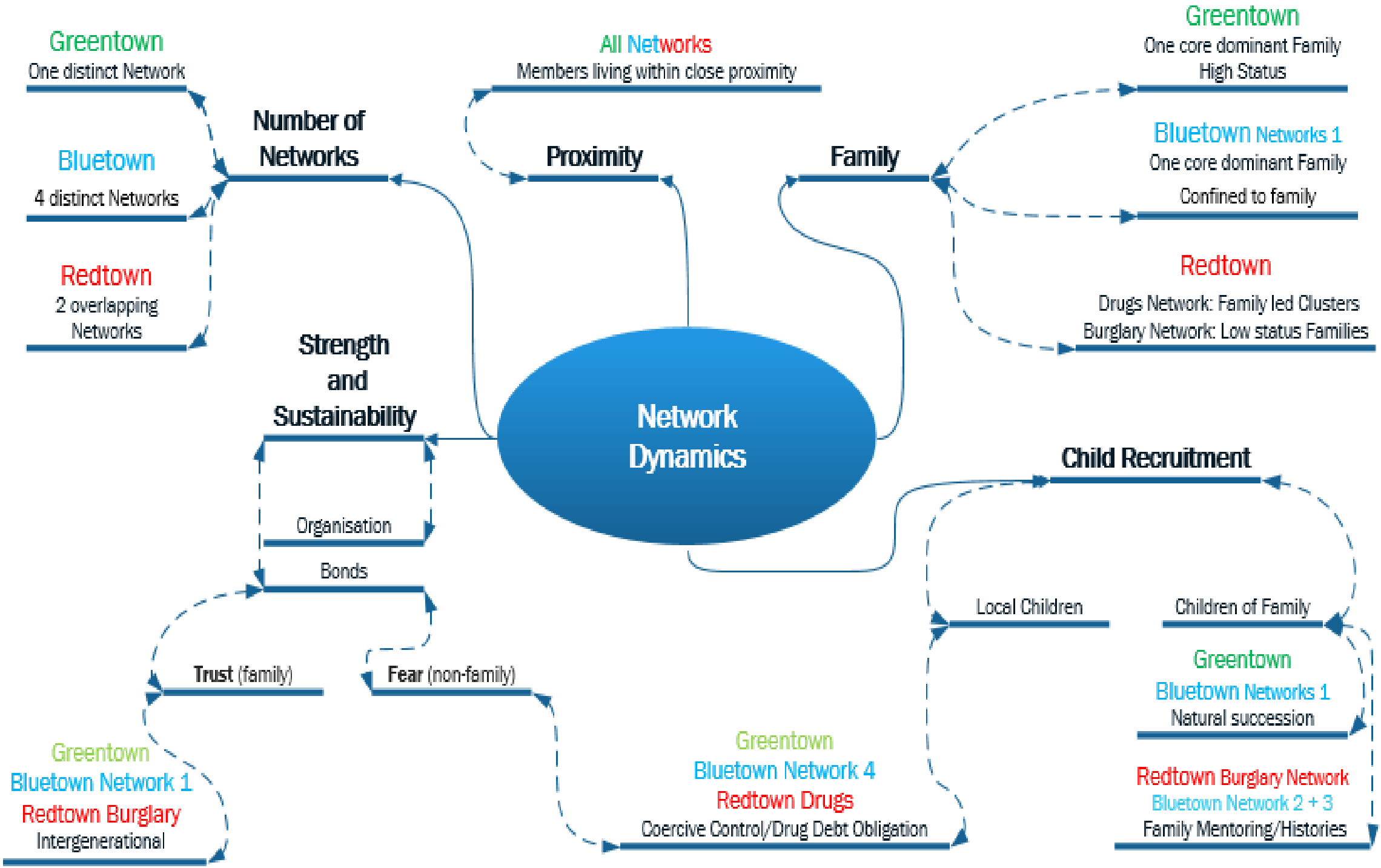


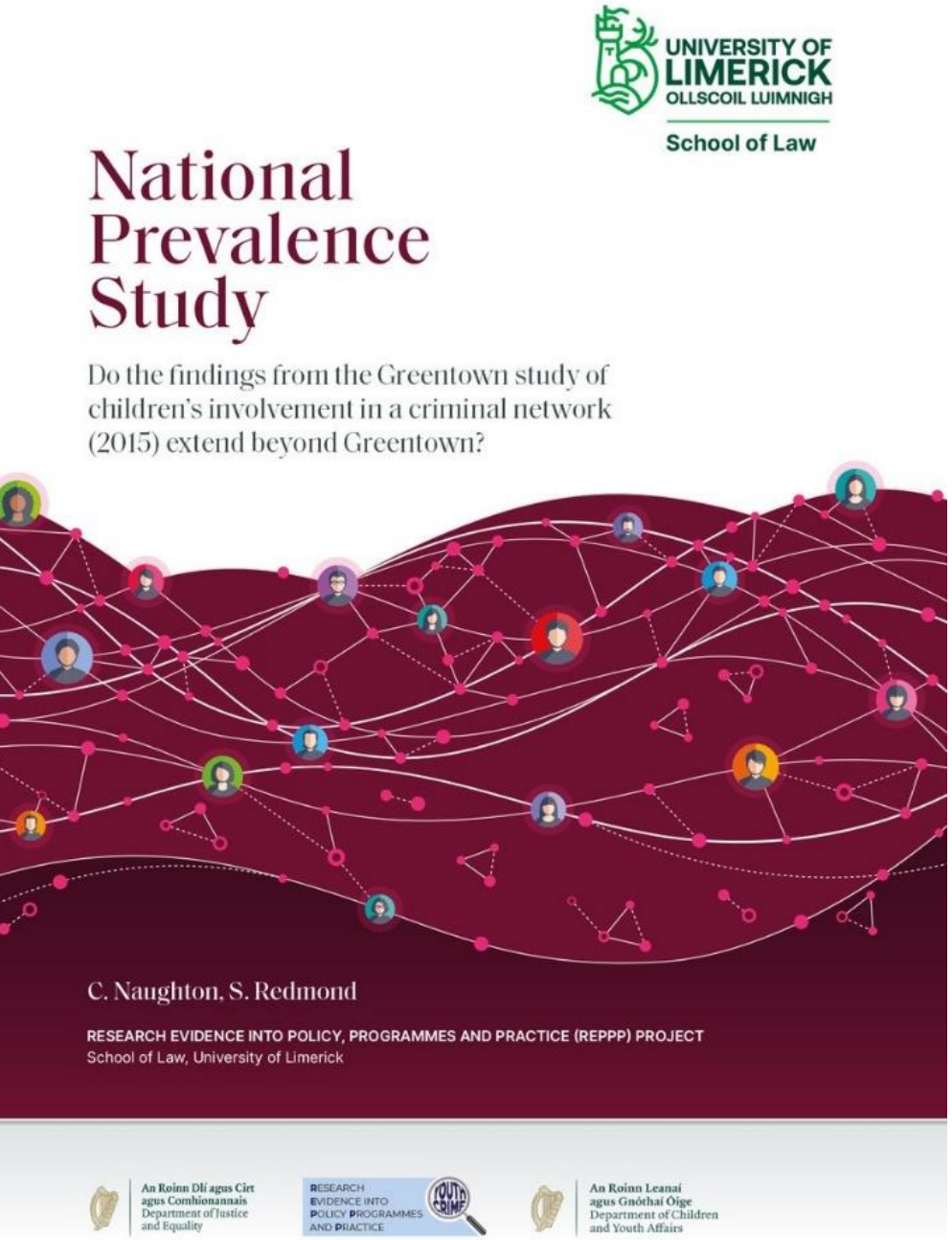


Starting Point





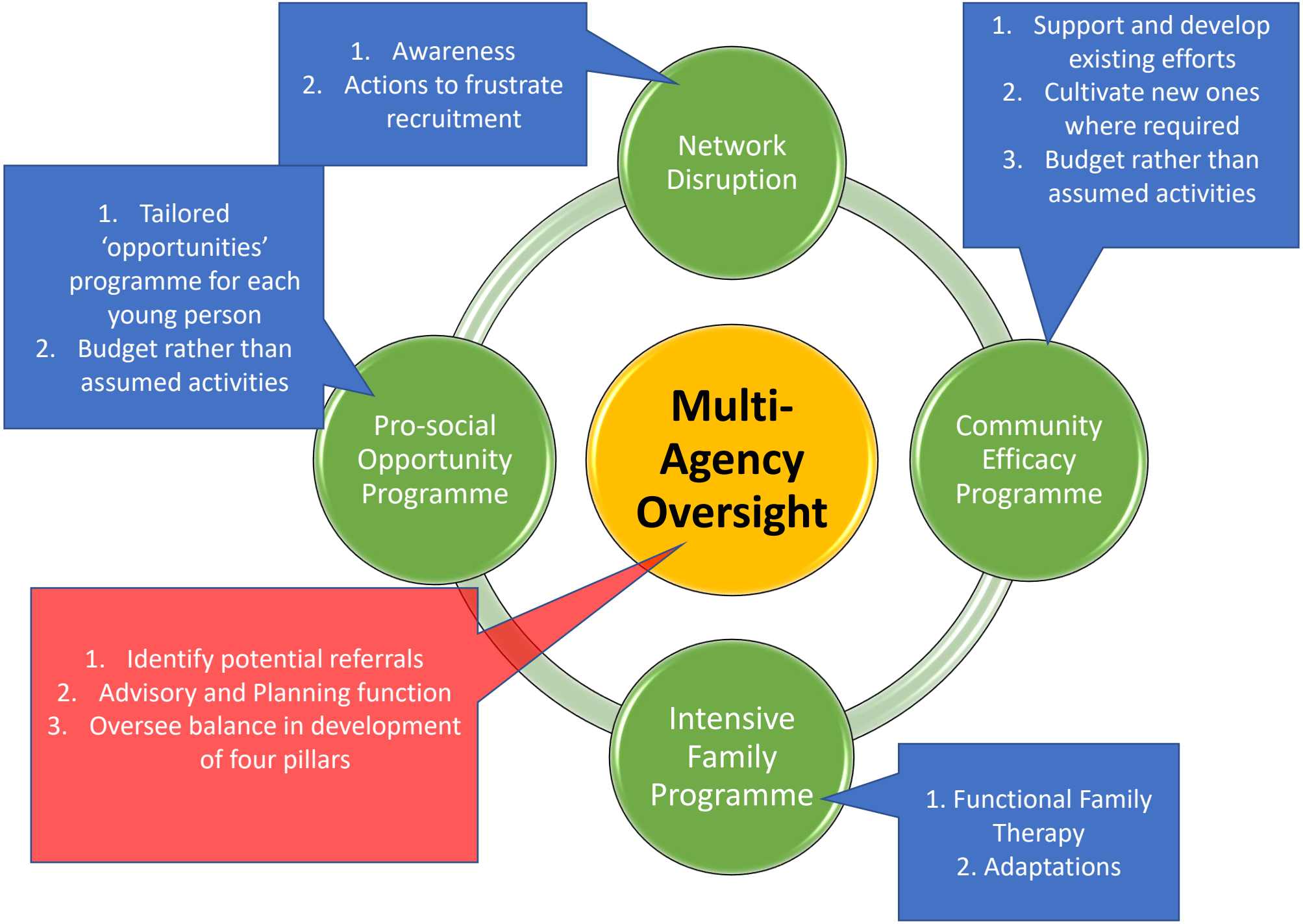

Greentown
One distinct Network
Bluetown
4 distinct Networks
Redtown
2 overlapping Networks
Number of Networks
All Networks
Members living within close proximity
Proximity
Family
Greentown
One core dominant Family
High Status
Bluetown Networks 1
One core dominant Family
Confined to family
Redtown
Drugs Network: Family led Clusters
Burglary Network: Low status Families
Strength and Sustainability
Network Dynamics
Organisation
Bonds
Trust (family)
Fear (non-family)
Child Recruitment
Local Children
Children of Family
Greentown
Bluetown Networks 1
Natural succession
Redtown Burglary Network
Bluetown Network 2 + 3
Family Mentoring/Histories
Greentown
Bluetown Network 1
Redtown Burglary
Intergenerational
Greentown
Bluetown Network 4
Redtown Drugs
Coercive Control/Drug Debt Obligation



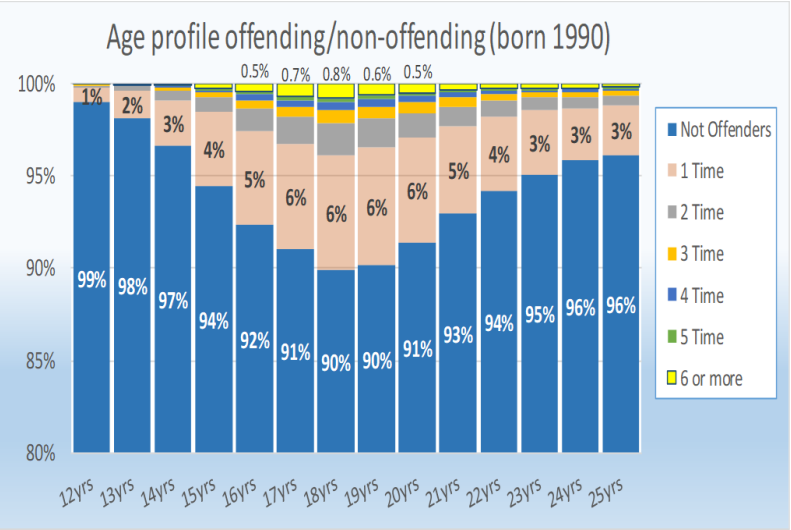
Prevalence

- Juvenile Liaison Officers
- 90% Response Rate
- 1 in 8
- Rural and Urban

* **1000 children in Ireland**


1. Awareness
2. Actions to frustrate recruitment
Network Disruption
1. Support and develop existing efforts
2. Cultivate new ones where required
3. Budget rather than assumed activities
1. Tailored 'opportunities' programme for each young person
2. Budget rather than assumed activities
Pro-social Opportunity Programme
Multi-Agency Oversight
Community Efficacy Programme
1. Identify potential referrals
2. Advisory and Planning function
3. Oversee balance in development of four pillars
Intensive Family Programme
1. Functional Family Therapy
2. Adaptations

Greentown Programme Goals



The Greentown Programme Request for Tender (RFT) specified two goals:

1) to reduce the influence of criminal networks on children at risk of involvement and

2) to improve the likelihood of extrication and pro-social outcomes for children who are already involved in criminal networks (Greentown RFT, 2020: Appendix 1, para.1.1.1)

Children's Contexts

- Economic deprivation
- Multiple adversities, e.g. single parent family, imprisonment of family members, neglect (physical & emotional), abuse (physical & emotional), parental substance abuse, experience of domestic violence and mental health issues
- Poor guardianship and supervision
- School exclusion
- Problematic peer groups
- No involvement in pro-social activities

Local Community Context

- **Crime network creates a culture of fear**
- **Network leaders have a "mythical" quality**
- **Residents feel subject to consent surveillance**
- **Young people may be involved in retaliations against their peers (They are very aware of consequences of non-compliance)**
- **Young people are more fearful of network members than criminal justice system**

The Greentown programme seeks to "load the dice" in favour of the young people

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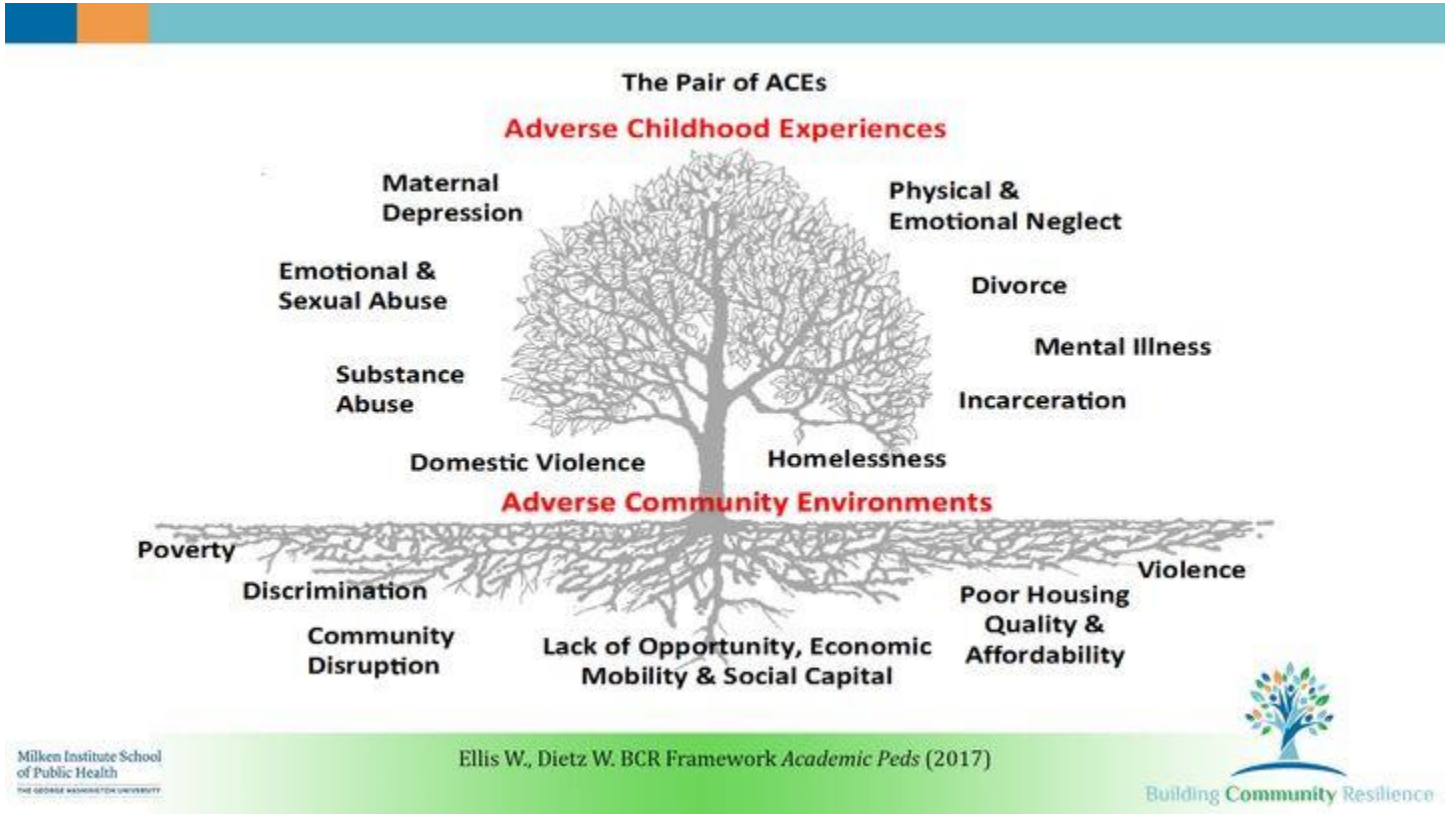
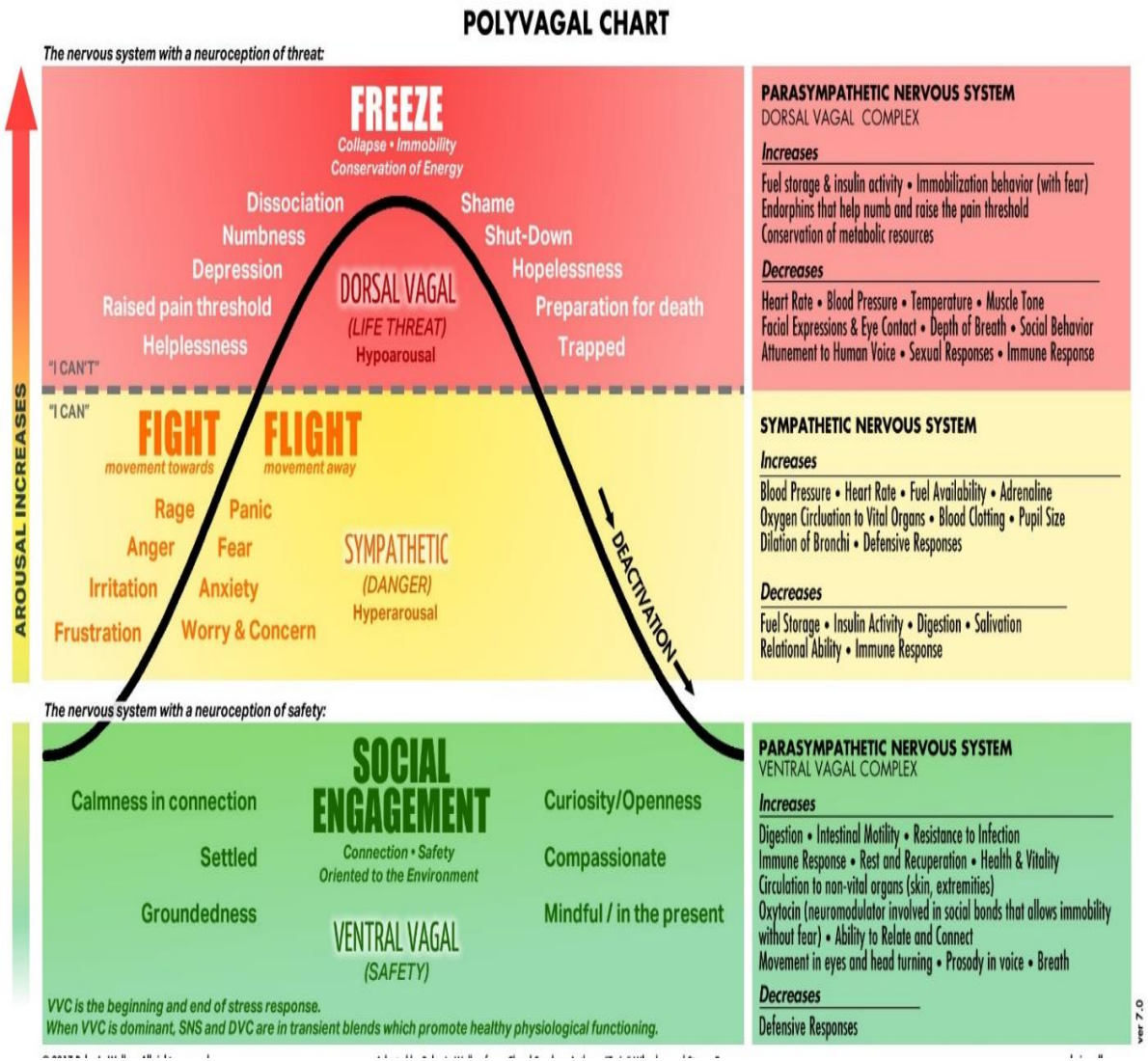
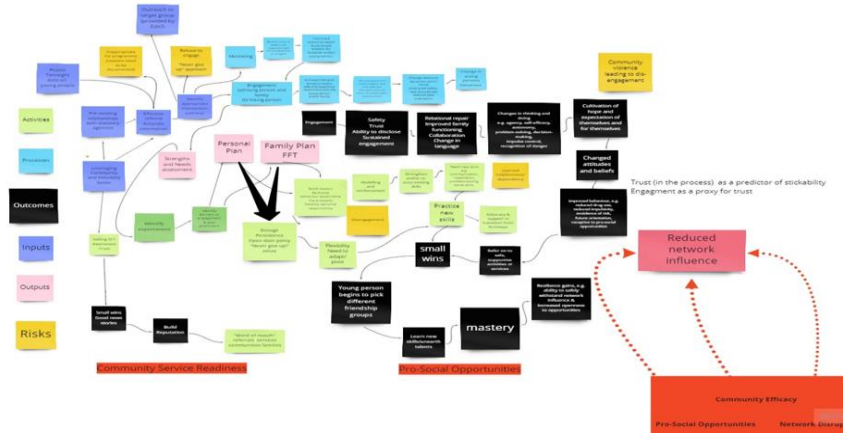
Might an overdose of individual, family and community adversity increase the risk of children & families being deemed "hard to reach"?



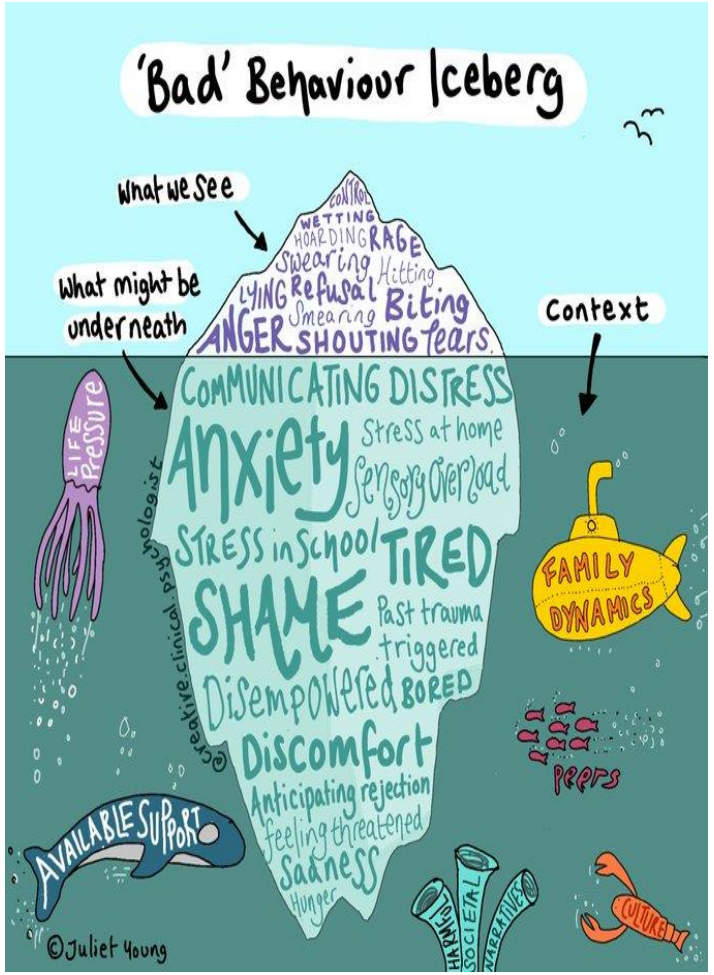


"It's as simple as, for example, [X] to be standing over one side of the green the Guards pull up and speak to a fella who might be relatively not involved in anything and just have a quick chat with him. If [X] sees that he could be classed as a rat. That's the way they think. That's the way they operate. And that's why they don't want to be seen talking to you because they are afraid, it's fear really. They are afraid, not afraid of the Guards - they are afraid of what other people in [Whitetown] will think of them."

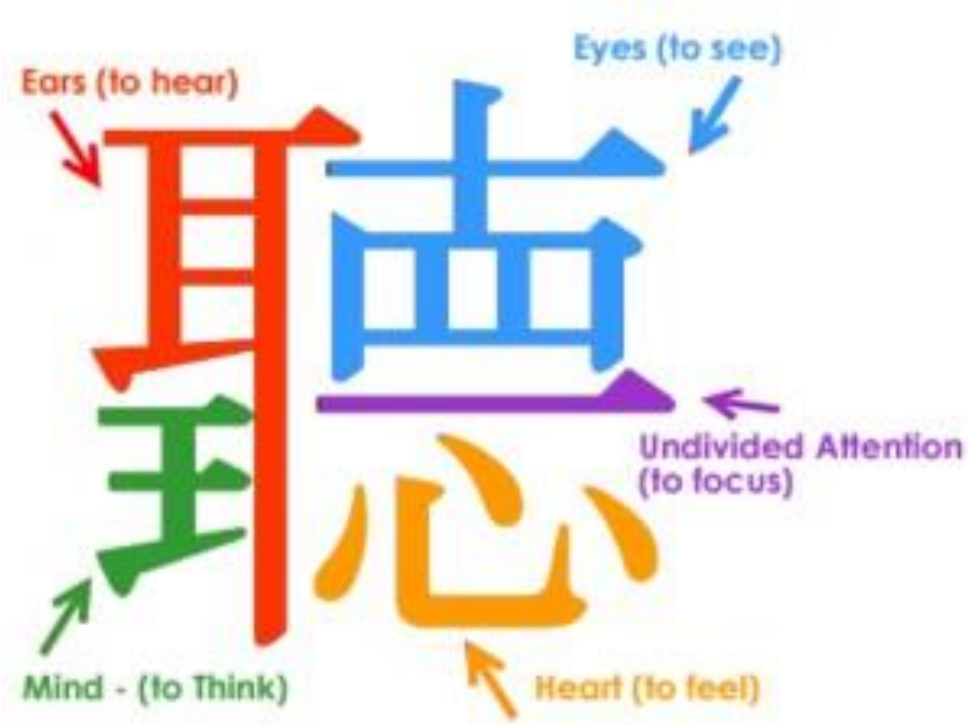


What the label of being "hard to reach" looks like in the Greentown trial sites

- high levels of childhood trauma, in particular relational and developmental trauma (e.g. relating to domestic abuse, maternal addiction or maternal depression in infancy),
- low levels of trust, including of authority figures and State actors
- traditionally not adequately served by existing services
- ongoing overwhelm and trauma e.g. suicide of family members, housing issues including impending homelessness, serious health issues of family members, open child protection cases
- not "therapy-read"
- Intergenerational criminality



- a general sense of not feeling safe around other people
- emotional dysregulation
- absence of an emotionally stable, always available adult’
- learned helplessness
- **debts**, mostly drug-related (occasionally gambling)
- dangerous risk-taking (e.g. driving stolen cars at high speed)
- difficulties in imagining a better future, or hoping for one
- not very open to personal development opportunities offered
- Oberstown is not a real deterrent (and may be a respite)
- return to network-related offending behaviour after successfully leaving the programme (even though the cage door has been opened, escape feels impossible)
- Death including “multiple tragic bereavement” (Vaswani, 2014)), leading to “complicated grief” (Tobin *et al*, 2018).



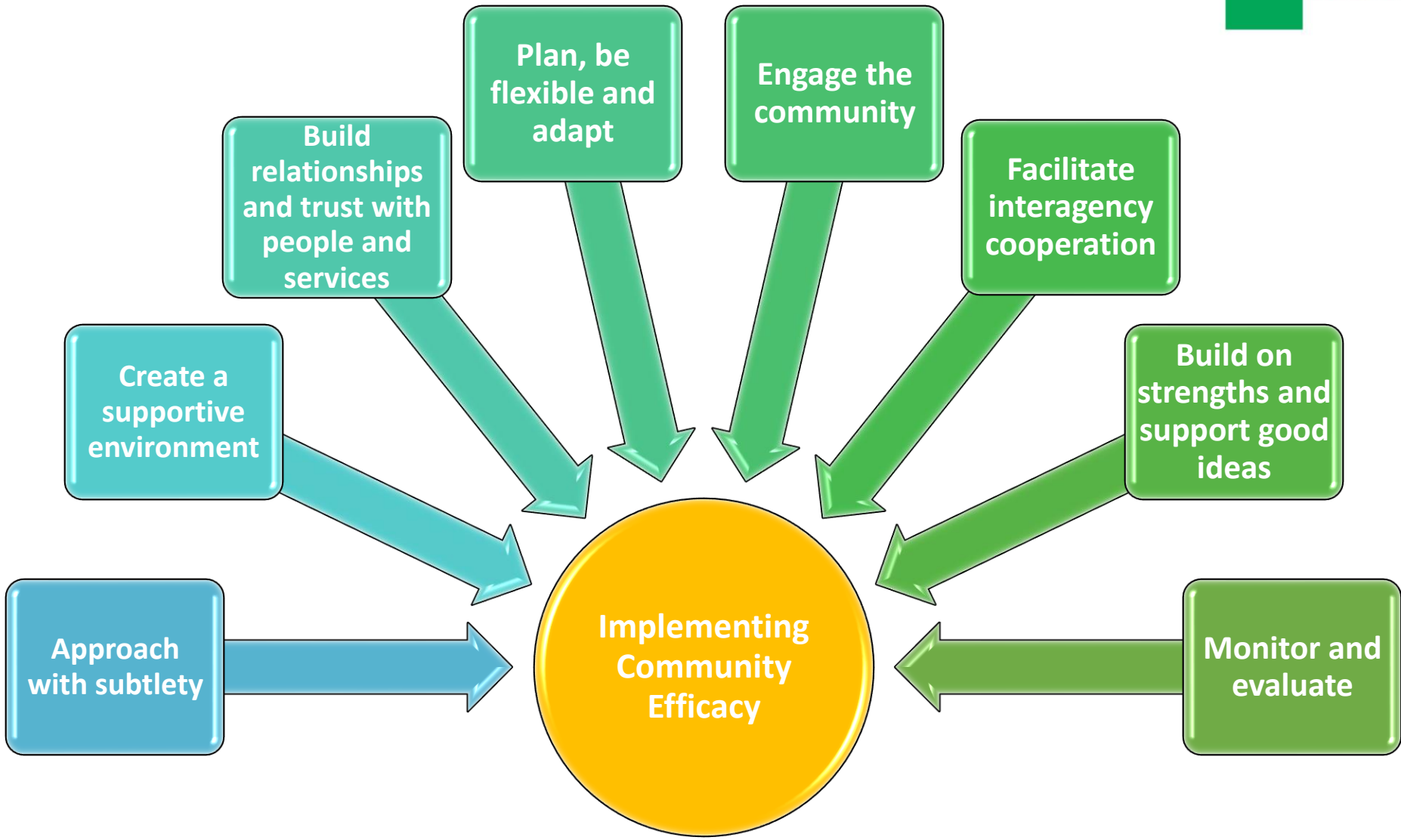
What appears to be working

- The burden of connecting with children and families is on the project workers – “relentless engagement”
- Listening & meeting children and families “where they are at”
- Therapeutic case-management
- A strengths-based, bespoke individual, family and pro-social plan
- “Hand-holding” & advocating for the children and families
- Taking time & being realistic about the duration of programme participation

- Postponing pushing the Greentown agenda until a trusting relationship has been built
- Consistency and persistence
- Flexibility and agility
- Expanding the therapeutic toolbox beyond Functional Family Therapy –“one-tool fixes” are rarely sufficient (M. Sparrow(2008) p. 135)
- Safety, belonging and opportunities
- Attending to “rupture and repair” (Whitetown)
- Interagency collaboration & re-framing behaviour
- Never giving up (welcoming children and families back on the programme)
- Minding the project workers to minimise the risk of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burn-out.

Implementing Community Efficacy in the Greentown Programme

It might look like this…



Dr Eoin O'Meara Daly, *Operationalising Collective Efficacy for Youth Crime Intervention* (UL, PhD)

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Community Efficacy Pillar

Rationale: The residents of unsafe, high-crime communities need support to help the community to build up its strength

Initiatives have included:

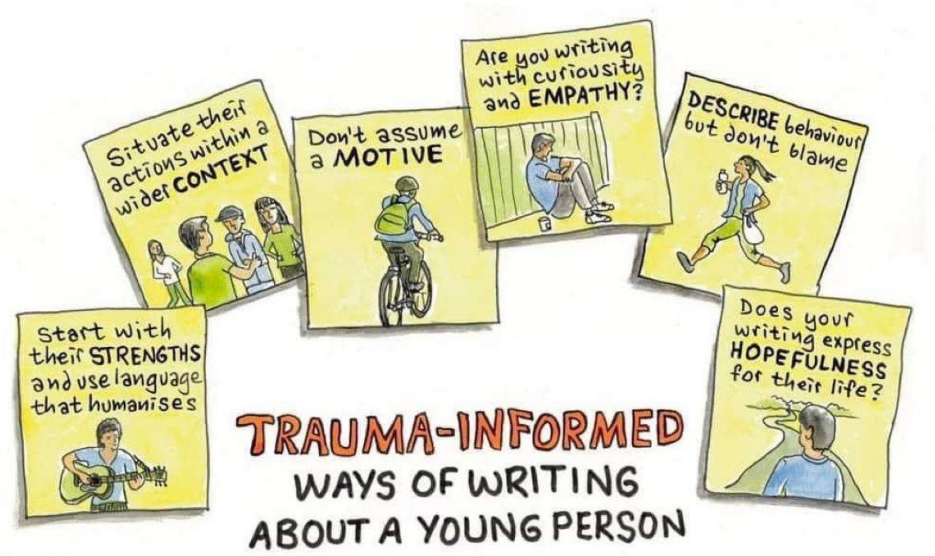
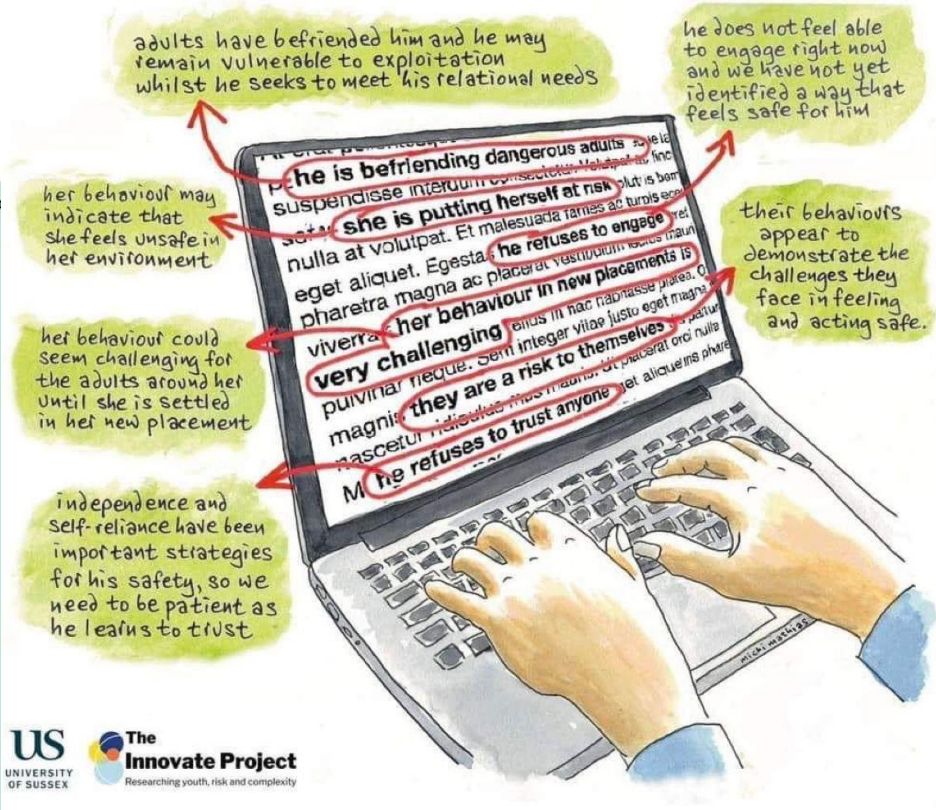
- A public messaging campaign to raise awareness that drug use and drug dealing need not be a community norm
- A fun-run through a park that had been tainted by past network-related violence
- An arts festival with creative attractions
- Support for a woman's group on the basis that women are often the pillars of the communities in which they live
- A self-development programme for 15 local participants aiming to assemble a group of residents to collaborate on future projects together
- The project manager participated in an 18-month leadership programme which sought to improve cross-sector cooperation and problem-solving in the locality.
- The provider is also leading a 'mentalisation-based' network to develop a common language and approach among services working with children and families such as those targeted by the Greentown Programme.

Reflections

- Any improvements are really hard earned, provisional, and always tentative given the environment that the young people live in and the projects operate in.
- Some young people have relapsed, and some have come to harm.
- With the development of the network disruption pillar, some safety might be created to increase the likelihood that children will engage with the programme and avail of pro-social opportunities.
- We have more to learn, but there's scant research out there, so we are building connections with other European countries (e.g. the Netherlands) that are dealing with the same complex problems to further develop the programme.

See J. Mulcahy, C. Naughton and S. Redmond (Routledge, 2024) "Theory of change as a tool for tracking Intensive Family Programme developments in Whitetown" in Koleros, A., Adrien, M.-H., & Tyrrell, T. (Eds.). (2024). *Theories of Change in Reality: Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions* (1st ed.) pp.235-243. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032669618

Thank you for listening

Any questions?

Email: jane.mulcahy@ul.ie