‘There are things that we can do to reduce community violence and to mitigate the effects of this violence on young children … and we have results to prove it.’
Introducing this edition of Early Childhood Matters, Bernard van Leer Foundation’s programme director Michael Feigelson calls attention to the stories of hope. While the articles in these pages clearly demonstrate the devastating impacts of community violence on young children, they also show that there are things we can do – and we have results to prove it.

I’d like to live somewhere that doesn’t have anything like this at all, you see? Live somewhere where the children can play, and where I can just lie down and be relaxed. Nobody dreams of this, nobody.

Beth, mum, Rio de Janeiro

Their parents ... explained to me that the children never normally used the play lot, as it was used by drug traffickers ... when I think about the kids growing up in those neighbourhoods, that memory has stayed with me as a powerful metaphor for what I hope our work can achieve.

Programme Director, Cure Violence, Chicago

Since 2007, one of my responsibilities at the Bernard van Leer Foundation has been supporting advocacy for young kids in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. During this period we have had some success – new policy, a growing coalition of advocates, and a fourfold increase in public childcare provision.

But also during this period, Ciudad Juárez recorded a homicide rate about three times that of 13th-century Holland, and well above many current war zones. So, while we are pleased to see progress, it is hard to fully celebrate. Kids are safer in childcare and parents are less stressed, but they are both still scared.

The last issue of Early Childhood Matters was devoted to the topic of domestic violence. This time we turn to the effects of community violence on young children. As the authors in this journal confirm, we know that just growing up around this kind of persistent violence changes the architecture of children’s brains, obstructs their ability to learn and literally makes them sick. For example:

• Shonkoff and Fox explain how prolonged exposure to fear in early childhood can impair the development of the pre-frontal cortex and future executive function (page 7).
• Guerra et al. describe how exposure can be linked to both mental health problems in young children and physical health such as asthma (pages 8–9).
• Sharkey finds significant effects on Chicago preschoolers’ cognition when a homicide had occurred in the last week within 1500 feet of a child’s home (pages 10–12).

Complementing these scientific accounts, Nashieli Ramirez’s description from Ciudad Juárez (page 13) looks at the problem through the eyes of young children themselves. She puts a human face on how little people experience these big problems, in the same way that the interview with Beth by Hermílio Santos gives a moving account from a mother’s point of view (page 17). These are important reminders of how young children’s lives are affected by violence on a day-to-day basis even though they themselves are not directly involved. In this vein, Robert Muggah and Helen Mostue explore the development of an index that can give voices like these a more systematic treatment, arguing that such an index would be a better barometer for success than simply counting shootings and killings (page 26).

One idea that all of the authors in this issue of Early Childhood Matters seem to share is that violence is contagious – something exemplified by the mapping exercise shared in Elizabeth Ward’s article about Jamaica (page 33). The more we see it in the community, the more we see it at home, and vice versa. But, as Susan Lee points out in an article on her experience with the Advancement Project in Los Angeles, in places with exceptionally high levels of community violence we need to stabilise the situation in order to make families’ lives easier. In her words, ‘before we can expect improved educational and health outcomes, the goal must be to achieve a basic level of safety so that children can learn and thrive.’

What I find most compelling in this series of articles, however, is the sense of hope. Hidden between...
layers of text describing the gravity of the problem, authors in this journal have shown that there are things that we can do to reduce community violence and to mitigate the effects of this violence on young children. We can get away from what Susan Lee denominates ‘a lethal absence of hope’ and we have results to prove it.

• Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnochan explains how the Scottish police took the lead on a violence prevention strategy that has led to a 50% reduction in gang violence in Strathclyde (page 36).
• Yvonne Bezerra de Mello describes a harm reduction strategy for children who have been witness to violence, implemented through 150 schools in Rio de Janeiro, going into detail about the successful recuperation of three young children who experienced extreme levels of post-traumatic stress (page 40).
• Susan Lee writes about a programme run by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa that has helped reduce homicides by 33% in some of the most violent neighbourhoods of Los Angeles (page 44).
• Alicia Lieberman shows evidence from randomised controlled trials of how parent–child psychotherapy has improved child and maternal mental health after exposure to violence, evidence which has informed a Child Development – Community Policing Programme implemented in 16 us sites (page 48).
• Charles Ransford recounts the experience of Cure Violence, which has achieved reductions of between 16% and 56% in shootings and killings in Chicago and Baltimore and is now being replicated in South Africa and Iraq (page 54).
• Mayor Rodrigo Guerrero of Cali discusses VallenPaz, a strategy that returned 400 families who had been violently displaced to their homes and prevented any further displacement despite the ongoing conflict in the area (page 59).

These stories and others like them are the ones that I think we need to help people remember. Explaining the extraordinary impacts on a young child’s brain of just growing up around this kind of violence may get us an extra five minutes of a policymaker’s time, but unless we can offer some semblance of tangible hope then the hard facts will eventually fall on deaf ears.

At the Bernard van Leer Foundation, our work on preventing community violence is focused in Rio de Janeiro and Recife, Brazil, where we aim to help build some stories of measurable success that we can share with you in the future. The article by Da Silva and Shaw (pages 21–5) sets out some of the strategies we hope to test, and we are also planning to hold a conference in Brazil of the most successful community violence prevention models in the region to infuse our partners on the ground with practical ideas for change.

If we are successful, then I hope to be able to write in a future edition of Early Childhood Matters not only that the shootings and killings are down and that Dr Muggah’s child security index shows kids feel safer, but that the average 7-year-old boy is growing up with a new notion of what it means to ‘get respect’.