

Knives, Guns and Gangs

- One in five 16-year-old boys admitted attacking someone intending to hurt them seriously
- Twenty-five per cent of young people at school admitted that they had carried a penknife compared to 46 percent of excluded students
- Nearly half of excluded young people (47%) admit to having carried a weapon, but say they never used it. A further 21 per cent have threatened somebody with a knife
- Of these, 30 per cent have carried a flick knife, 20 per cent an air gun and 16 per cent a kitchen knife
- Young girls are considerably less likely to have carried a knife in the last year than boys (15 per cent of girls compared to 40 per cent of boys)¹

Why is it in the news now?

Gun and knife crime has increased dramatically over the past few years. In the past year, incidences of robberies in which a blade was used increased by approximately 15,000 cases. Firearms offences have increased by over 30 per cent in the last two years and, based on current figures, at least 100 people will be the victim of gun crime this year². It is predominantly an urban problem, with three quarters of all gun crime in England and Wales taking place in major cities: London, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool and Nottingham.

What does this have to do with young people?

Increasingly perpetrators are young; research suggests an average age of 19. Arguably gangs, guns and drugs are all inextricably linked, and are becoming the norm for certain groups. The likelihood of using knives is greatest among the age group over 15. The last few years has also seen an increase in knife possession in school, youth clubs and on the street. However, carrying knives is more common than using them.

Although girls do carry knives, it is far more common among boys. Knife crime is increasing; arrests for carrying knives are rising, as is the number of knife wounds dealt with in hospital. And it starts young. Although gang members are usually in their mid-teens to early twenties, affiliate groups may be much younger.

Why are young people involved?

There is no convenient 'one size fits all' reason to account for young people's involvement with gangs and/or carrying weapons. Research suggests there are a number of factors including:

To commit crime

For a small group, knife culture is part of a wider culture of violence with which they associate, and to which they aspire. Some young people decide to carry a knife with the intention to scare, harass or steal. These problems become

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exacerbated when these young people consume alcohol, or take drugs which often leads to a greater likelihood of aggression, an increase in the number of offences perpetrated and their seriousness.

Fear of crime

One of the principal motives is fear. Research carried out by *Leap Confronting Conflict* found that protection was an important reason for a young person to join a gang or carry a weapon. Fear can result from personal experience of crime, or the reported experience of friends or siblings. Victimisation and offending are strongly linked.

Although young people are worried about becoming, and many in fact are, victims of crime, over half of the victims (51 per cent) do not report the crimes they have suffered to the police and 45 per cent do not tell their parents³. Even teachers sometimes do not report crime to the police when they witness it.

Lack of support or help

Linked to fear, is the perceived feeling of helplessness. The lack of support for young perpetrators and victims from parents, schools and youth community services appears to be a further significant risk factor. Many young people have a lack of faith in these external agencies to protect them, consequently taking matters into their own hands.

Status

In certain groups or gangs (distinguished by a name, a uniform, a hierarchy and/or code of rules) possession of, or using a knife may bring status and authority. In these two cultural senses, status and identity formation, carrying knives may be a fashion among some young people.

The possession of an offensive weapon can also be a means of acquiring status. More generally, peer influences and fashion also seem to play a part in encouraging young people to carry knives. Children who experience failure at school or other kinds of social exclusions could be looking for status by carrying and brandishing a knife.

What can youth work contribute?

Youth work is ideally placed to help address these issues. A successful approach to tackling these issues requires several approaches run in tandem:

Front-line issues

- Work should focus on issues relevant to young people, and not be driven only by crime reduction targets and law enforcement.
- Group work is fundamental to success.
- Non-formal education and social literacy are vital components.
- Workers should strive to raise young people's self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence.
- Young people should be encouraged to develop a vision of who they want to be, and get support to help them reach that place.
- Projects should work with all stakeholders, especially young people themselves.

Involving young people in solutions:

- A platform must be created to enable young people to meet decision-makers. Their involvement must be continuous, and not simply a one-off event.
- The process must aim for sustainability, so that young people who have taken part can educate and inform others.

Examples of successful programmes

There are a number of projects which help to raise awareness amongst young people of the dangers of these issues. These take a number of forms; they may be informal education projects, schemes working with young offenders or projects

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offering support for victims of crime. Many of these programmes also offer specific help with mentoring, conflict resolution, and support for parents.

Defendin da hood

Waltham Forest Council's innovative approach to tackling youth engagement and crime has earned it a nomination in the 2006 Local Government Association's 'Oscars'. The project has already won a hat-trick of awards and government plaudits and is one of six initiatives shortlisted in the innovation category of the 2006 LGC (Local Government Chronicle) awards.

It was set up to help the council and its partners engage with disaffected young people in a way that meant genuine involvement for them. It also illustrated how they showed that they were listening to young people and that their views made a difference.

Defendin da hood is now viewed as a pioneer in tackling youth and gun-related crime, and has strong partnerships with the police, the NHS, housing associations and other local partners.

The project centred around four key events, attracting young people with music and entertainment but always with a requirement for them to discuss serious issues first. Subjects discussed included community relations, and conflict resolution, and in all events young people had a sense of ownership of the events and a chance to participate in activities at an early stage, rather than trying to consult during or after the event.

Project achievements:

- A reduction in the local crime rates;
- development of a radio station; and
- training for young people to participate in a young people's independent advisory group.

Camden Youth and Connexions Service

Camden, North London has experienced rising tensions between the local Bangladeshi population, particularly young men. These tensions are based on an ideology of territory, further complicated by a feeling of being failed by the education system and being portrayed negatively by the media and they have led to several serious incidents.

In 2002, Rubel Ahmed from the South Camden Community Youth Project, in tandem with colleagues from LEAP, a group dedicated to training in conflict resolution, established a multi-disciplinary team which included youth workers, theatre workers, LEAP conflict resolution trainers, and other local voluntary youth projects.

Youth workers undertook one-to-one work with young people, along with outreach in the two affected areas. Young people from rival gangs were signed up on the understanding that they would attend separate mediation sessions aimed at resolving differences before attending a joint residential at the end. They were offered a £10 incentive per session.

As well as conflict resolution, session themes included identity, culture, what it means to be Bengali, understanding the consequences of actions and how to overcome negative stereotypes.

Outcomes included a report and video, in which participants described their involvement with the project as a life changing experience.

Reasons cited for the scheme's success:

- Valuing the young people as individuals; and

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- Recognising that while some may have been seen as perpetrators, many were also the victims.

LEAP Gangs and Territorialism Project

By conducting extensive research in several parts of the UK and through its own pilot projects, LEAP has identified successful methods of work in this area. Their studies have shown that being part of a gang is a transitional phase for most of the young people involved

The Gangs and Territorialism project aims to provide relevant and flexible youth work, applicable to the locality. It has found that the key to successful pilot projects is through working alongside established local youth workers.

Through sessions and workshops, LEAP aims to show young people the pros and cons of gang membership so that those affected can make informed choices. Much of their work is interactive, typically through games, drama and discussion. They examine the internal dynamic of how gangs work, and how individuals behave in a gang environment. LEAP also encourages young people to look at the nature of their conflict with other groups, why and what they gain from this, and what would terminate the conflict. To make the sessions direct and relevant, work is carried out that relates to the real life conflict the young people are experiencing.

LEAP emphasises the importance of proper training for adult practitioners, and developing better relationships between agencies. With well-trained workers in place and partnerships operating effectively, the work can continue after LEAP involvement has concluded. In the immediate future, LEAP will use the results of its studies to produce a new manual and other materials for work with young people.

What The NYA is calling for

Messages for central and local government:

It is clear that a multi-agency approach is required, as law enforcement alone will not solve the problem. Any approach will also require the involvement of central and local government to succeed.

- Media-led hysteria does not provide an appropriate context for decisions on legislation, as it in effect criminalises every young person.
- The contribution and tailored approach of youth work can lead to significant improvements, providing sustained funding is available. This type of work, given adequate funding, can tackle the causes of conflict, and not just the symptoms.
- New and different approaches are not necessarily the best ones. Core funding should be given to the right people, enabling long term projects to flourish.
- Government should help build capability into local communities, so they can support themselves and their programmes.

The National Youth Agency (The NYA) promotes the personal and social development of young people and their progress as citizens. Their issues need to be heard and acted upon. Most young people do not make positive progress as a result of their experience of the custodial system.

Youth work should aim to build and sustain work and stand by the young people with the greatest need, even though its impact may be incremental.

Government needs to unite behind youth work as a method of working that resolves conflict and reduces crime. More emphasis should also be placed on the difference that good youth work can make.

'A key question for youth work is how we can connect with the agenda of a government that is understandably worried about crime and anti-social behaviour. What we must do is demonstrate that our methods are successful,' said Tom Wylie, chief executive of The NYA.

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Resources

- The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, *Knife Crime: ineffective reactions to a distracting problem? A review of evidence and policy*. 2006
- Sharp, C; Aldridge, J; Medina, J, *Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour: findings from the 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*. Home Office 2006.
- Home Office, *Connected: together we can tackle gun crime*. Home Office conference. 2004
- McLagan, G. *Guns and Gangs: inside black gun crime*. Allison and Busby Ltd. 2005
- Beebee, S. *Youth Work Approaches to Gang Culture*, The National Youth Agency. December 2003.
- Lemos, G. *Fear and fashion. The use of knives and other weapons by young people*. Lemos & Crane 2004.
- *Defendin da hood* http://www.lbwf.gov.uk/index/news/defendin__da_hood_shortlisted_for_awards.htm
- *LEAP Confronting Conflict* <http://www.leaplinx.com/>

Notes

- 1 MORI Youth Survey 2004 (2004) Youth Justice Board <http://www.youth-justice-board.gov.uk/>
- 2 Simmon, J et al. *Crime in England and Wales 2001/2002* (2002) Home Office www.homeoffice.gov.uk
- 3 Lemos, G. *Fear and fashion: The use of knives and other weapons by young people* (2004) Lemos & Crane

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