

**TACKLING KNIFE CRIME TOGETHER
- A REVIEW OF LOCAL ANTI-KNIFE
CRIME PROJECTS**

**A REPORT BY BROOKE KINSELLA
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In June 2010 I was asked by the Home Secretary to head up a fact-finding mission into the work of schemes designed to prevent young people carrying and using knives. To do this, I undertook a series of visits across England and Wales to projects, chosen by myself with Home Office support, which reflected a good variety of the work and issues happening across the country. During my review I visited London and then travelled to Manchester, Liverpool, Nottingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Stockton, Sheffield and Birmingham, often visiting different areas and different projects within each city.

My review ended in a written report which highlights the factors which in my opinion make a project successful and relevant to today's young people, and identifies some of the underlying causes of knife crime. My findings and recommendations reflect my opinion and those of the people I spoke to on my visits across the country. This executive summary outlines the key findings and recommendations of my report, and highlights some of the projects which I found to be most effective at tackling the issues raised.

THE 'FEAR AND FASHION' FACTOR

The projects I visited pointed to two key factors behind knife carrying. Firstly, young people felt afraid that others were carrying weapons and so claimed they needed to carry knives themselves for self-protection: the 'fear' factor. Secondly, that other young people carried knives because it was seen as a fashionable or cool thing to do: the 'fashion' factor. These 'fear and fashion' factors that lead to the decision to carry a knife were evident at every project I visited.

Fear & Fashion, run by **Leap, (Westminster)** was an intensive peer education programme that aimed to deal directly with the 'fear and fashion' factors and explore and challenge young people's beliefs on this issue to change their mindsets. Interactive workshops and games were used to get young people to explore and understand the reasons why they may carry a weapon. The project worked because the sessions were led by young people with real experience of weapons who were willing to talk to other young people about why they did so and why they stopped.

BARRIERS BETWEEN POLICE AND YOUNG PEOPLE

From my visits, I found that unfortunately there is sometimes a barrier between young people and the police that makes it more difficult to keep young people safe. This is obviously detrimental to finding out who is likely to harm communities and who may be carrying weapons and may also hinder the chance of bringing an offender to justice.

The **Southwark Young Advisors** train police officers on the use of better and less threatening techniques with which to search citizens, with the aim of improving relationships between officers and the people they search.

Lambeth Summer Projects in **South London** uses a variety of modules to help build positive and continuing relationships between police, communities and young people in order to help reduce anti-social behaviour. They work closely with the police and bring them in to deliver workshops on crime and to debate its consequences with young people.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Many young people I spoke to said they feel they are portrayed negatively by the media and sometimes branded as if they are all criminals or trouble-makers. Although we need to highlight the problem of knife crime in our society, we also need to give our young people better things to aspire to. I believe that if young people were reading about the good things their peers are doing it would slowly start to make a difference and encourage them to have more positive aspirations

The recent **99% campaign** in **London** aims to do just this, by focusing on the positive young people we have. Their message that 99% of young people are decent and admirable and we should be promoting them positively. The campaign signposts young people to better opportunities, including volunteering and employment.

Similarly, we need to start recognising and rewarding the work of the wonderful young people we have in this country who do all they can to help their communities and make a difference, especially in the media and the public eye. The **Spirit of London Awards**, launched in 2009, allows communities and organisations to nominate young people who they feel have achieved great things, whether it be in music, sport, art, or social enterprise.

LOCATION OF PROJECTS

The rise of ‘postcode’ or ‘turf’ disputes between gangs of young people, means that some projects and schemes are based in locations that are not accessible to some young people, even those living nearby. Although the reason for these disputes is not always clear, I believe the problem is claiming lives and affecting the good work that is being done to combat the gang problem.

The Young Disciples project in **Birmingham** is one project seeking to overcome this problem. Their building is based between the Lozells, Handsworth and Aston areas, with young people from these areas finding it difficult to travel to the project across rival ‘turf’. The Young Disciples combat this issue by collecting and returning their members from home, assuring them and their parents of their safety. Once the young people are at the project, mixing with members of different areas and gangs does not seem to be much of a problem for them.

LACK OF PROJECTS GOING INTO SCHOOLS

The biggest concern that was voiced throughout my review by the schemes I spoke to was the fact that they are finding it extremely difficult to get into educational establishments to get across the anti-knife crime message. They felt that many schools and teachers feel that having knife crime workshops in their schools might give the impression that their school has a problem, which would affect the school’s reputation. I know this is not the case for every school and area, some of which are happy to work with anti-knife crime projects, but it is the sad case that many schools across the country are not interested and will not consider spending money or time on these projects.

Many knife crime prevention projects are happy to go into schools for no fee, or with just their running costs covered, so cost is not a major issue. Far better for schools to take that chance to prevent a young person carrying a knife than to have to bring in a project once the problem has already started and young people have been hurt.

THE IMPACT OF CRIMINAL RECORDS BUREAU (CRB) CHECKS

Many young people who go through the projects I visited turn their life around and then want to give something back. Because many of them will have attended a project precisely because they had previously strayed down the wrong path, they will have misdemeanours or minor crimes on their record. As a result, they can find it really difficult to get the positions that would allow them to work with young people and become mentors in their own right.

For projects that are trying to help young people to get back into employment or find a career, it can be a massive setback when a young person's past stops employers taking them on. It is heartbreaking that if a young person decides to create a better life for themselves, they risk being rejected again.

HELP FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS WHEN COMING OUT OF CUSTODY

Many young people said they feel there is a lack of support once they are out of custody and the criminal justice system. If we are to try and reduce re-offending, I believe we must equip offenders with better tools and support to keep them from returning to crime.

The Prince's Trust Leaving Prison Mentoring Scheme aims to do this by giving young people one-to-one support from people with similar backgrounds. The project enables former offenders to become mentors and supports young offenders through their transition from custody into the community. They visit them whilst they are in prison once a month to share their life experiences and inspire young people that they too can turn their lives around. If required, supporters meet their young mentee at the gate on their release and ensure they reach their accommodation safely and continue to support their client with access to appropriate services for their resettlement such as benefits, health and accommodation.

LACK OF PROJECTS FOR GIRLS, PARENTS AND YOUNGER CHILDREN

I found that out of the twenty-three projects I saw, only two or three had initiatives specifically tailored for girls and very few looked at improving the bond between parents and their children. There also seems to be only limited work being done with younger children to help prevent knife crime and intervene early, perhaps out of fear that such interventions would be traumatic or unsuitable for them.

One of the few projects I saw that had schemes specifically for their girl members was the **Butetown Pavillion** Project in **Cardiff**. Although girls can take part in all the activities they offer, the project also addresses issues specifically relevant to them, such as sexual health education and teenage pregnancy. Butetown Pavillion understands that girls may not always want to take part in sports or music activities and so has set up a small beauty salon in the centre where they can learn how to do beauty therapy. This not only gives them new skills, but also encourages them to open up to youth workers about the issues they may be facing.

The **Young Disciples** project in **Birmingham** runs the ‘In It Together’ programme specifically for fathers and their children to help them improve their relationship. As well as inviting absent or struggling fathers, they invite older mentors along to give an example to the younger dads of what a good father is.

One project I saw successfully work with children as young as 8 was the **Croydon Youth Development Trust**. In the session I attended the youth workers initiated a debate with a group of younger children on a range of issues such as the dangers of peer pressure, not obeying parents, carrying weapons and hurting others. I was astounded by the maturity and ideas that came from some of the children which proved to me that at this age they are already a lot more streetwise than we think and that we must begin to educate our children about these dangers at a much younger age.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

After my brother was murdered, and throughout my journey to understand youth crime, I heard about the idea of restorative justice but didn’t feel it was something that could be successful. As a victim myself, I knew that I would never want to meet the offenders who killed my brother. However, I visited the **Tees Valley project** with an open mind and was prepared to at least listen to what they had to say.

The project develops and delivers a range of restorative approaches including family mediation, victim-offender mediation and victim awareness and works alongside ten to eighteen year olds in the criminal justice system. After visiting the project, I began to realise that maybe some good could come out of the restorative justice process. It will not work in every case, and when dealing with murder or very serious violent crimes, it will be a much more personal and complicated decision. But in tackling more minor crimes, I believe it could have a massive impact in changing the attitudes of offenders and making them think twice about re-offending. I think it could also have a very positive effect on the victim, giving them closure, allowing them to express to the person who hurt them the damage they have done and helping them realise that they were in no way to blame.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After visiting the projects, discussing the different ways in which they tackled knife crime, and learning about the different obstacles they all faced, together with my young advisers, I have put together the following list of recommendations:

For more anti-knife-crime projects to go into schools

Head-teachers should be encouraged to allow anti-knife crime projects into their schools and the issue raised with them at one of their annual conferences and other forum.

For anti knife-crime programmes to be taught in schools

In subjects such as Personal Social Health and Economic education (PSHE), young people already learn about social and health issues that they will encounter in life. Knife crime is now such a big issue in some areas that I feel it too should be covered by schools. Although I am not recommending it this be made compulsory, it should be strongly encouraged in every school. This would overcome the stigma currently associated with talking about knife crime in schools and would ensure this message reached as many young people as possible.

For the impact of criminal record checks on young people to be reviewed

More work must be done to convince employers to take on young people who have minor offences on their record. I welcome the Government's recently announced Criminal Records Review, which is examining whether the criminal records regime strikes the right balance between respecting civil liberties and protecting the public.

In addition, I know the Government is taking a fundamental look at this issue as part of their green paper on the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (which aims to remove barriers to reintegration into society for offenders who have not been reconvicted of an offence for a specified time). In particular, I support their proposal to 'wipe the slate clean' once a young offender reaches adulthood for all but the most serious offences.

More encouragement for data sharing

Allowing agencies and projects to come together and share important information helps ensure that they are fully equipped and prepared to deal with individual young people. Privacy and confidentiality are clearly highly important, but sharing data between relevant agencies and services as much as possible will make a big difference.

The London Serious Youth Violence Board are piloting a scheme in different boroughs where they facilitate meetings between schools, police, local authorities and other agencies to discuss hot-spots in the community, identify young people at risk, and those who are causing the damage. This allows everyone to be aware of the highest risk people and places and to contribute to managing these risks.

More early intervention

This was one of the most important and widely raised issues with me in relation to educating young people about the dangers of knife-crime. If we cannot persuade schools to work with younger children, we must fund and develop projects that are suitable for this age group and make them as aware as possible of the paths that may lie ahead for them in the future.

A communal website to link charities to funding opportunities and share best practice/ideas/advice

Knife crime prevention projects are often very local and run by small teams of volunteers. Although many are very well run, when they encounter problems they may feel very isolated and unsure who to turn to. If there was a website that allowed projects across the country to link up to potential funders and to share their ideas, pool resources or ask for advice, this would save a lot of time and energy.

Less ‘ticking boxes’ and form-filling for projects and more grassroots advisers

I began this review with a set of core questions that I wanted every project to answer. Whilst these served as a good guideline, I would never have been able to learn exactly what each project does or feel the difference they have made to young people and their communities without seeing them for myself. Having a team of people who can assess a project personally would give the Home Office and other funders a much more honest evaluation of the value of potential projects. The best people to do this might be people like my own panel of young advisers, who provided invaluable advice and made very mature decisions. Young people would love the chance to have responsibility for their communities and show that the majority of them are not caught up in knife crime but in fact want to stop it.

Communities to be encouraged to come together more

I know such meetings will already be taking place, but in line with the concept of the Big Society, this is something which I think all communities should be encouraged to do.

A credits scheme for young people

Goodies in Hoodies runs a successful project called ‘Active Opportunities’ which is aimed at young people not in employment, education or training and aims to improve access to training and employment. Credits can be earned through volunteering hours, which can then be exchanged for courses such as coaching qualifications, forklift truck driving, CV and interview skills and driving lessons. Volunteering ranges from coaching, cheerleading and football to work placements involving cleaning graffiti, painting local amenities or stewarding at local events.

Not only is this an excellent way to engage with young people, but it also opens up a world of opportunities for them. By enabling young people to earn the opportunity to learn to drive, they can widen their job searching, which has a positive impact on their future. It is such a simple scheme that both rewards the community and has the potential to make a massive difference to a young person's life.

An awards ceremony for young people

Just as we have the Pride of Britain Awards, the BAFTAS and the Sports Awards for adults, I think we should have a nationally recognised awards ceremony for young people that gives them something to aspire to and allows them to be applauded for making the best out of their lives, whatever circumstances they may have encountered.

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