Young people's views on knife crime

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Tackling knife crime is a key issue facing UK policymakers and it is covered extensively by the news. Research has looked at the causes and possible solutions. At Coram we believe it is vital that young people's voices are at the heart of conversations about knife crime.

Methodology

In July and August 2019, Coram's Impact and Evaluation team ran five focus groups with 45 young people living in London to get their views about knife crime. Those who attended the groups did not have experience of being a victim or perpetrator. The groups were made up of boys and girls from different ethnic backgrounds and different parts of London. We were particularly interested to hear what young people thought about stop and search tactics, girls' involvement with knife crime and the idea of a public health approach.

Purpose of this paper

This briefing paper sets out the key findings of these focus groups ahead of Coram's knife crime event on 25 September 2019. After the event, a full report will be published on the Coram website.

What do young people think about knife crime?

Knife crime is everywhere. Young people talked about its pervasive effect in their community. They hear about knife crime "all the time" from family, teachers, friends and media. **Knife crime is part of their lives.** People carry knives to protect themselves from others who carry knives; this is seen as an unstoppable cycle.

Knife crime makes it **difficult for young people to move freely** between their local borough and other areas of London. They fear being confronted by someone carrying a knife when in the wrong postcode or area.

Some young people are **empathetic about the issues and challenges faced by those who carry knives**. For example, they highlight poverty, mental health problems or exclusion from education as risk factors. Others want to see current police measures to deter knife crime, including stop and

search, remain at the same level or increase. Some think longer prison sentences would deter young people from carrying and using a knife, although they could not say what the current prison sentences for knife crime are.

Knife crime is associated with a lack of opportunity, both in terms of employment and healthy ways to spend time, such as attending youth clubs and seeing friends in safe spaces. This lack of opportunity makes it harder for people to quit the knife crime lifestyle. Young people want more safe and healthy things to do in their community and more stable, well-paid employment opportunities. They acknowledge that being involved in knife crime, which could lead to a criminal record, will affect job prospects. Knife crime (and selling drugs) is perceived as a quick way to make money.

School exclusion and not being in school makes young people more vulnerable to being involved. The groups did not think drill music caused knife crime, but some felt it motivated young people to carry and use a knife.

What do young people think about stop and search?

Some young people in the groups had direct experience of being stopped and searched.

Young people do not like the police approach to stop and search but do not think its use should decrease. They think **stop and search is "violating"**; police officers have little respect for the people they stop. If officers were "nicer" and "calmer", more considerate of where the stop and search takes place - for example, not doing it in a busy area where family and friends might see - they would get a calmer, more effective response.

Race, gender and appearance all play a part in the likelihood of being stopped and searched. Some young people think young black men are more likely to be stopped. Many believe the way you look and what you wear, for example acting suspiciously and wearing hooded jumpers and coats rather than smart clothes, makes a stop and search more likely.

Not one young person suggested that stop and search should be stopped completely. Nobody offered any alternatives.

What do young people think about the involvement of girls in knife crime?

There are mixed views about this, including the extent to which girls are at risk, and their involvement. Some believe that although girls are involved in knife crime, it is essentially a boys' problem. Others say girls are at risk of knife crime, both as victims and enablers, but they are perhaps less involved than boys.

Girls are less likely to be involved in committing knife-related violence, but they do carry knives. Young people agree that **girls are less likely than boys to be stopped and searched.**

Vulnerability and abusive relationships are possible explanations for girls' involvement in knife crime. Some think girls could be pressurised or groomed by gangs or boyfriends into carrying knives for them; some say this is equally true for boys, and girls may get involved willingly. Vulnerable girls may have low self-esteem, possibly experience of trauma; they may seek safety with a boyfriend or gang.

Involvement in knife crime or gangs can be attractive to some girls because they like to feel powerful. However the lifestyle introduces them to others who are involved in drugs and crime, and exposes them to gang violence. These factors exist for boys too but girls might be more affected by them.

Young people recognise that **girls can be used as 'bait'.** They encourage boys from a different area or rival gang to leave their area to visit the girl, where they walk into a planned attack by rival boys. Some girls may help fuel a toxic masculine culture.

Do young people think knife crime is a public health issue?

The young people in the focus groups were aware of the concept of a **public health approach to knife crime.** But **few could articulate what it is** and what it means in practice. Some focused on the health aspect, for example GP and mental health support. Older members of the groups had a better understanding; they talked about the underlying causes of knife crime and what different organisations could do to help.

Some mentioned **Glasgow's successful approach** to knife crime. Some recognise that public health is a **"holistic approach"** that looks at how to help individuals.

Knife crime should not be treated as a health issue: this focuses too much on victims rather than perpetrators. It takes focus away from longer-term problems and the root causes of knife crime, such as poverty.

The groups were asked about the role that organisations can play to help support those affected by knife crime, but also in preventative work. Some think **school lessons about healthy relationships and handling emotions** could help people identify and avoid abusive relationships. This could reduce the risk of getting involved in knife crime.

Lessons from teachers are not helpful; young people already know that carrying a knife is dangerous but they still do it. However, lessons from police or youth workers might be more effective. Regular meetings with a mentor are likely to be more successful than one-off events.

Young people recognise the limits on what underfunded schools and pressured teachers can do. Teachers are not necessarily trained or equipped to deal with knife-related issues.

Young people are not keen on the idea of doctors and nurses reporting knife crime. They see this as similar to the Prevent anti-terrorism strategy. It would single out and marginalise certain groups. The charity Redthread, which supports young people through one to one work in hospital emergency departments, is seen as an example of how hospital-based interventions could work.

There is stigma with using social services and young people question their usefulness in helping tackle knife crime. 'Sure Start' was a positive initiative, although centres have now been closed. Youth clubs have a role, helping young people stay off the streets or providing an escape from knife crime for those involved in it. But they are not enough to prevent or stop knife crime.

Where would young people go for help if concerned about knife crime?

There are mixed views about this, and also about seeking help and support at all, because of the **fear that seeking help will reflect badly on them** and label them as 'criminal'. One young person said seeking help would make him look like a "little boy". Older teenagers (generally meaning 15 + years), are less likely to get help than younger children.

Young people would not generally turn to the police for help, because of a lack of trust and also because they carry out stop and search.

School is not seen as a safe forum to talk over worries about knife crime. A concern reported at school would become a safeguarding issue and the student involved **might be labelled negatively by the school.**

Family members or friends can offer support but this depends on the kind of relationship. If they are also involved in knife crime they might not be the best people to turn to.

Other suggestions included social workers, youth workers and religious groups.

Positive role models or mentors are identified as sources of support. There were mixed views about whether mentors need to have personal experience of knife crime. The foundation of trust in a long and regular relationship between a young person and mentor is more important.

How do young people think knife crime can be reduced?

The focus groups emphasised what individual organisations and people could do, rather than how the sectors can come together. Effective solutions need different people and organisations to work together but this is difficult to achieve.

Solutions to knife crime require tackling the deep-rooted causes, such as entrenched poverty, poor mental health and lack of funding for local services for young people.

Six main ideas were suggested at the focus groups for how to tackle knife crime:

1. **Police should be more respectful when they stop and search.** Young people understand that stop and search needs to happen but police officers should be more considerate. They should think about how the young person feels and consider the location of the search. Youth workers could share ideas about how to work with young people to create a more respectful stop and search approach. Police officers and teachers could be educated about the lives of young people and reasons why they might get into knife crime.

2. **Young people should receive education on better relationships and managing emotions.** This could be done via personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education lessons.

3. **Young people should have better access to careers services.** Access to careers services that would help show young people how education can lead to good employment and training opportunities, which would make the lifestyle surrounding knife crime less attractive.

4. **Stop and search levels should stay the same and there should be a tougher criminal justice system.** There should be harsher measures and sentencing for knife crime. There is uncertainty about the current length of prison sentences, so better information about sentencing guidelines could be useful.

5. **Young people should have access to long-term mentors.** The mentor should be a positive role model who can develop a long-standing relationship and highlight social and professional opportunities for a young person to get involved with.

6. **There should be more healthy, safe opportunities for young people to spend their time.** More funding of youth centres and opportunities for young people would provide alternatives to gang membership and drug dealing.

About Coram

Coram is the UK children's charity that has been supporting children for almost 300 years. Coram's mission is to develop, deliver and promote best practice in the care of vulnerable children, young people and their families.

Coram's Impact and Evaluation team works in partnership with public sector and third sector organisations to research and evaluate the effect of services that seek to positively impact children and young people's lives. The team also works across the Coram group of charities to help teams to evaluate their effectiveness.

Thank you to the young people, schools and organisations who took part in the focus groups, making this research possible.

For more information about the research email impactandevaluation@coram.org.uk