Parliamentary briefing: preventing and responding to serious youth violence

Summary

- The Children’s Society’s research has found that as many as 2.2 million children across the UK aged 10-17 are worried about crime with 950,000 children having experienced crime or anti-social behaviour.
- The approach to preventing and responding to serious youth violence must be child-centred and multi-agency. This response should safeguard, and not criminalise children at the earliest opportunity. We are encouraged by the Government’s proposed public health approach but action must match this rhetoric.
- Increased police powers and interventions will not solve this problem alone. The complexity of youth violence and knife crime requires a nuanced, fully funded approach bringing together statutory agencies and civil society.
- The proposed new Knife Crime Prevention Orders, similar to previous initiatives, could result in exploited children such as those involved in ‘county lines’ being criminalised rather than safeguarded. This runs counter to the provisions set out in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 which recognises the need to safeguard victims of exploitation over seeking criminal prosecutions.
- The introduction of these new civil orders risk criminalisation children as young as 12 and are highly likely to have the biggest impact on BAME children. Introducing more punitive measures runs the risk of splintering the fragile relationship between young people and authorities.
- The £51m packet of measures in the Serious Violence Strategy is warmly welcomed, as is the £200m Youth Endowment Fund; however in the wake of funding available for local authority children’s services, including youth services, having fallen by £3 billion since 2010, sustained long-term funding must for children’s and young people’s services must be allocated at the Spending Review.

1. Introduction

The Children’s Society’s Good Childhood Report 2017 estimated that as many as 2.2 million children across the UK aged 10-17 are worried about crime and anti-social behaviour, and an estimated 950,000 children aged 10-17 had experienced crime\(^1\). Fear of crime is often cited in reasons why children themselves carry weapons. From September 2017 to September 2018 knife crime had increased by 68.4% across England and Wales (excluding the Greater Manchester Police area)\(^2\). The Children’s Society is clear that it is imperative upon the central government, the police, local authorities and civil society to have a joined-up approach to preventing and responding to serious youth violence.

We are pleased to see the Home Office announce a consultation on taking a public health approach to knife crime. However action must meet this rhetoric, and we would urge the Home Office to bring forward these plans at the earliest opportunity. Core to this model must be the
need to prevent the criminalisation of children, and to intervene early to prevent young people becoming involved in violence.

Viewing youth violence through a public health lens would help enable a more effective, multi-agency response. It could shift the discourse from solely viewing these young people as criminals to a more nuanced understanding of the contextual factors which have contributed to young people becoming involved in violence, including the exploitation many have themselves faced.

Interventions for young people involved in serious youth violence often come too late. In our services, we know that young people caught up in criminal exploitation and associated youth violence often have a wide range of unmet learning, conduct and emotional needs.

The Children’s Society believe that a rapid safeguarding response needs to be followed through early when a child is deemed to be at risk. Effective early intervention, including through appropriate early diagnosis of conduct disorders, would stop the downward trajectory from a child misbehaving in school, subsequently being excluded, to becoming a victim of criminal exploitation and carrying a weapon as a result.

2. Preventing and responding to serious youth violence

The Children’s Society believe a whole-systems approach is needed to address rising levels of youth violence. The Government need to create a flexible, fully funded model that can be adapted to local needs.

Responding to risks outside of the family environment

Since knife crime amongst adolescents occurs largely outside of the family home, safeguarding measures need to reflect external risk factors when planning how to keep a child safe from harm.

The Children’s Society believe that any form of safeguarding should begin as early as it can – including where possible, prior to an incident of violence or exploitation taking place. This means providing meaningful support to prevent escalations where there are indicators that a child might be carrying knife or when the child is caught with a knife for the first time. Our practitioners inform us that very few local authorities utilise this window of opportunity to prevent; and research highlights that local authority spending on early intervention has reduced by 49% since 2010. Joint multi-agency and safeguarding boards could be used more effectively to identify risk and target safeguards accordingly.
Multi-agency working

As the risks to children change, so must the responses of statutory agencies and the voluntary sector. Multi-Agency Child Exploitation meetings (MACE) are one such safeguarding tool that can be utilised effectively by local authorities to identify and protect young people involved in often serious violence. Local strategic forums such as this are vital to co-ordinating support for a child identified as in need of support, but often these forums assess and provide support at the point of crisis and not before. Most of the guidance and protocols for such strategic forums place a joint onus on a range of services to identify vulnerabilities in children prior to and during exploitation to safeguard accordingly. The government urgently need to ensure all areas follow similar protocols and identify children prior to when abuse takes place in order to prevent their involvement in serious violence.

Schools and youth provision

Schools have a significant role to play in preventing youth violence, and despite financial pressures, many are doing so. However, Ofsted’s recent report into knife crime shows inconsistencies across different school approaches in London, which indicates a lack of national guidance over what works. Whilst the report finds no evidence suggesting exclusions are the root-cause of surge in knife violence, this needs further exploration. The Children’s Society are due to publish research into child criminal exploitation in the late Spring that will further explore school exclusions and attending alternative education and their association with criminal exploitation and serious youth violence. Whilst it’s important to improve safeguarding protocols and support for a young person being excluded, provisions should be in place much earlier, before disciplinary action has taken place.

The statutory safeguarding guidance for schools, Keeping Children Safe in Education, is primarily focused on reactive safeguarding, led by child disclosures of abuse and neglect perpetrated in the home. For children to be identified before the risk becomes acute, the safeguarding must be proactive. This means early identification and intervention. A proactive safeguarding culture involves every child and every adult, and thereby encourages peers to protect and empower one another. Anti-knife and violence initiatives work best when young people are engaged and feel part of the solution.

It has been documented that as relationships with statutory authorities break down, young people increasingly look to one another for support. Through sustaining positive relationships and providing one another with alternative opportunities, young people can empower one another. Spotlight, a series of youth centres in East London, provide a space for young people to form positive relationships with peers and youth workers. Spaces such as this need to be
championed by central government. This involves re-instating funding nationwide for youth services to not only prevent violence, but to provide young people who need it with alternative opportunities to succeed.

**Current policing response**

Government responses to deterring violent crime and anti-social behaviour over the previous two decades have been to enforce criminal and punitive civil deterrents. So far these sanctions have ranged from ASBOs to Dispersal Orders, from Criminal Behaviour Orders to Gang Injunctions and now to the latest proposed initiative, Knife Crime Prevention Orders. So far, such deterrents have not made a substantial impact on reducing levels of youth violence. Knife crime in particular has risen, statistics from hospitals on the number of admissions for stab wounds from 2012 – 2017 has increased by 13% in England and 17% in London.

The recently published State of Children’s Rights report shows that the use of police TASER and ‘spithoods’ against children are both also increasing. There were for example, 871 accounts of the use of TASER on children in 2017 and 839 in the first 9 months of 2018. It is worth noting that both the use of TASER and ‘spithoods’ were disproportionately used against children from BAME backgrounds.

Further, in relation to stop and search, a study published by the Home Office in 2016 found that, between 2008-11 as part of Operation BLUNT 2 in London-

> “there was no discernible crime-reducing effects from a large surge in stop and search activity at the borough level during the operation.”

It is wholly appropriate for a Government to develop policies that will act as a deterrent to violent crime, however there is a body of evidence to suggest confrontational interventions, such as stop and searches, frequently do not reduce crime rates. The Home Office have rightly acknowledged that a whole systems approach is needed to reduce the levels of youth violence. Yet so far, what has been deployed are increased stop and search powers, extra funding for police and Knife Crime Prevention Orders. Further preventative and holistic measures, such as a reinvestment in high-quality youth work, should be further prioritised.

**‘Big up the Bill’**

The Children’s Society run a youth-led campaign to help all police professionals learn how to best work with marginalised children and young people. ‘Big up the Bill’ recognises the importance of first impressions with police professionals can have on young people. The campaign produces advice on how these impressions can be improved. It is imperative that police professionals receive training on how to work with marginalised children to try and counteract negative assumptions. This campaign has highlighted how many dedicated and understanding police officers are in service, and with the appropriate training, resources and partnerships, they can have a positive role to play for safeguarding children and disrupting serious violence. However without all of these components, police officers are only able to implement punitive responses.

**Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs)**

The Children’s Society has raised serious concerns regarding the Knife Crime Prevention Orders. These new deterrents can be imposed on any person aged 12 or over to prevent vulnerable young people from becoming involved in knife possession and knife crime. These orders could place restrictions on the recipients preventing them from:

- entering certain geographical areas;
- associating with certain individuals;
- using social media.
They could also instruct young people to work with a youth worker or attend an educational programme. The Home Office have stated this will prevent the rapid escalation of rival disputes.

In an Urgent Question on 4th February 2019 to the House of Commons the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, Victoria Atkins MP, emphasised that these orders were preventative and aimed at a small cohort of young people. The Home Office should place greater priority on disrupting youth violence by targeting adults who coerce, control and threaten young people instead of sanctioning a small number of young people. These Knife Crime Prevention Orders are targeted at children and young people who themselves could be victims of exploitation rather than the perpetrators themselves. This runs counter to the world-leading provisions set out in the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Nor is there a recognition within these orders that a child carrying an offensive weapon should unambiguously prompt a safeguarding response under the duties set out in the Children Act 1989.

What is more, these orders can be issued on the balance of probability. These orders can be issued if the police suspect a person as young as 12 could have carried a knife twice in the last two years, rather than arrested, charged for convicted for doing so. This suspicion can be ‘intelligence’ led, meaning the police do not have to necessarily evidence their suspicions. Our practitioners have raised serious concerns that intelligence gathered on young people in a safeguarding capacity - i.e. where The Children’s Society workers suspect a child is being exploited - could also be used as the justification for issuing a KCPO. The Children’s Society organisations are deeply concerned that that these orders would infringe of the rights of children and could be disproportionately issued to children from a BAME background.

The Home Office have justified these KCPOs on the basis that they can be preventative by having ‘positive’ conditions attached to the orders, such as a young person engaging with a youth worker or placed on an education programme. As currently drafted, it is unclear whether voluntary organisations would have to monitor the compliance of young people they are instructed to work with and report any breaches to the authorities. The Home Office must understand that organisations on the frontline of serious youth violence are often the only support system trusted by communities because of independence from statutory agencies. Requiring voluntary agencies to report a breach of an order is deeply troubling, placing workers who have strong relationships with young people in an impossible situation. The Home Office need to consult with the voluntary sector and provide guidance as to which organisations will monitor compliance of an order.

As currently drafted, these orders risk criminalising young people and pushing them further from support. Orders restricting movement or association, for example, misunderstand child exploitation. For exploited children, even a risk of a two year prison sentence will not act as a deterrent as the threats from their exploiter are much more real to them. Our practitioners are concerned that these orders could even pose a safety risk to criminally exploited young people. We know through working with exploited young women who breach bail conditions that the fear of the exploiter outweighs the fear of the law. We would urge Parliamentarians to raise these concerns with the Home Office and ensure alternative interventions were given to children identified as being exploited.

We know through working with exploited young women who breach bail conditions that the fear of the exploiter outweighs the fear of the law. We would urge Parliamentarians to raise these concerns with the Home Office and ensure alternative interventions were given to children identified as being exploited.

Whilst the Home Office need to act and reduce levels of youth violence, the Government must stop and think about the effects these interventions will have on vulnerable young people. Increasing police powers and funding might provide short-term relief, but without addressing the
systemic underlying problems, this latest wave of deterrents will simply create the same division amongst vulnerable young people and authorities as previous initiatives have done.

**We urge Parliamentarians to raise these concerns with the Minister during the final stages of the Offensive Weapons Bill.**

### 3. Youth violence: the need for positive interventions

Our practitioners recognise the diversity of young people involved in serious violence. Whilst every child’s story is different, what remains consistent is the normalisation of violence and their fear of it. This in part stems from a lack of trust in statutory authorities to protect them and act in their best interests. As youth services are being cut and agencies are unable to safeguard at the earliest stage, responses are often only delivered at crisis point.

Positive interventions during moments of vulnerability can be very effective. There are excellent examples of community and national projects providing such support. The Children’s Society run several projects that support criminally exploited young men, often involved in serious violence. Our STRIDE service delivers relationship based support for young men, empowering them to build up their own support networks and thereby enabling them to access services. The priority for our team is to ensure safeguards are in place, and thereby reducing the harm surrounding the child. We know however that these services are not widely available. Often the only service that intervene at a point of crisis, when a young person has been involved in serious youth violence, are the police.

What these young people see as a result, is mostly only targeted punitive interventions from the police – often disproportionately experienced by BAME young people. The Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) released statistics showing that in 2018 those from the BAME community were 4.6 times more likely to be searched than white people, compared with 2.6 times in the previous year. Feedback from young people that we support is reflective of the findings in The David Lammy Review - in BAME communities young people say their distrust with the police starts from a young age. Similarly, the Prime Minister’s Race Disparity Audit found that only 3 in 5 black young people trust the police.

### 4. A new approach to youth violence

The Children’s Society do not believe we possess a simple answer to reducing youth violence. What we do know is that civil society, authorities and communities all have a part to play in this.

In order to address the root causes of youth violence, the government should focus on early intervention. In order to do this, the Home Office need to acknowledge the impact of the loss of youth services across the country. The £51 million packet of measures announced in the Serious Violence Strategy and the £200 million Youth Endowment Fund amount to just one fifth of the reduction in money spent youth services since 2010, and less than 1 per cent of the funding taken away from children’s services overall since 2010.

Whilst the Youth Endowment Fund and other preventative measures the Home Office has rolled out are welcome, it does not fill the gaping hole from a loss of services elsewhere. Nearly £17 billion per year – equivalent to £287 per person – is spent in England and Wales by the state on the cost of late intervention. This presents a clear economic and social argument to investing in early intervention services, these strategies can be just as an effective deterrent than sanctions that can cause social division.

The government need to remember that youth violence is complex and the strategy to tackle it should be multifaceted to reflect this. What is missing from the discourse is a recognition that whilst young people can commit serious violence, they can also be victims themselves. The
Children’s Society would urge the government to update their Serious Violence Strategy and align it with the updated Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance in order to ensure that violence that includes young people is consistently recognised as a safeguarding issue.

**Questions to the Minister**

- Does the Minister know how many children carry weapons out of fear and the need to protect themselves and how many of them received assessments of needs from services and an offer of help?
- How is the Minister working with Department for Education and local government to ensure that children involved in carrying knives always receive a safeguarding response?
- Will the Minister update their Serious Violence Strategy to align it with the updated Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance to acknowledge that violence involving young people is a safeguarding issue?
- Does the Minister think there is a correlation between funding cuts to youth services and rising levels of youth violence?
- How will the Minister ensure that children at risk of, or being exploited do not get issued with a Knife Crime Prevention Order that could lead to criminalisation?
- Will the Minister clarify who will monitor compliance of children being issued a Knife Crime Prevention Orders?

---

**For more information please contact Hannah Small, Public Affairs Officer, on Hannah.Small@childrenssociety.org.uk**

---

3. PAN Merseyside, Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Protocol 2018: Date Published 20th April 2018 Review Date 20th October 2018
6. https://wearespotlight.com/