

Written evidence submitted by Phoenix Education Consultancy (BYC008)

Knife Crime Consultation: a response to the British Youth Council's call for evidence

1. 1 million young people voted to make Knife Crime a priority for the Youth Select Committee, a British Youth Council initiative supported by the House of Commons. Youth violence and knife crime has been both a persistent and successive concern for the UK government and despite several action focused announcements and an additional £100 million budget for knife crime prevention and proactive interventions, there is still a need for action, improvement and innovation in the solutions we provide to and for our society.

2. KIP CIC and Phoenix Education Consultancy work in both mainstream schools and alternative education to improve behaviours, opportunities and outcomes for vulnerable and challenging children and young people. As a team we have worked in pupil referral units, psychiatric wards, children's hospitals and young offender's prisons, providing mental health support and education to the children and young people learning in these environments.

Overview

3. Although there is little evidence to connect school exclusions directly to knife crime, a recent report from children's commissioner, Anne Longfield shows that there is extensive evidence linking school exclusions and gang involvement. She further suggested that some alternative provision for excluded children have become 'gang grooming grounds'. However, government behaviour adviser, Tom Bennett suggests that we shouldn't confuse correlations and causations and must understand that much of what we consider to be a 'cause' of youth violence is instead a symptom or bi-product of poverty.

4. Although it is very easy to be pulled into a debate about the rights and wrongs of prevention and intervention; causes and correlations, when we step back to look at the various factors contributing to knife crime, we believe the area most in need of attention is not where we need to be as a society but what initial steps we need to take in order to begin that journey that will take us there.

5. Although there are many conversations around youth crime that start and conclude with a focus on policing, those individuals that have relationships with the children most likely to contribute to the knife crime epidemic, recognise that what's most important is the root causes of the emotions, behaviours and circumstances that drive violent crime amongst young people.

Austerity

6. Stephen Case, professor of criminology at Loughborough University, focused on the toxic environment austerity creates for children. Professor Case, who highlights the fact that the vast majority of knife crime takes place in neighbourhoods suffering from huge social disadvantage and disinvestment and further reports that when you begin to analyse the toxic environments creates in these areas, that it really is no surprise.

7. We think it's important to understand what austerity really means for young people. In the last six years, there has been a £422.3million reduction in spending on services for young people. 3,500 youth service jobs have been lost, 600 youth centres closed and 130,000 places at youth centres have been eliminated since 2010.

8. Austerity is more than a reduction in youth centres, though. Austerity contributes to the parents that have to make a choice between feeding themselves or their children. Austerity creates the mum that is so anxious and ashamed that she can't provide a nurturing environment for her child that she is also unable to provide stability and security. Austerity contributes to the large number of children that don't feel safe, not only on the streets but also in their own homes.

9. I think it's important to recognise that austerity doesn't just affect those families that are dependent on the state but also the families that are too scared to take extended maternity leave in case they lose their jobs, the families working around the clock to make their mortgage payments and the children that have a greater understanding of costs and financial restrictions than they do of basic maths and English.

10. Austerity contributes to the feelings of uncertainty, sense of injustice and frustration that become contagious; spreading from parent to child, from pupils to their peers and ultimately from an established gang member to a potential one.

11. For some children, austerity makes it easy for them to unite in their anger and understand achievement as an ability to overcome the limitations they experience. Austerity contributes to a culture of isolation and independence rather than community and collaboration and drives the desire to fight for yourself whilst craving a sense of belonging. When we begin to understand the impact austerity can have on children and young people, the problems we are currently experiencing with gang culture and youth crime almost become inevitable.

Mental Health

12. Mental Health problems now affect 1 in 10 children and mental health illnesses including eating disorders, addiction and anxiety have become commonplace in childhood interactions and young people's relationships. We acknowledge that there are variants in this figure of 1 in 10 and that certain demographic of children are more likely to be unduly affected by mental health conditions.

13. Although the numbers of children experiencing mental health problems have increased at an unprecedented rate, the services that are designed to understand, support and improve the mental health of young people have been able to develop at the same rate. For too long, child and adolescent mental health services have been the poorer provision compared to paediatric services for children's physical health. Government targets of meeting the need of 30% of children is not good enough. We need to invest in the training, skills and expertise for CAMHS services and makes sure that it is integral to the provision for children and young people.

14. It is also important, in the development and implementation of appropriate solutions that we are able to understand the causes of poor mental health in children. Time and time again, the increases in stress, anxiety and other mental health issues point to symptoms of austerity and the unspoken issues of simply being unable to solve the many complex challenges austerity creates.

15. Poor mental health in children doesn't simply begin in childhood but is instead is crafted from a child's conception and influenced by everything from the physical and mental wellbeing of their parents through to their early experiences of socialisation, their understanding of attachment and the nature of their diet in their early years. We often talk about early interventions and refer to understanding mental health before a child reaching their teens but actually when we talk about early intervention we must have a clear view of what this means. Early intervention means providing parents/carers with support prior to a child's birth and thereafter children services that allow for mutual experiences with child and carer in the primary years. The constant erosion of children's services such as Sure Start centres must be addressed and seen as an integral part of the offer that we make for communities and their children.

16. Early intervention is about supporting parents rather than punishing them and understanding how we can help them thrive as parents rather than pointing out the likelihood of their failures. It's about ensuring the during a child's early years, they develop and maintain secure attachments rather than the excessive responses to stress we see more and more frequently. Early intervention should include listening to parental needs and understanding what changes we can make as a society in order to meet them; actively taking steps to reduce the number of children that experience poor mental health rather than simply getting better at restricting and punishing the behaviours it can create.

Exclusions and Alternative Provision

17. Although there is little evidence to support a direct link between exclusions and knife crime, it is undeniable that exclusions, in many cases, a symptom of austerity - the domino that follows on from poverty, mental health issues and traumatic childhoods.

18. We believe it is important to articulate what can make a childhood traumatic as too often we focus on the extremes of physical, sexual and mental abuse; overlooking the profound impact emotionally absent, incredibly stressed or insecure and unstable family lives can have on a child.

19. Currently, our education system and our society believe that when we exclude a child we should punish them by removing their ability to embrace many of the components of education that exist outside of the core curriculum. We believe it is acceptable to label children that are unable to thrive in mainstream school and limit their future opportunities accordingly. We create a narrative, both internally and externally that undermine and isolate them and further fuel many of the conditions that if not caused, has contributed to their behaviour.

20. When we, as a system and a society give up on children, when we refer to their places of learning as '*sin bins*' and make them feel that their future is limited to poverty and crime, it is unsurprising that this is

the future that follows for many. When we extract children from our society and minimise or completely eradicate their sense of self-worth, their ability to believe in possibility and surround them with children to whom we have done the same, it is almost inevitable for gang culture to develop. In many ways, alternative provisions are a breeding ground for gangs but it is not because of the children, it is instead the way we as a society perceive AP and the limitations we put on children that are already vulnerable as a result of our failings as parents, professionals and as a community.

Solutions

21. Our approach to solutions is often complex and confused. We debate the merits of prevention and intervention and passionately debate the ultimate outcomes for education and analyse the ways in which we could redesign society.

22. We are incredibly passionate about helping people understand the need for regeneration. We are incredibly aware of the fact that any solution must support and improve the lives of children and young people in the system today whilst also moving the entire system, and our society forward for the future.

23. Many of us understand where we need to go but struggle to understand what we must do right now in order to begin the journey that will get us there. To create immediate improvement and sustainable change, we believe we must operate a three pronged approach which we have briefly outlined below:

24. Preventative: Preventative solutions are often the measures that would both innovate and overhaul society. Preventative measures would improve our economy, our government, the physical and mental health of our nation and the overall wealth and equality of our society. Preventative solutions are very much the goal and although it may take us many years to reach them, it is important that we move towards them rather than away from them. We can do this by:

- Investing in research around new diagnosis and treatments relating to mental health.
- Instilling effective long term budget controls and innovative solutions for social interventions and state services
- Clearly define what various areas of society are responsible for and understand where personal and public responsibility meet (i.e: are employers responsible for mental health issues or should they instead simply commit to 'doing no harm'; is the NHS a place for proactive health care or simply response to illness? Should social housing budgets be used to facilitate traditional social housing options or provide people with financial support into private rented accommodation) Should we increase the costs of 'bad' food and make 'good' foods more readily available? Should our education system ultimately focus on life and employability skills rather than the traditional notion of academia?)

25. Proactive: Proactive Solutions are the things we can do today that should improve tomorrow. Proactive Solutions don't require the society overhaul truly preventative solutions demand but

should reduce the numbers of all symptoms of austerity and dramatically reduce the prevalence of youth violence and crime. We can begin to implement proactive solutions today and by utilising technology, expertise and looking at budgets and associated outcomes as a picture rather than puzzle, we should be able to generate substantial societal change.

Some of the proactive solutions could include:

- Improving regulations around maternity and paternity leave to ensure employers support and fuel the development of health child attachments
- Provide all parents with access to a digital service that delivers practical parenting tips and skills for children of all ages (to help parents proactively tackle issues surrounding mental health, identity, esteem etc)
- Drive towards a more diverse and engaging curriculum is welcomed, we must ensure that there are appropriate resources to fund this. In the past, children and young people that were struggling in school would have opportunities such as vocational courses. The attrition of curriculum options is having a fundamental impact on children's engagement with education.
- Regulate the permissions and responsibilities the media have when it comes to reporting, researching or referencing children, young people, mental health and Alternative Provision.
- Extend extra-curricular activities and focus on providing the most vulnerable and challenging children and young people with a sense of belonging and purpose through talent and interest discovery and development.
- Analysing the current universal credit system to ensure parents are aware of all the benefits they are able to access (healthy start vouchers and vitamins, for example) and make it as easy as possible for these to be utilised
- Utilising community spaces to provide support, encouragement and connection for parents and caregivers
- Review our understanding of domestic abuse and analyse (particularly) fathers risks of mental health problems during pregnancy and offer support and intervention during the perinatal stage rather than punishing and isolating father than may express their challenges through abuse
- Extend the 'earning' cap on benefits for parents (particularly single parents) to incentivise them to create better lifestyles for their children and ensure society benefits from, for example, improved diets, family holidays, extra curricular activities etc
- Encourage and where possible enforce a mutual regard for mainstream learning, academic education and alternative provision, vocation qualifications.

26. Reactive: The way in which we react to childhood violence and knife crime can also improve and, although we have limited expertise in the detail of punishment, as alternative education experts, we do recognise some of the qualities that reduce the likelihood of reoffending. Whilst we recognise the need to punish and deter childhood violence is critical, we must also work to

prevent a reoccurring cycle of this behaviour. We must recognise that human beings are governed by their perception and understanding of their identity. We must acknowledge that humans crave a community and need a sense of belonging in order to thrive and if, in our commitment to punish, we encourage children and young people to find their sense of self in gangs and crime, we can only expect them to repeat cycles of violence and antisocial behaviours throughout their lives.

To improve the way in which we react to child violence and knife crime we should:

- Improve learning opportunities within young offenders institutes
- Encourage employers to offer learning or working experiences to young offenders
- Extend opportunities within education to those who have been involved in crime
- Create (using digital platforms if required) networks of reformed offenders united by their sense of ambition, hope and commitment to rehabilitation
- Facilitate easier relocation resources for offenders keen to geographically relocate (remove the requirement to have lived in a borough for 5 years to access social housing, for example)
- Ensure families are skilled and supported in managing their children's behaviours and motivations for crime
- Improve understanding of any mental health diagnosis and ensure both young people and those around them understand what their diagnostic label means and how it manifests itself in their day to day lives.

27. It is in our opinion that these three strands of activity must operate together to ultimately improve and where possible eradicate violence and crime. Favouring one solution will simply fuel problems in another aspect of our society and focusing on long term outcomes is likely to prevent any short term improvements. The three strands of activity should be modelled and analysed with finances, activity and responsibility mapped across a 5 year plan to ensure we can understand interaction between each action and the ways in which each small outcome helps us move towards a future that can be truly preventative in nature.

Biography of contributors to this report Sarah Dove BA (Hons) Sociology & Criminology, MA, NPQH, QTS (Phoenix Education Consultancy)

28. Sarah Dove has had extensive experience of working with children and young people in the last eighteen years. This has included; a specialist youth worker in the East End of London, detached youth worker supporting police and community services for children at risk of violence, leading tier four psychiatric in-patient services, Head of secondary PRU in Bexley, Deputy Head Teacher of care home education and currently enjoys a varied role as education consultant. These roles include the interim Head of Behaviour and Inclusion in Redbridge, Project manager for the Department of Education Innovation Fund as well as a well-respected key note speaker on issues such as trauma, attachment disorder, mental health needs and impact on education. Sarah Dove is currently completing her PhD research titled 'Young people's experiences of alternative provision: A critical review of how feelings of belonging affect young people's experiences of mainstream schooling'. Sarah Dove is the President of PRUsAP, a member of Redbridge's Youth Offending Service management board, SEN governor of a primary school and member of executive board for KIP education.