

Written evidence submitted by the Greater Manchester Youth Combined Authority¹(BYC017)

Members of the **Greater Manchester Youth Combined Authority** were asked to consider the following questions in their 'home' organisations and to bring their thoughts to a YCA meeting and to engage in debate with their fellow members. This is a summary of the discussion with quotes and statements from flipcharts in red.

Is treating knife crime as a public health issue a good approach?

Members's discussion focused on two main areas: There is support for the idea that it is a public health issue as there is a significant impact on people's mental and physical health. One young person talked about his levels of anxiety on the one occasion he had carried a knife, he was extremely worried he would be stopped by the police. There is concern that seeing knife crime as a public health issue will lead to the police not policing and passing the costs on to an overstretched health service.

The majority of members felt it is a social issue and the reasons young people carry knives should be addressed. A minority feel it is a crime first and foremost and should be treated as such.

No – all this will do is pass the cost to health instead of police, no more will be achieved.

Yes – because it affects people's mental and physical health

I feel it should be treated as a social issue and what it truly is: a crime

No – the motives around knife crime should be treated as the main issue.

Why do young people carry knives?

It is clear for most the young people it is a question of safety and perceived danger and need for protection. The lack of youth provision and places to go came up a lot. Young people feel peer pressure along with the idea that 'everyone is doing it and if I don't I will be unsafe' is an important factor. Carrying and using a knife are seen as two different things and the safety factor for most of them was the carrying of the knife. Although members report knowing people that carried knives and one or two have themselves very, very few knew anyone who had used a knife as a weapon. One young person talked about his school and how for some young men carrying a knife was part of their family culture and they were encouraged by family members. A member who spends a lot of time on outdoor pursuits and wood craft couldn't understand why carrying a knife is always a negative thing as their experience of using a knife in a woodland setting is a positive experience for them.

Safety, protection, fear, image, feel obligated to do so through fear and misconception that everyone carries a knife.

¹ Membership of the Youth Combined Authority comprises of 40 young people aged between 11 and 18 (or up to 25 for those with additional needs). Each member serves for up to two years. The 40 members of the YCA represent 20 youth groups across Greater Manchester. Half the members come from Greater Manchester's youth councils, and the other half from other youth organisations.

Young people need to be told how they are more likely to be hurt by the knife they carry themselves. Some carry it as a threat, but are not bold enough to use it.

Born out of austerity; less money, more drugs etc. Police cuts – no consequence for carrying one.

Peer pressure.

Schools, friends, gangs, groups

Lock downs in schools which really do not help!

Either to protect themselves or make people think they are 'hard'

Previously a gang related issue but now become more focussed on personal defence – people carrying knives out of fear of being attacked.

Peer pressure and fear

To feel safe, secure or act big

Chain reaction

Revenge

Protection and self defence

Fear/ area you live in

Fear of bullying and feeling weaker

Media coverage has blown the issue out of proportion

Cultural or parental encouragement/influence

Celebs that have been part of gang culture have glamorised it

Think it is cool

Do you think it is fear that makes young people carry knives?

Fear is the issue that comes up over and over again, whether it is from a genuine and real fear based on experience or perceived fear driven by gossip and the media. Different experiences drive the fear; fear of gangs, fear of bullying, of looking weak, all are cited as reasons young people carried knives.

Yes – the fear of gangs and crime drives the belief that a knife should be carried.

Yes – fear for their own safety

Where does this fear come from?

For many members the fear comes from media reporting that leads people to see the issue as more widespread than it possibly is. A significant number said that gang culture has led to young people carrying knives and that in its self creates fear and causes other young people to think they need to protect themselves. They feel in some areas it is normalised behaviour and not seen as out of the ordinary.

Gang related

It's been normalised

It's cool

Gang culture

Drug culture

What can be done to address this fear?

Members feel that education is key and starting at quite a young age, i.e. year 6. The emphasis on out of school education, in youth centres and provision is preferred. Assemblies are not seen as good ways to get information over and there needs to be room and opportunities for discussion in small groups with trusted adults who will treat the conversations confidentially. It is important for young people to have a sense of belonging and sometimes gangs are the only thing on offer, young people need the opportunity to socialise and belong to groups outside schools. Members recognised the benefit to themselves of the organisations they belonged to.

Education about the dangers

Youth centres and youth provision

Work in schools and colleges, but not in assemblies

Real life stories

Work with young people outside of school

Ask young people who do or have carried knives

Show the alternatives

Prevention at a young age

Create a sense of belonging somewhere outside of gangs

Do you think young people's involvement in knife crime is affected by gang culture, music and / or social media?

For some young people gang culture and its portrayal on social media is a problem. If you lack other opportunities and you don't belong a gang can seem attractive as alternative 'family'. Social media can glamorise the lifestyle and downplays the negative aspects. Young people can be groomed through social media.

Yes, it feeds and fuels the issue significantly, probably subconsciously to most people.

Gang culture is glorified through social media and film, but it is a lifestyle that offers danger and problems. People should be educated to avoid gang culture.

Gang culture and social media – yes.

Do you know what support is available to identify and help young people at risk of getting involved in knife crime?

There was a lack of awareness of support to help young people at risk and a lack of trust in the system as support is linked to law enforcement in most young people's eyes. Help and support often comes too late and they don't know anyone who has been helped other than through projects on the street, i.e. detached youth work. There is a need for education and rehabilitation in schools, colleges, work and out of school community settings.

No-one aware of any help available, but often it is too late once it has been identified. No-one knows if it works for definite, no experience or knowledge of anyone, even those they know could do with it, getting any help. People are too scared to say the names of people who need it.

It is hard to tell people not to carry knives. There must be more education on knife crime and rehabilitation for offenders afterwards.

No – don't know about anything other than the police

Crime-stoppers

Projects working on the streets

Does it work?

Detached youth work is seen as an approach that can work through the relationships youth workers develop with young people and that they can talk to them directly. This is in direct contrast to the large scale assemblies the police run as for a multitude of reasons many young people do not relate or respect the police. The members feel a focus on law enforcement doesn't understand the nuances of why someone would carry a knife.

The projects on the streets work – as it gives young people something else to do and it's a different approach.

Do you know of anything happening locally?

Members know projects that are working locally and gave examples of where they are campaigning.

It is a growing problem in Rochdale, especially in Middleton. Rochdale Youth Council working hard at the moment to act on it and have a plan in place which is progressing well. They are meeting with Chief Constable Mark Warner next week to try and make a day to hand knives in with no punishment. Youth workers are doing detached work to speak to youth about it directly. There is more awareness of what is happening where young people are campaigning and in the city of Manchester where many of the projects are based. A number of these projects have been in existence for a number of years and are based in communities who have suffered from knife crime.

Manchester Young Lives

Street Doctors

City in the community programme

Fathers Against Violence

Mothers Against Violence

How effective are positive role models in deterring young people in getting involved in gang and criminal activity?

A number of members attended a talk given by Prince's Trust Ambassador, Hezron Brown where he talked in an honest, funny and graphic description of his journey into and out of gangs. Young people responded to his honesty and the authenticity of his experience. The opportunity to listen ask questions in a big group and then in a more personal setting, even one to one was valued and is still having an impact two months later.

A bit, but only if they see the young people directly at events. Hezron Brown had a big impact at the last Youthforia event – anything similar from others is good.

Inspirational speakers are a good way to spread awareness – Hezron Brown.

Do police stop and search powers help promote safety and / or put young people off carrying knives?

For a few stop and search is a good thing as if you are not carrying a knife you have nothing to fear. Ethical concerns loom large and a number of members feel the police target BAME young people unfairly. The police could work in communities to build better relationships and this would help. Lack of trust means young people don't want to talk to the police.

There is concern about the impact on young people with mental health issues and those on the autism spectrum who may respond in a way police find 'suspicious'. For young people who identify as trans the fear of being searched in an unsympathetic way is very real.

Nope, not at all. They just need a better police presence around.

I believe it does – but ethical questions remain.

Stop and search affects innocent people more than those carrying knives

People respond to stop and search in different ways, Race is definitely a factor and stop and search isn't always warranted

No – it doesn't stop violence and creates more stress about the issue. Police need to do more in the community

Yes as police can confiscate weapons/knives

Police are known to target specific groups so this just reinforces negative stereotypes

This can be very traumatic for young people with sexual trauma, mental health issues, gender dysphoria or autism

How do you target the right people? Can be racially motivated – targeting minority groups

No – it would make me defensive, Yes – but it's a drop in the ocean and just demonstrates police authority and is ineffective most of the time.

