

Written evidence submitted by Ofsted (BYC028)

1. In March 2019 Ofsted published a report into safeguarding children and young people in education from knife crime¹. The report was the result of research carried out in 29 schools, colleges and pupil referral units (PRUs) in London. Below is a short synopsis of some of evidence we found, but we recommend reading the full report also supplied with this evidence.

General

How is knife crime affecting schools

2. Our report found that staff and school leaders are generally confident that children are safe from knife crime at school and children confirmed this. Leaders say that they keep pupils safe on the premises through policies and practice, their zero-tolerance approach to bladed objects, their clear expectations of pupils' behaviour, good levels of supervision at the start and end of the school day, including on the school gate and at the bus stops, and the visibility, albeit reduced, of a police officer at the school.

3. The most dangerous time for children is shortly after school, between 4pm and 6pm. So, while children might be safe on site, their safety after school is a concern for children, their parents and their teachers. Several schools told us that they endeavour to keep pupils safe on arrival and departure from school by ensuring staff presence at the bus drop-offs and supervision there until the pupils have left. Leaders also set high expectations regarding pupils' behaviour on the buses and out of school. Indeed, several of the permanent exclusions for knife-related incidents that leaders talked about resulted from incidents that took place outside school or at the weekends.

Young People

What motivates young people to carry knives and how do differences in their lives make them more vulnerable?

4. Knife crime is an increasing safeguarding risk to children. School leaders told us that, in their experience, children are in three categories of risk of knife-carrying:

- The highest level of risk is for those children who have been groomed into gangs, for the purposes of criminal exploitation.
- Underneath this lies a group of children who have witnessed other children carrying knives, have been the victim of knife crime or know someone who has carried a knife for protection or status-acquisition or who are encouraged to believe knife-carrying is normal through the glamorisation of gangs and knives on social media.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/knife-crime-safeguarding-children-and-young-people-in-education>

- Then there are children who carry knives to school as an isolated incident. For example, they may carry a penknife that a grandparent has gifted them.

5. Knife crime is just one issue among many faced by children that leaders in schools must understand and manage on a daily basis. The common denominator of pupils who are found carrying bladed objects into school is their vulnerability. Leaders were clear that, almost invariably, these children have experienced poverty, abuse or neglect or are living within troubled families. They may also experience social exclusion due to factors such as their race or socio-economic background.

6. School leaders said that all the pupils who have been permanently excluded because of a knife-related incident had at least one of these characteristics. School leaders also told us that those involved were also more likely to be low attainers academically compared with their peers.

7. Children need help and support to prevent them becoming either victims or perpetrators of knife crime.

Is there a correlation between young people being excluded, or not getting enough support from, education and involvement in knife crime?

8. Children who are excluded from school to PRUs have self-reported higher instances of knife-carrying than children who are not excluded. The 2018 The London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime youth survey found that:

'When looking at PRU attendees, 47% (92 of 196) say they know someone who has carried a knife with them, compared with 25% of non-PRU attendees (1188 of 4673). Once again, it is a similar picture for exposure to gangs, with 46% of PRU attendees saying they know someone in a gang (87 of 191) compared with 22% of non-PRU attendees (1022 of 4585)'.

9. However, it is not possible to conclude from this that exclusions are the cause of these behaviours, or even that they increase their likelihood. What it does tell us is that these children are more at risk.

10. One factor that schools, LAs and central government need to consider further is that children who are being groomed by gangs to deal drugs and/or carry knives may be being coached by dangerous adults to get themselves excluded.

11. In a recent focus group we conducted with parents of children who have been both perpetrators and victims of knife crime, parents told us that their children had been encouraged by adult gang members to carry weapons into school for the sole purpose of triggering an exclusion. Once excluded, children may have fewer protective factors, including access to trusted adults such as their teachers, depending on what happens to them as a result. If they are not admitted into another mainstream school or good-quality alternative provision or PRU, this can make them more vulnerable to potential criminality.

12. It is also important to consider what happens to children when they are excluded after a knife carrying incident. In our report we recommended that all schools and academies in London should ensure that their exclusion policy reflects the practice set out in the Department for Education's statutory guidance. Local authorities should have a strategic response to permanent exclusions.

13. While, in general, the intention that the pupil had in carrying a knife was the key factor in determining whether or not a child would be excluded, being gang-affiliated (in secondaries and colleges, not PRUs) was also a trigger for expulsion.

14. Permanent exclusions are a necessary and important sanction but there is a balance to be found when taking this most serious action. Schools should consider the best interest of pupils at risk of exclusion alongside the need to maintain safety in school and for exclusion to act as a deterrent. It is not acceptable to exclude without considering the impact on and the risks to the child being excluded.

15. We have also recommended that The Department for Education should collect data from schools about managed moves in the same way in which it collects information on permanent and fixed-term exclusions. We found in our report that school leaders spoke more often about using managed moves as a response to children's knife-carrying than they did about exclusions, in other words moving children in a planned way to an alternative school rather than formally excluding them. Most often, these managed moves were permanent to another mainstream school, but sometimes they were to PRUs, and sometimes for only a limited or trial period.

16. We do not think that any single body has a clear picture of the number of children who are 'managed-moved' to different schools, how long for and where to or for what reason. We also do not know what the educational outcomes for those children are, or whether managed moves do in fact effectively safeguard those children or keep them in mainstream education in the long term.

Prevention

What could be done to make young people less likely to a) carry knives and b) commit knife crime?

17. Our knife crime report makes two recommendations on early help and prevention:

1. Safeguarding partners should involve school leaders at a strategic level in assessing the needs of children and young people in their area, and in planning and delivering early help services in response to those needs. Schools need to participate actively in local arrangements as required under 'Keeping children safe in education' statutory guidance.
2. Local safeguarding partnerships should facilitate all agencies including schools and colleges in challenging each other's practice if they believe any agency is failing to contribute to the local strategy to protect pupils from knife crime.

18. There was a wide variation in the responses from school leaders as to the perceived quality of support and intervention from LAs and other partners. Equally, it was clear that some schools were more actively engaged in local partnerships than others.

19. However, schools and PRUs alone are unable to provide all the early help support that children and families need, nor should they be expected to. All schools need to be aware of the offer provided by LAs and wider partner agencies. Schools can contribute valuable information to assessing the needs and planning for children pre- and post-statutory social care or youth justice intervention. Schools and partner agencies need to continue to work hard to make sure this consistently happens.

Intervention

Whole community approaches to intervention

20. Local community safety partnerships should fully involve schools, colleges and PRUs in developing and implementing local strategies that aim to address knife crime and serious youth violence.

21. Each LA/community safety partnership also has its own approaches to knife crime and related issues, its own types of support services and organisational structures reflecting its differing resources and assessment of needs. School leaders, particularly those working in schools where children came from many different LAs, told us that they struggle to know what services they can access for children and how best to do that, because the systems are so dependent on the LA in which that child lives. Under 'Keeping children safe in education', 'all [school] staff should be aware of their local early help process and understand their role in it'. Local safeguarding partnerships should coordinate their efforts to ensure that these processes are as clear and easily accessible to schools as possible across, and between, boroughs.

22. Our London based knife crime report found that there was wide variation in how school leaders felt about the leadership and planning in their local areas to address knife crime. Some school leaders reported a lack of direction in their local area on tackling knife crime and they did not feel supported despite the Mayor's knife crime strategy.

23. The schools in our sample felt that they were often acting in isolation in developing a curriculum response to the risk of knife crime, keeping children safe at school and managing children who are at risk of offending. This is despite the evidence of what works in violence prevention and government guidance, which points to the importance of a multi-agency approach and information-sharing.

Are there any examples of how police and communities have worked together to tackle knife crime?

24. School leaders have very different approaches to involving the police in incidents of knife-carrying. The approach varied widely between schools.

25. Some school leaders had a strong ethos against criminalising children, or calling the police, in response to a child bringing a bladed article into school. Others were firmly of the opinion that it is an offence and should be treated as such. But within these two approaches was a vast grey area in which school leaders may need to make decisions about contacting the police based on a variety of factors. Some of those factors included:

- whether the child is vulnerable
- whether it was a first offence
- the history of the child's behaviour more generally
- whether the child was thought to be, or known to be, affiliated with a gang
- the reason for which the child was carrying a knife, for example for protection or with the intention of harming someone
- whether the child was looked after or not
- whether the child had any connections to adults with a history of violence or criminality in their family or family friends
- whether other children were aware that the blade had been brought to school
- the nature of the weapon, for example a compass, a corkscrew, a penknife, a kitchen knife, etc.
- the relationship the school had with the child or parents
- the child's prior attainment.

26. School leaders had conflicting views about whether it was a criminal offence to carry a knife into school at all. They also reported that police officers do not take a consistent approach to children when making decisions to charge. One said they had been advised by their SSO that schools are not public places and so carrying a knife was not a criminal offence. Another school had called the police in response to a child carrying a small, sharp metal object (not a knife) for self-protection on the way to and from school when there was clear evidence that the child was in fact at risk during their journey. This child was arrested and charged.

27. Senior leaders and school staff must understand the law on knife-carrying and knife offences generally so that there is a common approach to responding to such incidents. These approaches will need to be flexible so that decision-makers can take all the information into account. However, the underlying principles cannot rely too heavily on individual leaders, teachers or police officers making decisions about how deserving or undeserving of prosecution children are based on their vulnerabilities, as opposed to the risk they present.

Are the police's stop and search powers effective in promoting safety and/or putting young people off carrying knives?

28. Under the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006, teachers were given the power, once only held by the police, to stop and search children on entry to school. This is One of the clearest examples of the lack of school involvement in the design and

implementation of a strategy is the different approaches the schools in our sample had to searching children for the possession of weapons on entry to school.

29. While some proponents, and indeed schools in our sample, firmly believe that searching children on entry to school keeps children safer, others do not. Interestingly, in one of our focus groups with children, in a school that did not search children for knives, one child who opposed the idea of searching said 'we're at school, not in prison.'

30. Conversely, some schools that had introduced searching said that their children felt safer as a result, and once embedded in a normal routine, being searched in the morning on the way into school was just an ordinary part of the day.

31. Some leaders who used wands to carry out searches believed they had a 'massive impact'. One headteacher said:

'We did it three or four times and found drugs for personal use, some weapons which we passed to the police and discussed this with young people. After this we found nothing in subsequent searches. We are confident the message has got out to students.'

32. Searching, done sensitively, does not have to ostracise children.

33. On the other hand, one college had abandoned the use of knife arches, believing it to be detrimental to the students and to the reputation of the college. Students found ways to notify each other of checks, including those coordinated by the borough commander at tube stations.

34. In our sample, we heard of several different approaches to searching for knives:

- no routine searches: searches are intelligence-led, relying on third-party information
- searching pupils randomly either termly, fortnightly or weekly: this could involve knife arches, wands, bag searches or pat-downs; consent is either obtained by the pupils individually at the point of search or agreed with pupils and parents in the behaviour policy on enrolment
- searching pupils daily on entry to school, as above (most common in PRUs)
- searching pupils multiple times per day (most common in PRUs)
- perimeter searches of the surrounding area of the premises, sometimes carried out by police liaison/safer schools officers (SSO) and sometimes teachers/staff.

35. The Department for Education (DfE) has set out guidance for schools in relation to 'Searching, screening and confiscation at school'. Meanwhile, the London Mayor's Office has committed to supporting schools by 'offering the use of knife wands in areas where knife crime is most prevalent'. However, only 250 schools in London have taken up the offer of a knife wand.

36. What appears to be missing is a dialogue between local safeguarding partners and schools about the purpose of searching, the impact on staff and pupils and

evidence of the impact on knife-carrying. Additionally, some schools were wary of beginning to search children in case it sent the wrong message to parents – that suddenly their children were less safe – or because the school 100 yards away did not.

37. This was particularly a concern for colleges, which felt that it would make them look less safe than competing schools in their area.

38. Searching pupils, while encouraged by the government when necessary, is an example of a strategy that has been adopted in a piecemeal way across schools in London. It is not clear why such searches, if done sensitively and without bias, could not be successful in acting as a deterrent and encouraging discussion about issues, including knife crime.

39. Schools want to know what works, including what works in different contexts. They need strong local leadership that drives the implementation of local strategies that are regularly reviewed, and they need to be involved and to engage actively with the strategy development from the outset.

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