

## Written evidence submitted by St Giles Trust (BYC030)

### Q1 Are there any prominent trends in the statistics on a) who commits knife crime b) who are the victims of knife crime?

1. Two key features – for both victims and perpetrators - have emerged over the past few years and been well publicised but are worth highlighting again:

1/ The decreasing age of those involved. The average age of the young people we support in this area of our work is 15.

2/ We know that the trends tend to suggest that the victims and perpetrators share the similar fundamental traits. For example, coming from areas of lower social mobility, communities with lower income thresholds. In effect perpetrators often commit crime where they live. County Lines though has changed the geographical spread beyond cities and urban areas to more suburban and rural communities. This is probably driven by the spread of county lines and with that the promise of making quick money.

### Q2 Is the Government strategy to combat knife crime doing enough to effectively: a) prevent b) intervene and; c) sentence those committing knife crime d) rehabilitate those cautioned or sentenced for knife crime?

2. Whilst enforcement measures have a role to play, in our experience prison does not act as a deterrent. Knife crime and serious violence are symptoms of more complex issues requiring intensive work over a period of time. Prevention and intervention for those at risk are the real keys to tackling the problem at source. Whilst some good work in this area is being supported on the one hand, cuts to services and activities for young people are equally having a negative impact.

3. Support services for young people already involved in the criminal justice are patchy. Good practice examples in existence include police custody interventions carried out by external organisations which are independent from the police. Much more support needs to be offered to young people leaving prison to ensure they are diverted away from negative influences and helped to access positive opportunities such as those around employment and training.

4. We applaud the money put into prevention resources at school level; this though needs to be consistent and long term in order to have a lasting effect. We argue that it should also be extended to primary schools as young people are way more technologically minded than the adults of today. We would also argue for sessions for parents to be more socially aware.

### Q3 Does the Government's Serious Violence Strategy strike the right balance between preventative and punitive action.

5. It rightly identifies the need for support for those involved alongside prevention and the fact the county lines drugs trade lies beyond some of it. However, as mentioned in answers below serious violence is a symptom of deeper problems in our society around inequality and lack of social mobility

(both real and perceived), cuts to public services which have traditionally supported many young people most at risk and supported wider issues affecting their family around homelessness and poverty.

#### Q4 Is treating knife crime as a public health issue an effective approach?

6. We believe this is the right direction of travel as it focusses on root causes rather than solely treating the 'symptoms' by simply arresting perpetrators without addressing the reasons why the young people were carrying and using weapons. If this approach also focusses on prevention of those who are at risk but not yet involved it also helps stem the spread in the same way that steps are taken to minimise the risks to those who may be more likely to develop certain illnesses. However, it is important to consult and offer the right level of resources, training and support to any services who are given added levels of responsibility as a result of this approach e.g. schools, health providers who may find themselves legally required to flag any individuals there are concerns about.

7. When you contrast the London versus Glasgow model the differences are apparent. Glasgow has a population of that of one London Borough and one unitary authority. Money was pledged over a ten year stretch. London has 33 different sectors each with their own authority. We would argue then for a cross parliament agreement which would not only pledge the money required but ensure it was protected for an effective duration.

#### Q5 How is knife crime affecting a) public services b) health services c) schools d) emergency services?

8. As a frontline charity working to support young people caught up in knife crime, we see first-hand that it is putting already stretched public services under added strain.

9. Education – schools and other education providers (especially ones which take students with challenging behaviour such as PRUs) are dealing with the fallout of this through having to introduce measures around security to ensure schools remain the vital safe spaces for young people that they should be.

10. Health – we carry out partnership work with Bart's NHS Trust in the Royal London Hospital to offer support and interventions to young people admitting to the hospital's major trauma centre as a result of serious violence. We were brought in precisely because a Trauma Surgeon at the hospital was seeing the same young people return after discharge and he recognised the need for preventative work. As a result of the partnership work, the number of re-admissions of this nature has drastically reduced. We are now carrying out similar work in hospitals in the Midlands. The ultimate aim of this work is to help the young people involved in serious violence make positive changes but it also has a knock on effect of reducing the pressures on frontlines services.

11. Emergency services – the police are under ever greater scrutiny and pressure to address the problem of knife crime through increased use of enforcement which has its place but does not address root causes in itself. Better public education may be beneficial so that the public has a greater understanding of the complexities of the issue and can appreciate that enforcement measures alone will not solve the problem. The tone of the Home Office's #KnifeFree campaign has been helpful in this respect.

## Q6 Is judicial sentencing effective in a) serving as a deterrent and b) preventing reoffending?

12. Overwhelmingly, young people tell us that they carry weapons for protection and would rather be caught by the police with their weapon (and face the consequences of this) rather than encounter an adversary without it. In essence, young people would rather run the risk of a prison sentence and having a criminal record over the possibility of becoming killed or seriously maimed. In the face of this stark and depressing 'choice', custodial sentences would appear to fail to act as a deterrent. It shines a light on the fact that serious violence is a requires a nuanced and multi-faceted response, much of which lies outside the realm of the criminal justice system.

## Q7 How do differences in young people lives (e.g. geographic location, education, mental health, household income and socioeconomic background) make them more vulnerable to being involved in knife crime?

13. In general, young people from more disadvantaged communities and backgrounds are more likely to become vulnerable to knife crime and serious violence both as victims and perpetrators. In our experience there are a number of factors which could be driving this:

- Parents working long hours due to in-work poverty meaning that they are not necessarily able to monitor what their children are doing and the friends they are spending time with.
- Financial constraints meaning that there is no money to pay for out of school and holiday time activities that their more affluent peers may benefit from. Similarly, there are often pressures on young people to have money, the latest clothing and other possessions which can help drive them towards crime and associated violence – particularly that involved in county line exploitation.
- Exclusion from mainstream education (more below)
- Geographical areas can also affect susceptibility and if a young person is growing up in an area where they are surrounded by crime and weapons carrying it can increase the likelihood of them also doing so. For many it is the norm rather than the exception and it takes an exceptionally strong and brave young person to go weapon free in these situations.
- Social media – it is worth highlighting the role of social media in perpetuating a culture of violence and weapons amongst young people.

14. Whilst knife crime still typically affects deprived urban communities, it is worth noting that it is spreading to suburban and rural areas partly due to the increase in county line activity (as mentioned in the first answer).

## Q8 What motivates young people to carry knives? Q9 Is fear a motivator for young people who carry knives? What causes this? What can be done to address it?

15. Overwhelmingly young people tell us they carry weapons for self-protection. The reality or perception amongst them that their peers are all carrying weapons and likely to use them makes the lives of these young people a frightening place to be. Many have lost their siblings and best

friends to weapons or previously narrowly survived attacks themselves. We are sometimes witnessing levels of post-traumatic stress disorder amongst the young people we work with that are more common to those experienced by individuals who have been engaged in military combat.

16. Once we reframe the issue to one of public health – as described above - rather than criminal justice we become closer to solutions.

These must focus on:

Prevention – this needs to happen early on when children are still in primary school. This reaches them before they become vulnerable in later years – particularly on the transition from primary to secondary school - by equipping the children with the knowledge and resilience to steer clear from weapons and negative influences.

- Intensive interventions for those already involved to ensure they are supported and guided out of their current situations and able to access positive opportunities to rebuild their lives.
- Increased resourcing of vital state and voluntary services offering services and activities for young people which create safe spaces which are known to be weapon free
- Partnership working and information sharing across all agencies and sectors including embedding voluntary sector professionals with expertise in this issue within statutory services.

17. Also of vital importance is the use of people with lived experience of the issue themselves who have the cultural competence to resonate with the young people. This is the starting point to all St Giles Trust work. Lived experience means an individual is in a unique position to credibly dispel myths and break down the narrative that has built up around weapons amongst young people.

## Q10 Is there any evidence that gang culture, social media and/or music impact young people's involvement in knife crime?

18. These can all be contributing factors and can help amplify and accelerate the spread of negative messages though this is not a sole cause in itself and some would argue that music gives disadvantaged young people an outlet through which to vent frustrations and have a platform. It is of vital importance to build resilience in young people to the allure of these messages through the approaches described above.

19. If you consider some of the reasons why young people make content for social media platforms it is to build social capital, essentially fame through followers and with many of the platforms affording ways of monetizing content when it has accumulated enough views it is easy to recognise that the more shocking the content the more likely it will be viewed. It is a shame then that these platforms do not do more to invest in some of the most disadvantaged communities and charities doing this work.

## Q11 Is there a correlation between young people being excluded, or not getting enough support from, education and involvement in knife crime?

20. There is a strong correlation. Exclusion from mainstream education means young people feel labelled as failures, written off from mainstream, legitimate opportunities and they become increasingly isolated from them. The practice of twilight hours where young people with challenging behaviour only receive two hours of schooling a day means that they are at a loose end for the remainder of the day and vulnerable to negative influences. Off-rolling has the same effect.

21. This illustrates a wider challenge of how the education system accommodates children and young people with challenging behaviour. Excellent, dedicated work is undertaken by many alternative education providers but many lack support and resources.

## Q12 What could be done to make young people less likely to a) carry knives b) commit knife crime?

22. Action needs to take place on a number of levels.

- Preventative work and awareness- raising – as highlighted above, this needs to start with children to equip them with the resilience and knowledge to stay away from weapons and violence from an early age. This work needs to be carried out by people with lived experience of these issues who have the credibility to expose the lies and myths that surround knife carrying.
- Increasing awareness of positive opportunities – Many young people feel they are growing up in a society in which they have no stake. They do not feel they have the same opportunities to get a good start and progress in life as their less disadvantaged peers. A credible, positive role model who can act as a bridge to access opportunities around education, training and employment and extol the positive benefits of staying engaged in them means that they are guided to build stronger motivations for staying clear of crime.

23. However, as highlighted above, funding for services supporting young people needs to be boosted to ensure that opportunities are created for young people and they are able to connect with them.

## Q13 What support is available to identify and help young people at risk of getting involved in knife crime? Is it effective?

24. Support services vary across different areas. Some excellent initiatives are already taking place and could be replicated. We work in partnership with a local group in south east London who are able to engage young people from an excluded, relatively isolated community in this borough. They act as the bridge to the young people and our facilitators can then offer them information and advice on issues such as weapons, county lines and other similar issues whilst extolling the benefits of staying engaged in education and positive activities. As ex-offenders, our facilitators speak from a position of real knowledge and have credibility in the eyes of the young people. There is 'finger wagging' – the facilitators help guide the young people towards positive choices through using their own

testimonies and really understand the importance of thinking for the long term when making choices.

#### Q14 Are there examples of local initiatives which have worked well to prevent young people being victims or/and perpetrators of knife crime?

25. See above. The same project we offer this local group works in schools across the UK using the facilitators described above to go into schools to deliver sessions on weapons, drugs, the realities of having a criminal record whilst carrying out one to one work with any young person there are particular concerns about. This project reached over 40,000 young people last year and whilst it is difficult to give data evidence on whether young people have desisted from serious violence as a result of the sessions, feedback from young people and staff tells us that the work is playing an important role in prevention. Feedback also tells us that the use of people with lived experience and real credibility to deliver it is the major reason why.

#### Q 15 Are there particular groups of young people who are overlooked by current prevention strategies?

26. Knife crime and serious youth violence are still often wrongly perceived as problems solely affected young black men and a black urban problem. In our experience, it simply reflects the local demographic of the area it is taking place in. Our work in Kent in this area tackling young people exploited through county lines – many of whom were both victims and perpetrators – involved a caseload that was mainly white and suburban/rural. Parents of these young people expressed frustration at the fact the issue was not presented in a necessarily representative way. There is a potential to skew the way services are designed as a result.

27. At the other end of the spectrum, some hard-to-reach communities are often not able to access services and support due to language barriers and similar issues. They require lots of brokerage and proactive work so that they are able to connect and trust mainstream services or possibly have services specifically targeted at these communities. Our peer-led work takes just this approach through using people who are from these communities to offer services and become the bridge to wider ones.

### Intervention

Q 16 Are there any examples of intervention schemes that have successfully rehabilitated young people who have been cautioned, reprimanded or sentenced due to knife crime, back into the community, education and/or employment?

28. Alongside preventative work, we also work with young people who are already entrenched in serious violence using our peer-led approach of training and employing people who have 'been there' themselves to offer intensive support to help the young person with both practical and emotional issues which are pushing them towards their offending. These workers are often part of multi-agency partnerships within local authorities so information can be shared and the workers can be passed the cases of young people who have been identified as being at a high level of risk. Our presence offers an independent, credible source of support to the young person and their families who are often reluctant to engage with mainstream services. Having direct personal experience of the issues themselves means our staff have cultural competence with the communities they are working with, are highly motivated and are able to effectively challenge negative thinking and behaviour. The lives of the young people they are helping are usually highly chaotic which means they require round the clock support which we are able to offer them at the most critical times. Last year, the team helped 287 young people in London safely exit lifestyles involving serious violence, gangs and county lines out of an active caseload of over 800. Most of these engaged in education, training and employment opportunities we were able to help them access. Furthermore, we don't give up on young people who may mess up whilst they are working with us – we will continue our support if a young person is sent to custody so we can pick up work with them again upon their release. For those heavily entrenched, it can take number of years to make a sustained change to their lives so there is no 'two strikes and you are out' approach.

**Q 17 What examples are there for whole community approaches to intervention? Q 18 Are there any examples of how police and communities have worked together to tackle knife crime?**

29. Please see second paragraph to answer to question 15.

30. Partnership work is vital to ensure information is shared and that the young person can be worked with in a comprehensive way. No single agency has the answer to such a complex problem. We work within local authority integrated gangs units and are embedded within these teams. Our role is to be an independent presence for young people who may not trust or engage with statutory services. As such we can share information and support safeguarding.

31. Our preventative work described above is carried out in close consultation with the local community. Alongside schools, we carry out this work with parents, young people in out of school settings and also offer training to professionals in agencies such as local authorities and the police using our ex-offender facilitators to help them gain a better understanding and insight into the lives of young people who carry and use weapons and to promote best practice and prevention.

**Q 19 How effective are positive role-models in deterring young people from gang and criminal activity?**

32. They are vital but also need to be credible. Young people are often bombarded with celebrity and role models from the world of music and premier league sports. Whilst not a bad thing in itself, most young people will not be able to achieve this or they are based on a 'get rich/achieve fame quick' myth so more credible alternatives need to be available of individuals who are from their communities, have similar backgrounds and are relatable. They can help young people identify realistic goals and help them realise that they need to put time and effort in to achieve them. Many of the facilitators and caseworkers we employ in this area of our work were also former clients. They have been inspired by their former caseworker to follow in their footsteps and train to become able to help other young people, created a positive ripple effect in these communities.

### **Q 20 Are the police's stop and search powers effective in promoting safety and/or putting young people off carrying knives**

33. Stop and search has a place but will not address the problem of knife crime in itself. Inappropriately used it runs the risk of damaging hard won relations between the police and disadvantaged communities and could therefore be counterproductive. If stop and search is used it needs to be based on firm intelligence and police need training in how to carry it out in a way which does not make the individual being searched feel singled out, targeted or violated.

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