

Speaking Out Briefing No. 10

Gang, Gun and Knife Crime: Seeking Solutions (Part 2)

Children and young people's involvement in knife, gun and gang crime has received much media and political attention in recent months. This briefing examines the Government's response to the issue and the role the children and young people's voluntary and community sector can play in finding sustainable solutions.

This briefing is part of the Speaking Out series.

Speaking Out is a partnership between the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO) and the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), which seeks to build a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector across government.

The project aims to develop closer links between a range of government departments (Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Department for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs, Communities and Local Government, Cabinet Office and HM Treasury) and the voluntary and community sector in delivering cross departmental policies such as *Every Child Matters* and *the Children's Plan* and the direct implementation of initiatives which affect children and young people.

Speaking Out aims to support children, young people and family voluntary and community organisations to better understand the impact on their users of a wider range of government policies and provide routes to influence them. The project is funded by the Office of the Third Sector in the Cabinet Office.

Who are these briefings for?

This series of briefings intends to provide members of both NCVYS and NCVCCO and other interested parties with background and analysis on specific policy items affecting the sector.

Other activities

In addition to these briefings the Speaking Out project is developing work streams around the policy themes which include:

- organising a series of seminars and events;
- establishing communities of interest amongst members and other organisations on specific policy themes linking them into email groups and bringing them together for small round table meetings with policy makers;
- making representations to government; and
- linking with wider NCVYS and NCVCCO campaigns.

For further information about the Speaking Out project or any of the issues raised in this briefing contact Sophie Wainwright, Policy and Information Officer at sophie@ncvcco.org or 020 7833 3319.



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1. Introduction

The increase in the number of children and young people involved in knife, gun and gang crime has been the focus of much media attention and public concern over recent months¹. Incidents of knife, gun and gang crime involving children and young people occur nationwide; however the issue is particularly prevalent in London where in 2007, 26 children and young people were killed - nine in shootings. In the first half of 2008, 21 children and young people have died in violent attacks in the capital and the Metropolitan Police estimate that more than 170 gangs are currently in operation². The Government has responded by implementing and investing in a whole range of policies and initiatives in a bid to reduce the number of young people involved in such crimes, both as victims and perpetrators, as well as trying to satisfy increasing public concern over the issue. Despite a concerted effort to tackle knife, gun and gang crime the impact of the Government's interventions is perceived as being largely unsuccessful³, with the number of children and young people killed by weapons continuing to rise.

This paper builds on a previous briefing published in October 2007⁴. As well as providing an update on more recent policy developments, this briefing details the key messages from a multi-agency roundtable event organised by the Speaking Out project, the Association of Principal Youth and Community Officers (APYCO) and the National Youth Agency in February 2008. The event explored ways in which knife, gun and gang crime could be combated by different agencies working in partnership and offered recommendations to policy makers.

The policy discourse frequently refers to knife, gun and gang crime as a single issue. Of course, there are many different issues arising from possession of a knife or gun, or from membership of gangs. Although these can be related, they are often conflated and should be recognised as distinct.

This briefing paper will examine:

- the policy context relating to knife, gun and gang crime and children and young people;
- the legal context;
- relevant findings from research and practice;
- possible implications for voluntary and community sector children and youth organisations; and
- useful resources in relation to this issue.

1 See for example: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7351207.stm> and <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article3965021.ece>

2 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/may/22/ukcrime.jacquismith>

3 **Centre for Crime and Justice Studies** (May 2008) *Ten years of Labour's youth justice reforms: an independent audit*

4 **NCVCCO and NCYVS** (2007) *Speaking Out Briefing no. 1 – knife, gun and gang crime*. Available online at www.ncvcco.org or www.ncvys.org.uk

2. Policy context

Government policy aimed at preventing children and young people's involvement in knife, gun and gang crime has been abundant in recent years, partly reflecting growing public concern and increased media attention in the phenomenon. This section provides a summary of the latest and most relevant government developments and builds on the policies highlighted in the previous Speaking Out briefing on knife, gun and gang crime⁵.

The Government has published cross-departmental targets, public service agreements, for the period April 2008 to April 2011. One of these targets relates to children and young people's involvement in knife, gun and gang crime by aiming 'to increase the number of children and young people on the path to success'⁶. The target intends to create an effective and efficient criminal justice system; reduce the percentage of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training; reduce the number of young people using illegal substances and increase the participation of young people in positive activities.

The Government's commitment to reducing children and young people's involvement in criminal activity was outlined by the Department for Children, School and Families (DCSF) in the *Children's Plan: building brighter futures* launched in December 2007. The plan recognises the majority of young people do not offend; however it emphasises the need to reduce harm caused by youth crime both to those who are victims and to young offenders themselves. The Children's Plan sets out how the Government wants mainstream services to work together to prevent crime, what the Government plans to do to deal swiftly and appropriately with those involved in youth crime and how they aim to prevent reoffending. Specific preventative initiatives include accelerating the extended schools programme in areas of high crime and encouraging schools to work more closely with other local agencies, such as the police and children's services, to reduce problems that affect whole communities.

The DCSF also published the *Youth Taskforce Action Plan* in March 2008 setting out plans to tackle anti-social behaviour by adopting a three part approach: clear sanctions where behaviour is considered unacceptable; non-negotiable support to help young people overcome problems and preventative work to tackle problems before they arise. Under the new plan, young people deemed at risk of offending will have to agree to a contract and will receive a key worker who will ensure the young person receives any help needed to prevent anti-social behaviour. The Government affirms this support will be compulsory, for example a young person may receive an Anti-Social Behaviour Order and an Individual Support Order to compel them to co-operate.

5 **NCVCCO and NCYVS** (2007) *Speaking Out Briefing no. 1 – knife, gun and gang crime*. Available online at www.ncvcco.org or www.ncvys.org.uk

6 **HM Treasury** (April 2008) *PSA Delivery Agreement 14: Increase the number of children and young people on the path to success* http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/0/7/pbr_csr07_psa14.pdf

The Home Office has lead responsibility for cutting crime and launched the Tackling Gangs Action Programme (TGAP) in September 2007, a government initiative focused on tackling gun crime and serious violence amongst young people. Neighbourhoods in London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester were awarded £1.5 million over a six month period to develop innovative approaches to dealing with gangs. Early results from the programme include: a reduction of 51% in gun-related injuries across the four areas (from 93 offences in October 2007 to 46 in February 2008); a 27% decrease in the overall number of gun offences in the four areas (from 165 in October to 120 in February 2008); and targeted enforcement in November 2007 which resulted in 124 arrests and large scale seizure of firearms.

The Home Office set out further measures to reduce youth crime in the *Violent Crime Action Plan* published in February 2008. This three year strategy aims to tackle knife, gun and gang crime by challenging the idea that weapons are glamorous; addressing the fear and peer pressure that drive young people to carry weapons; and investing in interventions and information sharing between police, councils, volunteer groups and health workers to identify people likely to commit serious violence.

In May 2008 the Home Office launched a knife marketing campaign which consists of adverts in women's weekly magazines encouraging mothers to talk about knives with their children; a new good practice guide for local agencies to help them tackle gang-related crime across all communities⁷; and guidance for schools on how to reduce the risks of gang related problems and how to deal with any incidents that do occur, with the help of external partners⁸. The schools guidance is intended to take forward the work the DCSF is doing in preventing at-risk young people from behaviour which impacts on their life chances and those of others by offering positive activities, support services and developing extended schools. Children and young people's voluntary and community organisations are cited throughout the guidance as a source of support and partnership working.

Other government departments have also issued policy statements relating to reducing young people's involvement in crime:

- The Department for Work and Pensions announced in February 2008 that from April 2009 all 18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training will have to undertake at least four weeks of full time work or face losing their benefits⁹. Employment opportunities, training and apprenticeships are all considered solutions to reducing the temptation for young people to be drawn into gangs and carry weapons.

7 *Tackling Gangs: a practical guide for local authorities and other local partners* is online at: <http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/violentstreet/violentstreet012.htm>

8 The DCSF guidance for schools on gangs and group offending is available online at: <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=12639>

9 <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/mediacentre/pressreleases/2008/feb/emp062-180208.asp>

- The Cabinet Office's 'think family'¹⁰ agenda aims to ensure adult services support whole families not just individuals and focuses on targeting the most excluded and hard to reach families in an effort to engage and meet diverse needs. The agenda may therefore complement wider government initiatives to tackle knife, gun and gang crime among children and young people by recognising the importance of a family centred approach to service provision.
- The Ministry of Justice launched a Youth Citizenship Commission in June 2008 aimed at reducing youth crime by encouraging young people to become active citizens and play a positive role in society. The Commission will focus on the issues of citizenship, political participation, volunteering and voting.

More recently, the Government has published its Youth Crime Action Plan which sets out the cross-government agenda on tackling youth crime. The Plan focuses on enforcement and punishment, prevention and support, and key measures include expanding the provision of youth centres at times when young people are likely to offend (Friday and Saturday nights); making permanent exclusion from school an automatic trigger for a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) assessing the young person's needs; and increasing the proportion of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) accompanied by Parenting Orders. The Speaking Out project will be publishing a briefing paper on the Action Plan in due course.

3. Legal context

Further to the legal context outlined in the first Speaking Out briefing on knife, gun and gang crime¹¹, a range of legislative measures have been introduced making it a serious offence for young people to buy or be in possession of a weapon. Recent legislation includes the Criminal Justice Act 2003 which established a mandatory minimum five-year sentence for the illegal possession of a prohibited firearm and the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 which raised the minimum age of purchase for air guns to 17.

The Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 came into force on 1 October 2007. Measures in the Act include increasing the age limit for buying or firing an air weapon without supervision from 17 to 18 years; increasing the age limit for purchasing a knife or any item with a blade or point from 16 to 18 years; and introducing powers for head teachers and other members of school staff to search pupils for weapons. Furthermore, on 1 February 2007 the Act increased the maximum sentence for possessing a knife or blade in a public place from two to four years.

The prosecution age for carrying a knife was lowered from 18 to 16 years on 5 June 2008. This most recent change in legislation further reinstates the Government's tough enforcement approach to young people and knife crime.

10 **Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force** (June 2007) *Reaching Out: Think Family, Analysis and themes from the Families at Risk Review*

11 **NCVCCO and NCYVS** (2007) *Speaking Out Briefing No. 1: Knife, Gun and Gang Crime*. Available online at www.ncvcco.org or www.ncvys.org.uk

4. Findings from research and practice

In February 2008, the Speaking Out project, the Association of Principal Youth and Community Officers (APYCO) and the National Youth Agency organised a multi-agency roundtable discussion event. Attendees from the voluntary and statutory sectors explored ways in which knife, gun and gang crime could be combated by different agencies working in partnership and offered recommendations to policy makers. The key points of the discussion are summarised below.

Effective multi-agency working

Participants at the event acknowledged the importance of a collaborative approach in order to achieve successful solutions, but emphasised that multi-agency working should not involve too many organisations and should focus on a 'roots up' rather than a 'top down' approach. In addition it was mooted that multi-agency working should engage proactively at a neighbourhood level rather than being artificially created to respond to an issue. Partnerships should therefore be service-user led, delivered in a diverse way to suit the local community and should reflect the differences between young people.

Delegates noted that local authorities and other large organisations often want to work in partnership with smaller voluntary and community sector organisations, but are frequently viewed with suspicion, particularly due to competition for resources and funding. Furthermore, participants agreed that local decision makers need to be more transparent in funding and commissioning decisions, stressing that smaller organisations are likely to disappear due to lack of resources unless they work in partnership. Representatives from the VCS stated they can feel undervalued by statutory services and excluded from local decision making processes. They also expressed concern that local authorities often engage only with community representatives and young people whose opinions and actions enhance their own objectives, rather than seeking to hear from a variety of voices.

The contribution of local youth services and the voluntary and community sector (VCS)

Participants acknowledged the significant contribution that local statutory and voluntary youth workers make to engaging with communities and hard-to-reach individuals, and to tackling knife, gun and gang crime. As a result, delegates stated that youth work should be seen as a valued profession by the Government, with appropriate investment allocated and effective workforce training provided.

The effectiveness of the Government approach

There was consensus that the mechanism of government can be over complicated and bureaucratic with seemingly contradictory policies and targets. For example, the Home Office leading on the issue of gangs and street violence has resulted in more focus, including funding, being placed on enforcement measures as opposed to the preventative approach indicated by the DCSF. Delegates highlighted the need for all agencies to have space and resources for creative work to develop effective and long-term initiatives.

Involving children and young people

Representatives at the roundtable event suggested that participation with children and young people is too often tokenistic and not fully representative. It was emphasised that the views of children and young people on knife, gun and gang crime need to be appropriately voiced, especially the hardest to reach children and young people as they often know what solutions would be most suitable in their communities. Delegates also suggested that children and young people should receive remuneration for any time spent participating in research and should receive full feedback on consultations in which they are involved.

Other findings from research and practice

A wealth of information and research exists on children and young people's involvement in knife, gun and gang crime and a large number of organisations are working on ways to reduce young people's involvement. The research and organisations outlined below are examples of such work.

A report by the children's charity NCH on gun and knife crime¹² found that fear, image and a need for protection are among the reasons why children and young people get involved in gun and knife crime. The report followed a six-month consultation with 800 children and young people across the UK, particularly those from hard-to-reach and vulnerable communities. 72% of children and young people in the consultation stated they feel unsafe in their own communities, 29% of respondents felt personally affected by gun and knife crime, whilst 41% knew someone who had been personally affected. NCH called for:

- children under the age of 16 to be included in official crime survey data across the UK to help understand the true extent of the issue;
- all children and young people to have access to structured activities on a weekly basis;
- children and young people to be involved in designing and developing safe community-based youth services that enable them to play a role in tackling weapon based crime; and
- sustainably funded services that reach out to the most vulnerable children and young people to enable them to face challenges and reach their full potential.

An independent review of evidence and policy on knife crime in the UK carried out by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies¹³ found that:

- knife carrying, especially amongst young men, is not unusual but there is insufficient evidence on the extent, nature, motivation, frequency and possible growth of knife carrying;

12 **NCH** (2008) 'Step inside our shoes' *Young people's views on knife and gun crime*
<http://www.nch.org.uk/uploads/documents/step-inside-our-shoes.pdf>

13 **Centre for Crime and Justice Studies** (December 2007) *Knife crime – A review of evidence and policy. Second edition.* <http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/knifecrime.html>

- children who have been victims of crime are more likely to carry knives. There appears to be a link between knife carrying and whether or not young people feel safe from crime and victimisation; and
- children, young people, those living in poor areas and members of black and minority ethnic communities are more likely to be the victims of knife offences.

In May 2008 the British Youth Council conducted an online survey on gun, knife and gang crime, funded by the Speaking Out Small Grants Programme¹⁴. The survey revealed 32.5% of young people aged 13-26 had come across someone who had carried a knife, with 12.5% of those surveyed stating they had been in contact with someone who had carried a gun. 22.5% knew someone who had been the victim of knife crime and 65% believed young people carry weapons to gain respect. One young person stated:

“There is a vicious circle of people not feeling safe and wanting to protect themselves from supposed threats.”

Over half the young people surveyed (67.5%) believed media coverage of knife, gun and gang crime had a negative effect on the image of young people. The most popular solutions to tackling knife, gun and gang crime included setting up workshops for former gang members to educate young people about the reality of being part of a gang and finding better ways to deal with young people who have been excluded from school. One respondent stated:

“The young people that I have known who have been in gangs have not been exposed to opportunities to gain a positive sense of identity in a healthy or safe setting.”

14 The Speaking Out Small Grants Programme enabled voluntary and community organisations working with children and young people to apply for small grants to deliver one-off projects or activities in their local communities. The grants funded the development of new activities or extensions of existing projects that aimed to raise the voice of the children and young people’s voluntary and community sector, focusing on three key themes: knife, gun and gang crime, substance misuse and access to activities in rural and urban areas. For further information see the Speaking Out pages at www.ncvcco.org or www.ncvys.org.uk.

5. Possible implications for Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) children and youth organisations

Children and young people's involvement in knife, gun and gang crime presents challenges for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations providing support and services to children, young people and families. However, it is clear the Government considers the VCS a key partner in ensuring the well being and safety of children, young people and their families.

The public narrative surrounding knife, gun and gang crime is at best confusing and at worst damaging. The use of the word 'gang', for example, has become synonymous with serious organised crime committed by young people and is routinely associated with the use of weapons. At the same time, it is used more widely to refer to groups of young people who are not necessarily involved in any anti-social behaviour. Nevertheless this association can be damaging to young people in the way they are perceived and reacted to. The children and young people's voluntary and community sector is in a strong position to challenge such misperceptions, promote positive images of children and young people, and provide a platform for children and young people to engage with their communities and have their voices heard.

A strong theme from the wealth of research and practice relating to this issue is the importance of engaging with children and young people directly. However, it is important that this engagement is part of a broader recognition of the place of children and young people in their communities and the contribution that they make in a range of areas. The children and young people's voluntary and community sector has a strong track record of participation and meaningful consultation work and this must be utilised in combating knife, gun and gang crime. The *Communities in control: real people, real power*¹⁵ White Paper, published in July 2008, provides an opportunity for voluntary and community organisations to ensure children and young people's views are represented and that local services become more responsive to the needs of children and young people

The sector also provides a range of services which can both help to combat involvement with knife, gun and gang crime in the first place and reduce reoffending amongst children and young people who have previously entered the criminal justice system. Opportunities for the sector exist through local initiatives such as sports, music and arts clubs and encouraging active citizenship amongst children and young people for example through the creation of local youth parliaments and school councils.

15 Communities and Local Government (2008) *Communities in control: real people, real power*

Often these services are provided with a range of local partners including schools, colleges and extended schools. These partnerships should be service-user led, delivered in a diverse way to suit the local community and should reflect the differences between children and young people. It is therefore important that voluntary and community organisations are involved in designing and shaping appropriate services through local partnership structures as well as delivering services where they choose to do so.

A key strength of the voluntary and community sector is the holistic approach it takes to meeting the needs of children, young people and families. There are indications that a 'think family'¹⁶ approach which considers the needs of parents, carers and communities rather than focussing only on individuals is key to making lasting changes to the incidence of knife, gun and gang crime, and this is an area where the sector has considerable expertise to contribute.

Ultimately, there are no clear and simple answers in how to reduce children and young people's involvement in the destructive nature of knife, gun and gang crime. However, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector is in a unique position to engage with the most hard-to-reach children and young people and ensure services are provided that fully meet the needs of local communities.

¹⁶ Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force (2008) *Think Family: Improving the life chances of families at risk*

6. Resources

In addition to the resources referred to in this briefing, the following websites and sources of information are useful for those wishing to know more about knife, gun and gang crime:

The **Metropolitan Police's** anti-knife campaign includes a website outlining the impact knife crime has on communities and provides information on organisations that aim to educate young people on the dangers of carrying knives.

<http://www.itsnotagame.org>

The **Connected programme** is part of the Home Office's strategy to reduce gun crime in the UK and is aimed at working with community groups. The Connected website is a one-stop shop for anyone working on the issue of gun crime reduction.

<http://www.connected.gov.uk/about/index.html>

The **Children's Commissioner for England's** website includes a section on gun and knife crime. The interactive website is specifically aimed at children and young people and contains a range of resources and activities.

http://www.11million.org.uk/youth/gun_and_knife_crime

Small Grants Programme

The following children and young people's voluntary and community organisations were funded through the Speaking Out Small Grants Programme to deliver one-off projects or activities in their local communities relating to knife, gun and gang crime:

- ALOVE (Salvation Army)
http://www1.salvationarmy.org.uk/alove/www_alove_national.nsf
- Bradford Youth Development Partnership
<http://www.bydp.co.uk>
- The British Youth Council
<http://www.byc.org.uk>
- Full Circle Education
<http://fullcircle-ed.com/>
- Nottinghamshire Youth Organisations Network
<http://www.nyon.org.uk>
- Oasis Trust
<http://www.oasistrust.org>
- The Leys Community Development Initiative
http://www.thebiggive.org.uk/charity.php?charity_id=3399

7. Other briefings

- Briefing 1** Knife, gun and gang crime
- Briefing 2** The Government's Social Exclusion Agenda
- Briefing 3** Access to Services in Rural Areas
- Briefing 4** Public Service Delivery
- Briefing 5** Community Cohesion
- Briefing 6** Local Government Reform
- Briefing 7** Placeshaping
- Briefing 8** The Comprehensive Spending Review
- Briefing 9** Rural migrant children, families and young people
- Briefing 10** Gang, Gun and Knife Crime: Seeking Solutions (Part 2)

All the briefings are available at www.ncvcco.org or www.ncvys.org.uk