



All-Party Parliamentary Group on  
**Knife Crime**

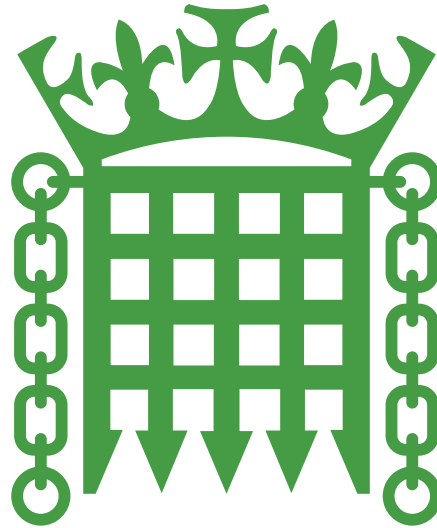
# “THERE IS NO PROTECTION ON THE STREETS, NONE.”

Young people’s perspectives on knife crime

March 2019

Redthread

Believe in  
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Knife crime is at the highest level on record. Knife offences and knife related deaths have been rising since 2014, not only in London and major cities but in communities across the country. It is not an overstatement to say that this is a public health crisis – one which predominantly impacts young people.

The causes of serious youth violence are complex and wide ranging, and opinions on what it will take to solve this crisis are similarly diverse. We set up the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime to build awareness and understanding of solutions with a particular focus on prevention and early intervention. We also sought to investigate new factors potentially driving this epidemic, such as the

role of county lines and social media. But from the start, we knew that the voice of young people – too often drowned out in this debate – must be what guides our work.

This document summarises a powerful meeting which brought together MPs with young people who had experienced knife crime, either as perpetrators or victims – often both. It has guided the subsequent work of the APPG which will be published in a series of short reports in the coming months. We are incredibly grateful to the young people who took part for their honesty and openness. We cannot hope to solve this crisis until we start thinking of young people not as the problem, but as the solution.



Sarah Jones MP –  
Founder and Chair



Lord Paddick –  
Vice-Chair



Kate Osamor MP –  
Vice-Chair



Ross Thomson MP –  
Vice-Chair

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# INTRODUCTION

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Knife Crime convened a special meeting bringing together MPs and Peers with 16 young people who had been convicted of knife offences or had been victims of knife crime.

The young people came from cities across England and Wales including London, Sunderland, Manchester and Cardiff, as well as smaller towns in areas such as Essex and South Wales. The group of young people was ethnically diverse and included male and female participants.

Young people were accompanied by youth workers or representatives of local youth offending teams, who helped prepare them for the session and guide them through the discussion. They discussed the causes of knife carrying and knife crime in small groups before a wider discussion chaired by APPG Chair, Sarah Jones MP.

Around 20 MPs and Peers from the APPG attended, including senior parliamentarians and shadow ministers. All the conversations were recorded and comments transcribed, with young people's comments anonymised.

This report covers five major themes which were particularly prominent during the discussion. These are:

1. **Reasons for carrying knives**
2. **Root causes and prevention**
3. **Social media**
4. **Policing, drugs and county lines**
5. **Sentencing and prisons**

This report explains the thoughts and ideas of the young people on each of these issues and provides some illustrated quotes which highlight the views that were expressed. This exercise has been used to guide the priorities of the APPG for future sessions. The APPG is grateful for the assistance of the group's secretariat, Barnardo's and Redthread, for their help in running the session and the Youth Justice Board for their assistance in contacting youth offending teams across the country.

This report is not an in-depth study nor does it provide a representative sample of young people across the country. However, we hope it helps shed some light on the motivations and pressures of those young people who carry knives, and demonstrates the fine line between perpetrators and victims.

The secretariat to the APPG on Knife Crime is jointly provided by Barnardo's and Redthread.

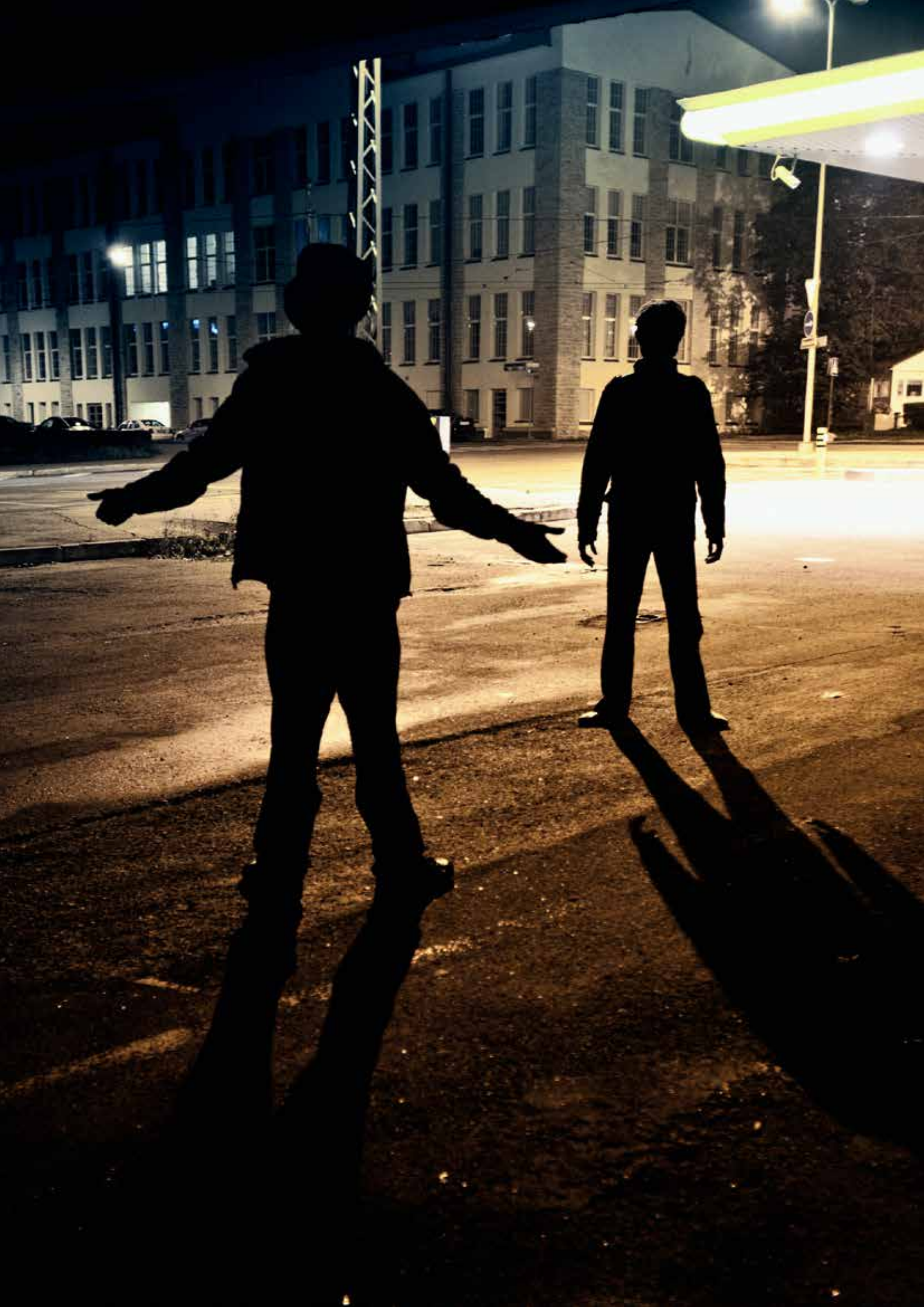
## About Barnardo's

As the UK's largest children's charity, last year Barnardo's worked directly with 301,100 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. Our services provide counselling for children who have been exploited, support for children in and leaving care and specialist mental health services. Barnardo's purpose is to transform the lives of the most vulnerable children and young people. We work to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures for children and their families/carers through our services, campaigns and research.

## About Redthread

Redthread is a youth work charity whose vision is a society in which all young people lead healthy, safe, and happy lives. Redthread's mission is to empower young people to thrive as they navigate the challenging transition to adulthood by integrating trauma-informed youth work into the health sector. Redthread supports the holistic wellbeing of young people by delivering innovative interventions, personal support, and bridging of services – through their Youth Violence Intervention Programme in A&E departments, Well Centre, and education programmes across London and the Midlands. The aim is to help young people to meet their full potential to live healthy, safe, and happy lives, and move away from cycles of violence and (re-)offending.





# WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE CARRY KNIVES?

Young people explained in some detail why they carried knives. Many reported that knives were viewed as an easily available form of protection. They also talked about how carrying a knife had become a ‘norm’ in their community and was something they did because all of their peers did. This has powerful implications for the way the Government and others talk about knife crime. Decision makers may talk about violence being perpetrated by ‘bad people’ – in reality much of what is behind the increase in knife carrying by young people relates to fear for their own safety. Lines are often blurred and young people frequently reported having been both a victim and a perpetrator of knife crime in their community.

## Knives are an easily available form of protection.

Feeling a need for protection was the most prevalent reason young people gave for why they carry a knife. Many young people reported they did not feel that the police were able to provide protection and that they needed to rely on something else to ensure they were safe. Since knives are comparatively simple to obtain they provided an “easy solution”.

*“It’s really easy and you’ve only got to go into your kitchen drawer and there is a knife there.”*

*“It’s just a trip to the kitchen then you can literally just grab it.”*

**“I don’t feel protected; when I’m out I don’t feel protected. Nothing’s protecting me, if someone came up to me and started fighting me, what am I going to do?”**

*“You’ve just got to stick up for yourself because they come more than one... they come in like groups, so say if you got caught on your own you’ll get stabbed or shot or anything.”*

*“When you step out your house it feels like you might have to defend yourself. It’s a sad world we live in isn’t?”*

## For some groups of young people carrying a knife has become seen as the norm.

The sense that carrying knives was just the expected norm was also very evident in the conversations. Young people talked about the confidence they felt carrying a knife while out with their friends and explained they did it because it was the “fashion”, with no real intention that it would be used. Sadly though sometimes things escalated in ways they did not expect.

*“In Camden everyone’s going to have one – they put it in a sock – and everyone has one.”*

*“It’s a shield, it’s confidence as well... if you go out onto the street where anything can happen to you the knife gives you a sense of confidence.”*

*“Carrying something and actually using it is two different things. They might be in the situation where their mental state isn’t the best and they feel like ‘this is the only way I’m going to be able to survive to see tomorrow.’”*

**“You know they are not carrying the knife to use it, just carrying it so it’s a confidence thing. It boosts you up and I feel like alright I’m safe because if someone comes to me I have this.”**

*“From the age of about 14 I was exposed to, initially I wouldn’t call it crime because it never starts off like that. It starts off as the young boys you go to school with, the young boys that grow up in your area, they are just your friends until one day something happens to one of them and then you have to go and defend your friend. That’s how it starts off. Then we don’t take into consideration whether they would be any form of repercussions, you know maybe you got into a fight, and maybe the person you fought he’s going to run back and tell his friends, so now it becomes a tit for tat sort of situation.”*

## PROPOSALS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE:

- Ensuring young people feel safe on the streets is important if they are to stop carrying knives.
- Work needs to be done to challenge the idea that carrying a knife is the norm.

## WHAT SHOULD WE BE DOING TO PREVENT KNIFE CRIME?

We talked to young people in detail on what should be done to prevent knife crime. A particular theme mentioned by a number of them was that there needed to be alternative opportunities available for young people particularly those living in communities where criminal lifestyles are common. Ensuring that young people could access opportunities for skills development, education and activities was seen as key. Young people also talked about the value of positive interventions with trusted adults at moments of crisis and then over time. There is a growing body of evidence pointing towards tackling violent crime as you would a disease – dealing with the problem at its source and inoculating the wider population against it – the conversations with these young people would support that approach.

### Schools have a key role in helping to support young people and diverting them away from crime.

Schools were seen as central to helping young people at risk of involvement in knife crime – but lack of resources was a problem. Young people explained that schools needed to think more about how what they teach could connect with young people growing up in very disadvantaged communities. Some felt there was a disconnect between the perceptions of those in power, where going to university was the norm, and their own lived experience growing up in areas with high unemployment, low skill levels and few opportunities.

*“Growing up, primary school, high school, we got taught about the past – Tudors and Vikings and Guy Fawkes and all that, 1066 and the great fire of London. I never got taught about how to handle a mortgage, I never got taught about interest, but that is what I need to know to live isn’t it?”*

*“Growing up, there’s a local primary school... and once you’ve finished primary school you go to the local high school, potentially college or university or whatever. Now I see there are flaws in that – you see...people in the government...high up people...their kids don’t go to the local schools or colleges, do you know what I mean? What if everyone was to invest the same amount of ambition in all kids? You know?”*

Some of the young people expressed the view that in their experience schools or colleges were not always good at engaging with students who were starting to get involved with street gangs or low level criminal activity. A number reported having been either permanently or temporarily excluded which only served to provide them with more time to spend on the street getting into trouble.

*“I’ve got ADHD. They (teachers) would tell you things like ‘go and sit down in Starbucks in the quiet area’. But what’s the point because that’s not fun and that is not where my friends are. And then to a certain extent they start punishing you, saying you can’t play football and stuff if I don’t do this and that. It’s not going to make me come into college anymore.”*

*“Since they kicked me out I’ve got time on my hands to do more crime, commit more crime, when I’m out of college there is more time out of college in Croydon with my friends who have also been kicked out who are also doing wrong things, who are also selling drugs, who are also carrying knives.”*

*“People my age haven’t got anything to do... If you don’t go to school, or you are not in any education you are on the streets doing what you want to do and nothing is stopping you from doing that.”*



## Mentoring and youth work can play a key role in supporting young people at risk of involvement in violent crime.

A number of young people talked about specific people who had worked with them in their lives and been able to make a difference. Connecting with a worker who understood the challenges they faced and could offer them help, support and a route out of trouble were seen as key.

*“Redthread was just there...I had my injuries and everything and Becky [the youth worker] just helped me through that whole process ... You need that support at that very vulnerable stage, particularly if you’ve got no family to look after you.”*

*“I needed someone to understand me and he kind of just broke me down like that and then picked me back up like that, and he uplifted my spirits and gave me confidence. He also got me involved in a work programme which involved boxing and me teaching boxing.”*

Young people involved in knife carrying often get a sense of belonging to a community. Young people commented how members of their “group” would look out for each other and how hanging around with friends on the streets gave them a sense of purpose. Any work to redirect young people away from violent lifestyles therefore needs to consider how to re-create this sense of community in other settings.

*“The further you are into criminality, lifestyle and behaviour, the more fear you have of leaving and being alone.”*

*“I did a motorbike course, learning how to ride a ped and fix one up and everything and that kept me off the streets because it’s something for me to do. But I think that more money needs to be put into that.”*

*“Let’s say if you have a skill to make a table, then you would go and find a piece of wood and say yeah, I’m going to spend the day making my table and I’m not going to think about going to stab no one.”*

## Fixing wider problems within the community such as homelessness and unemployment is central to reducing violent crime.

Many of the young people highlighted that there were wider problems within their community that needed to be solved, and that knife crime was in many cases just a symptom of this. They talked of problems such as homelessness and unemployment which the government would need to tackle if they were to reduce knife crime incidents.

*“Homelessness, there is more homelessness than you can believe. I wouldn’t be surprised if people in this room right now are homeless. And skills, people don’t have enough skills.”*

*“If people had more skills then we wouldn’t wake up and have nothing to do. A lot of people wake up and they literally have nothing.”*

### PROPOSALS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE:

- Schools need to provide better support to young people who are at risk of involvement in crime, those excluded from school need a safe place to go.
- Investment in youth services and mentors is key to helping young people escape violent lifestyles.
- We need to tackle the underlying causes of violent crime in communities such as lack of housing and unemployment.



## WHAT ROLE HAS SOCIAL MEDIA PLAYED IN THE INCREASE IN KNIFE CRIME?

While some recognised how social media could be reflecting a social reality of the young people using it, there were also concerns about the negative effect of young people becoming ‘desensitised’ by watching violent or illegal content. There are important implications here for how all media present youth violence – the headlines and images perpetuate myths and add to that desensitisation. We clearly have a long way to go to understand and tackle the impact on young people of seeing negative content. Social media companies in particular could do more to police harmful content.

### Viewing excessive violent content online could be desensitising young people to violence.

There was a sense amongst many of the young people that the ease in which young people were able to view violent content, either online or through other media was re-fuelling a perception that carrying knives was the norm.

*“From a young age it’s glorified in music videos.”*

*“I just think personally that the way of life has gone for me, like the things you see on TV, advert, music, if you can see it so easily and go about it day to day as if it’s normal how do you expect it to be? Knife crime is just a fashion.”*

*“People are just getting desensitised to it...it’s not that big of a deal as it was 2, 3 year ago.”*

### Gangs use social media as a means of recruitment and to reach vulnerable young people.

The use that gangs made of social media was also mentioned. Gangs appear to be using social media channels to lure vulnerable young people in and recruit them – for example as runners for county lines activity. The glamorous lifestyle gang members are able to portray online can appear very attractive to vulnerable young people living in communities where they perceive they have few other options for progression.

*“Watching videos with gang members, people doing crime and stuff like that and sharing it on the internet and seeing videos of jewellery and stuff like that, these guys haven’t got jobs they haven’t got qualifications. The gang members are just using kids, the poor kids, to make money, they are just disposable to them.”*

*“When they (young people) see everybody showing all the bling bling they think ‘well why can’t I have that’. But they know that they can’t afford it that they don’t have the training, they don’t have the education, they don’t have the opportunities that others do but they have a right to have a life and to have those things so how do I get those things.”*

### PROPOSALS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

- Gangs need to be prevented from using social media as a means of recruiting vulnerable young people.
- All media have a responsibility not to perpetuate myths that young people need to carry a knife or contribute towards young people becoming desensitized to violence.







## WHAT WERE YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF THE IMPACT OF POLICING, DRUGS AND COUNTY LINES AND HOW DID THEY FEEL THESE IMPACTED ON KNIFE CRIME?

Young people's perspectives of the police varied widely. While many reported mistrust or poor relations, several young people were positive about the role played by the police. Some of the young people convicted of offences had been engaging positively with their local police forces as part of their rehabilitation, which is likely to have coloured their perspectives. Nonetheless, their understanding of the impact of different styles of policing was notable.

Generally, young people expressed a view that the police had a vital role in helping communities where knife crime was an issue, but how police responded to the threat was key to how successful they could be.

### **Lack of resources is an issue – more police officers are needed, not less.**

Young people were concerned that reductions in police officers in recent years, in particular community police officers, have had a negative impact on communities. They felt that community police officers could play a

crucial role in helping to build relationships, gather local intelligence and provide low level intervention. A lack of visible policing made young people feel that there was no protection when something serious happened.

**“There have been three stabbings opposite my house in the past year, I live like 30 seconds from the police station, that’s not right!”**

*“[We need] more policing, more police officers around.”*

*“Community police officers, you may not realise it, but they make you feel safe – sorry but they do, you may not like police or whatever but they are there, and they are safe.”*

*“I think community police officers were good because when I was younger, they used to go I’m going to call your mum about that not taking me down to the police station and arresting me. You may not be getting arrested but you are going to get in trouble for what has happened.”*



## When the police have not built effective community relationships communities can become very distrustful.

Despite positive stories from a number of the young people about the police, there was also a perception that talking to the police could make a problem worse. Young people were particularly skeptical about the effectiveness of stop and search tactics. It is clear that such approaches can harm relationships between young people and the police and make it more difficult to effectively police communities longer term.

*“If anything the police can just get you in trouble more, you can be worse off going to the police... as soon as someone sees you talking to a police officer about business then that’s it, there is nothing that is going to protect you.”*

*“[Stop and search] is not really going to help...you can have a knife without holding it on your body, some people hide it in a bush or whatever.”*

## Drugs – including so called “county lines” activity – are a significant reason for the rise in knife crime.

A number of young people said they believed that dealing in illegal substances was a significant reason for the increase in knife crime in their area. Young people talked passionately about how tackling the drug problem should be at the heart of any initiatives aimed at reducing knife crime.

**“It’s the drugs that drive crime and then the violence begets more violence...other kids pick up knives because they are not living in a safe space.”**

*“You’ve got to deal with violence but someone has got to start doing something about drugs – I never hear anyone doing anything about drugs.”*

*“Unless you can keep your drugs somewhere, of course you are going to have to carry them on you, and then you are going to have to carry a knife.”*

Involvement in county lines was highlighted as a significant problem. This model involves gangs in big cities expanding their drug markets into smaller towns through the use of a common phone line. Vulnerable young people are often exploited to “run” drugs between locations. Young people explained how “runners” often used knives for protection and how if two different gangs target the same small town turf wars could break out.

*“You got people moving out of London so they bring their gang culture down to Cambridge.”*

**“I know a lot of boys my age at the time they were more like runners – they work for other people, someone would give them drugs on consignment and then they would go sell it to get the money. And then there were always altercations like one of my friends might have lost an older boys money, or the police showed up, so they had to throw the drugs somewhere.”**

### PROPOSALS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE:

- Introduce more community police officers who can build relationship and help prevent crime before it starts.
- Tackling the drugs market is a key part of tackling knife crime.
- The Government need to provide support to young people who are either already involved or at risk of becoming involved in county lines activity. There needs to be a clear strategy on how to help these victims of exploitation escape involvement with gangs.

## WHAT DID YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT THE ROLE OF PRISONS AND THE JUSTICE SYSTEM IN HELPING TO TACKLE KNIFE CRIME?

Perspectives on the youth custody were resoundingly negative, both as a deterrent and a way to rehabilitate young people away from crime. It is clear we need to hear the voices of young people and design a justice system which considers how to make best use of community sentences. In the minority of cases where custody is necessary, policymakers need to consider how to ensure time in prison is used to rehabilitate and reduce re-offending.

**Young people involved in violent behaviour often live chaotic lives – rather than a deterrent prison can end up being a place of safety.**

A number of young people and youth workers commented that those involved in criminal activity have often had very difficult home lives. Experiences such as growing up in extreme

poverty, exposure to drug abuse or witnessing domestic violence are common. For these young people there is a limit to which prison can act as a deterrent since it is often safer than their lives on the outside. This highlights how important early intervention can be. The key to effective long term intervention would seem to rest not in the criminal justice system but with what can be done to address underlying problems in the lives of many young people long before they start to get into trouble with the law.

*“I didn’t mind jail...The only thing that makes me not want to go back there, and makes me think yeah let me behave, is that it’s isolating from my family.”*

**“I got more protection than what I have got on the streets.”**



## Exposure to other criminals can mean that prison serves as a training ground for higher levels of criminality.

Some young people reported they had made contacts and learnt things in prison that effectively made them “better criminals” upon release. There was concern expressed that placing large number of people convicted of criminal offenses together was naturally going to expose young people to a greater range of criminal activity than they knew about before they came inside.

*“You are surrounded by other criminals so you gain experience.”*

*“You send me to prison with guys who are worse than me, I’m going to build links on the inside, and when they come out I’ve got links to bigger things.”*

*“It’s more of a training camp.”*

Added to this young people also reported that having been “inside” acted as a status symbol, giving you more respect on the street with an expectation that when you came out you would be “tough”.

*“When I come back out I’ve got a good reputation on the streets because I’ve been to prison and I’m feeling good – it’s the reputation.”*

*“When they come out [of prison] they get all street cred from their boys, their friends and that because they’re like “oh they’ve been to prison” and then no one want to mess with that person.”*

## Youth custody is not effective in working to rehabilitate young people.

Young people who had spent time in custody resoundingly reported that the experience had not helped to rehabilitate them or focus their lives away from criminal lifestyles. Young people in fact reported the opposite since time in custody meant that they had a criminal record and significantly reduced job prospects. This meant it was even more difficult for them to escape a criminal lifestyle long term.

*“I went to prison when I was 15 and came out when I was 17. That was two weeks ago. It’s meant to rehabilitate but it doesn’t really do it because it’s not exactly school is it?”*

*“Once you get convicted for crimes your life is down the drain you know, what are you going to do?”*

*“Criminal records, they are just held against people... what if I do get a job in an apprentice, but what if after that no place wants to hire me because I’ve got to declare my criminal conviction.”*

### PROPOSALS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE:

- Custody should be used as a last resort – often it only serves to help young people become ‘better criminals’.
- Rehabilitation, particularly helping young people gain skills and access employment, should be central to the youth justice system.



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROPOSALS

Ensuring young people feel safe on the streets is important if they are to stop carrying knives.

Work needs to be done to challenge the idea that carrying a knife is the norm.

Tackling the drugs market is a key part of tackling knife crime.

Introduce more community police officers who can build relationship and help prevent crime before it starts.

Gangs need to be prevented from using social media as a means of recruiting vulnerable young people.

We need to tackle the underlying causes of violent crime in communities such as lack of housing and unemployment.

Schools need to provide better support to young people who are at risk of involvement in crime, those excluded from school need a safe place to go.

Investment in youth services and mentors is key to helping young people escape violent lifestyles.

All media have a responsibility not to perpetuate myths that young people need to carry a knife or contribute towards young people becoming desensitized to violence.

The Government need to provide support to young people who are either already involved or at risk of becoming involved in county lines activity. There needs to be a clear strategy on how to help these victims of exploitation escape involvement with gangs.

Rehabilitation, particularly helping young people gain skills and access employment, should be central to the youth justice system.

Custody should be used as a last resort – often it only serves to help young people become 'better criminals'.





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Author: Nicola Smith & Tom Hughes

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Knife Crime thanks the  
young people who told us about their experiences.

Website: [www.preventknifecrime.co.uk](http://www.preventknifecrime.co.uk)