

FIGHTING KNIFE CRIME

A stylized illustration of a city skyline at night. In the foreground, a bridge with multiple arches spans a body of water. The bridge is illuminated with warm orange lights. In the background, a city skyline is visible, featuring a prominent clock tower on the right side. The sky is a deep orange-red color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall style is graphic and modern.

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Issue 9 - September 2023



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NOTE: All references and footnotes have live links to enable greater research. Our signposting poster on page 14 gives immediate access to our own resources as well as those of Local Village Network. Please download it [here](#) and print at home.

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Foreword

Bruce Houlder, Founder of Fighting Knife Crime London (FKCL)

The EZRA COLLECTIVE's Mercury Prize winning album 'Where I'm Meant To Be', comes directly from a team of talented young musicians who met in a youth club, and has all that positivity and abandon that young people can possess. It reaches into the heart of our communities. **Stephen Akinsanya**, in this FKCL's 9th quarterly edition, echoes the words of the Ezra Collective's **Femi Koleoso** who described what we can all create through a shared dream, passion, collaboration, and dedication.

There are three interconnected strands to this edition which find a common thread in FKCL's main aim to Change Young Lives and place our young people where they are all meant to be.

First, we have our first piece from **Lib Peck**, the director of London's Violence Reduction Unit which covers the broad area of their work in preventing violence, through help offered to community ventures old and new. These projects, chosen for their ability to affect change, are supported by Londoners and many hundreds of volunteers across

Greater London. We look forward to working with and hearing from the VRU in future editions.

Next, we look at the Arts, and in particular the power of music – of every kind – to see what a contribution that can make to the lives of young people in the most deprived areas. We have a contribution from **Dame Kathryn McDowell**, CEO of the London Symphony Orchestra. It is an astonishing piece which debunks any prejudice about exclusivity. She illustrates how music-making can benefit everyone. Just one example of the LSO work is the programme of activity they have in partnership with East London Music Education Hubs, which includes opportunities in mainstream and special education school settings, through to high-level coaching, mentoring and performance opportunities for young instrumentalists. Also, we learn from **Sophia Membery**, an extraordinarily talented 17-year-old, who has benefited from the kind of musical education we want others to receive. She uses her own experience to help young people grow

their own talents. She has just returned from working in the United States with young people. She saw there how well-equipped schools had 68% of teachers who reported improved academic performance once music had been introduced in the school community. 94% of teachers saw better social-emotional skills from their students, and how students became more connected with one another. These are powerful messages. We hear too from **Wendy Lewis** of Celebrate Life Events who work closely with groups, artists and communities. Here, she uses the vehicle of their new and powerful film (which I have seen). Each person in 'Power to Change' has been affected by violence, be it as a perpetrator or as a victim, but the film doesn't stop there. Instead of just focussing on the causes of knife crime and the aftermath of grief, the film gives authentic voice to people further down the line who have managed to make peace with what happened and reach a place of acceptance and even forgiveness.

The third strand looks at the downstream reality for those who have not been able to seize or access the opportunities for change or reconciliation that exist to help other young people. We hear from **Stephen Akinsanya**, barrister, community worker and broadcaster who speaks with amazing directness and obvious understanding of those he represents who find themselves confronted the realities of their poor decision making, and life chances. He examines the options for change which his experience tells him are the most constructive. He also addresses some hard necessities about how we deal with those who do not choose to take the chance to change. We hear from **Edward Smyth**, a writer

and speaker in the field of criminal justice and faith, who makes the strongest experiential case for changing society's attitudes to imprisonment for low level offending and uses careful research to support his case. The evidence to support that is very much the skillset of another of our contributors, **Jonathan Ley**, of Make Time Count Today, whose understanding of advanced analytics in the field of criminal justice has started to provide the best evidence to police and to government of the value of diversion as opposed to our society's penchant for retributive justice devoid of reform.

It's a corker of an edition. Please share it and read it all. If not a subscriber to our magazines already, then it's free, and comes straight to your inbox every quarter, and can be found [here](https://www.fightingknifecrime.london).

Bruce Houlder

Founder of Fighting Knife Crime London (FKCL)

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Bruce Houlder



Why Working in Partnership is Key to Tackling Violence

By Lib Peck, Director of London's Violence Reduction Unit

We believe violence is preventable, not inevitable.

It's a mantra we believe and are fully committed to. The Mayor of London set up the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) in 2019 – the

first in England and Wales – to lead a partnership approach to tackling violence that is rooted in prevention and early intervention.

Over the last four years, we've worked to develop partnerships with

local authorities, the NHS, charity and community organisations and the police. These are all built round our principal focus and that is to work with and support young people, families and London's diverse communities.

We've seen improvements during that time. Compared to when the VRU was set up, knife crime involving under-25s is down 15 per cent, robbery fallen by 26 per cent and homicides dropped by a quarter. But statistics only tell one side of the story. We've seen the impact violence has. We've spent time speaking with bereaved families and communities and the raw grief is heart-breaking.

It's why we're determined to work with others to bring about change and that means tackling the underlying causes of violence that are undeniable poverty, deprivation, and lack of opportunity.

Over the last two years, we've invested in positive opportunities for 150,000 young people. Much of this investment and our policy advocacy has been centred around support at early years, in education, through youth work and positive opportunities, and in communities, grounded in place.

We know the school holidays are a significant challenge because we can see violence and exploitation increase. It's vital that we have programmes in place to deliver targeted interventions that both prevent and divert, but also provide hope, inspiration, and opportunity.

This summer we invested £7.4 million a wide range of activities for children and young people during the holidays and beyond to keep them safe and supported with positive and constructive opportunities.



This included investment in sports and physical activities during summer and throughout all school holidays for the next two years. This funding supports young people as they transition from primary to secondary school, and cover food and travel expenses to make opportunities accessible to children impacted by the cost-of-living crisis.

As well as funding opportunities in activities and targeted interventions through music and art, the VRU is determined to tackle violence, exploitation and harm affecting young people online. Evidence shows that children and young people spend more time online when they're not in school and that's why we've invested in the Social Switch programme, led by charities Catch22 and Redthread, to



support more than 1,000 children and young people to stay safe online over the next three years. It will support young people aged 16-30 who may be at risk of violence or exploitation, providing them with skills to stay safe and mentors to develop careers in the digital sector. The programme will also train more than 2,000 London-based practitioners to better support young people on how to navigate being online.

We use evidence, data, and intelligence to understand what works and crucially, what doesn't. Communities are facing complex social challenges and we're committed to encouraging creativity, experimentation and investing in community-led solutions to addressing the root causes of violence.

With the funding support of the Mayor, the VRU is investing £1.5 million in its Innovation Fund¹ for up to 54 community-led organisations and groups to test new approaches and ideas to support vulnerable Londoners

who are either at risk or have been involved in violence.

We've funded the first round of projects of the Innovation Fund that will begin delivering in September on targeted interventions such as the 'Street Aunties' Project, a seven-day a week, outreach-based, wrap-around package of care and support to young people in Tottenham, Wood Green and Hornsey.

Schools across the capital have now returned after the holidays, offering a place of safety and opportunity to thrive through education. Our Inclusive and Nurturing Schools programme, delivered by charities nurtureuk and Tender², is being delivered this academic year in 70 primary and secondary schools in London. The programme works to tackle exclusions by promoting a nurturing and inclusive environment, as well as working with children to better understand healthy relationships.

That's supported by a new £4m programme targeted towards early

identification of special educational needs and interventions to support speech and communication skills in primary schools.

This investment is underpinned by the development of a London Inclusion Charter that is built around the voice of children and young people and informed by parents and carers, schools, education specialists and local authorities.

It will be a Charter built on partnership and the principles of promoting inclusive practices in school. Our ambition for the Charter is to build a key set of principles and practices around inclusion, backed up by investment in schools and teachers, so we can build on their commitment and dedication to supporting children and young people following the challenges presented by the pandemic.

Over the last two years, we've supported community-led networks delivering interventions locally to tackle local concerns, invest and work in partnership with local authorities, health, police and more to deliver sustainable prevention programmes.

Our award-winning community-led MyEnds programme operates in eight neighbourhoods across London and provides mentoring, sports, music and arts activities, and targeted interventions. MyEnds puts communities at the heart of solutions. In its first year it provided opportunities for 5,600 young people and community members.

Preventing and reducing violence is a collective effort, built on partnership. No single public service, agency, charity, voluntary organisation or politician can reduce violence alone. By working in partnership, we can be informed by learning and listen to communities,

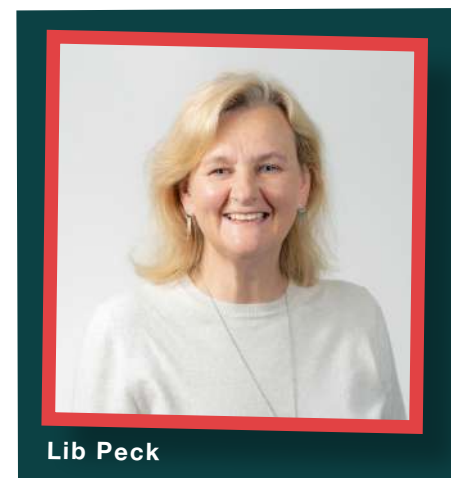
build as well as develop relationships, advocate for system change and embed equality, diversity and inclusion across all our programmes.

Our partnerships build collective strength to help us achieve our goal of improving the lives of young Londoners. When we work together, we can prevent and reduce violence.

To find out more about the VRU, visit www.london.gov.uk/vru



Lib Peck
Director, London Violence
Reduction Unit



Further Reading

[1] <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit/our-programmes/innovation-fund>

[2] <https://natureuk2.jcink.net> <https://tender.org.uk>



Photo by Doug Peters for pamedia

Enriching Lives Through the Transformative Power of Music

By Dame Kathryn McDowell DBE, DL, Managing Director London Symphony Orchestra

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Children from all backgrounds need classical music education. Differences in economic capital are not the only thing that drives inequality in society. Cultural capital matters, too. Along with many in the orchestral sector the London Symphony Orchestra has the Discovery department of specialists in music learning and a programme of initiatives created with experts in their field and LSO musicians

on introducing music, and nurturing musicians from the very earliest years through to later life. Our focus is on our local communities in East London, the City of London and South Islington, but much of what we do is available to all online and as digital resources.

WHAT IS LSO DISCOVERY

LSO Discovery enriches lives through the transformative power of music, with

a year-round programme of inspiring, inclusive opportunities for performers, creators and listeners of all ages. Every year we reach 50,000 people through nearly 1,000 workshops and events, using the power of music to enhance wellbeing, and sharing the knowledge and experience of the LSO family to encourage creativity, potential and talent to flourish.

CREATIVE MUSIC FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

We aim to ensure all young people have access to inspirational opportunities to learn about, listen to and participate in music, instilling a life-long love for the artform.

Workshops and concerts for under-5s allow little ones to get up close to the instruments of the orchestra, and to enjoy moving to new sounds and songs. For older children our fun, participatory Family Concerts and Key Stage Concerts at the Barbican introduce music and the instruments of the orchestra through a theme.

We also have an ever-growing range of digital resources available for use in the classroom or at home, and our Continuing Professional Development programme supports teachers in delivering a creative music curriculum.

Young people can get actively involved in music-making through LSO On Track, our programme of activity in partnership with East London Music Education Hubs, which includes opportunities in mainstream and special education school settings, through to high-level coaching, mentoring and performance opportunities for young instrumentalists.

ABOUT LSO ON TRACK

LSO On Track has a key objective of creating environments for young people to

flourish, both musically and personally – wherever they started from musically, socially, economically and culturally. Like an orchestra, LSO On Track aims to build communities made up of people and organisations, greater than the sum of their parts.

The initiative provides a diverse programme which reflects the variety of individuals who make up the communities of East London, bringing together the skills and expertise of many people. The programme includes activities for primary school teachers and their pupils, for special schools and young people with learning disabilities, for young musicians to both devise their own new music and receive high-level coaching from LSO musicians, plus opportunities to perform in world-class venues, and much more.

The LSO East London Academy, part of On Track, aims to identify and develop the potential of young instrumentalists aged eleven to 18 through a programme of intensive coaching and training sessions, particularly encouraging those from backgrounds underrepresented in orchestras or who face barriers to other high-level progression opportunities.

LSO On Track is a partnership between the LSO and ten East London Music Services, and their Music Education Hub, in collaboration with the Barbican and Guildhall School of Music & Drama. It is generously supported by the Irving Memorial Trust and the Aldgate and Allhallows Foundation.

ABOUT NEXT GENERATION

Next Generation is a creative ensemble that gives young musicians from East London the opportunity to



Photo by Kevin Leighton

work with LSO musicians to develop new music. Beginning by learning and developing fragments of musical material by ear, young musicians improvise new musical ideas using their instruments and. With the guidance of LSO musicians, they negotiate and make compositional decisions about what material to keep and how to develop it. The project creates an environment where it is safe to take risks, and which enables young musicians to thrive and excel in ways they did not expect.

Next Generation is generously supported by the Kirby Laing Foundation.

MUSIC SKILLS FOR THE MUSICIANS OF TOMORROW

Through practical guidance, mentoring and coaching, we are helping to build a future generation of musicians that reflects the society we live in. In addition to the LSO On Track partnership, our Pathways scheme nurtures the personal and

professional development of aspiring orchestral players who may have faced barriers to their progress. Plus, our close collaboration with Guildhall School of Music & Drama on their Orchestral Artistry programme supports Masters students seeking a career in orchestral playing. We also work with string players at the start of their career, providing opportunities to gain professional concert experience with the LSO, through the String Experience scheme.

There are major opportunities too for early-career composers through the LSO Panufnik Composers, Soundhub and Jerwood Composer+ schemes, where participants are encouraged to experiment with and develop their writing for a full orchestra or chamber ensemble. Meanwhile the biennial Donatella Flick LSO Conducting Competition bridges the gap between conservatoire training and professional life for early-career conductors.

Through music we can enrich lives, and help people connect with each other and their communities. Our musicians make visits throughout the year to hospitals, early years and adult day centres, using music to respond to health and wellbeing challenges. Further specially tailored activities include LSO Create for neurodiverse adults, their carers and supporters, where group members compose, improvise and create music together.

We work closely with community partners to deliver projects that have the greatest impact for local people, such as LSO Connect, which aims to bring live music to sometimes isolated older local residents. We also support community-led initiatives including the Community Gamelan Group and the St Clement's Community Choir.

Finally, everyone is invited to discover more about music as a listener in our Free Lunchtime Concert series at LSO St Luke's, which includes specially tailored performances, particularly suitable for people more comfortable attending a concert in a relaxed environment.

*Dame Kathryn
McDowell DBE, DL,*

**Managing Director,
London Symphony Orchestra**



Dame Kathryn McDowell DBE, DL

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FIGHTING
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The Power of Music

By Sophia Membery

Music is one of the most powerful tools that can be used to bring people together. It is a vehicle for expressing and sharing emotions, which begins to explain why it is so

influential in uniting communities. Not only do musicians invest emotionally in their art but listeners then join this journey through listening to and engaging with the music created. The

meaning behind a piece of music is far more universal than might be expected. I was interested to read of a recent study where participants were asked to listen to 14 second clips of songs from communities across the globe and to identify the purpose of the song (for example whether it is a love song, lullaby etc...). Despite the language and cultural barriers, the vast majority were able to correctly detect the emotional aspects of a piece of music.

This led me to consider the power of music in increasing tolerance within and between communities. It is a brilliant form of cross-cultural communication and helps to bridge the gaps between cultural heritages and different backgrounds. This summer I completed an internship with Project Rousseau, a non-profit organisation in New York City working to support a large number of newly arrived migrant families in NYC. My role was focused in the immigration legal services department of the organisation but also included a number of other tasks such as teaching children English and helping to set up a music scheme run by the charity. The programme will hopefully be able to offer free individual instrumental and/or vocal lessons for all students who would like to take up an instrument, as well as a choir open to everyone, regardless of prior musical experience or language. This is a significant example of music being used to draw people together from an incredibly diverse range of cultures and backgrounds. Uniting people to sing together in a choir, despite having so many apparent differences between them, is highly rewarding for all involved. The sense of comradeship amongst the children engaging with

music, often for the first time, is heart-warming and goes a long way to building a sense of community and making connections with other people. Rehearsing, practicing and performing with a group of people is phenomenally powerful in forging strong connections between those taking part.

One of the greatest aspects is that music can touch so many lives and be incredibly empowering even from the beginning stages. The benefits described do not require the highest level of commitment, practice and performance in order to be applicable. In fact, I have found in many cases that it is the musical groups and individuals you are surrounded by when you are initially learning who can become some of the strongest connections made through music. I have begun to realise just how much can be learnt from teaching music as well as how rewarding the process of passing on your skills and passions can be. Recently I gave a 13-year-old an introductory organ lesson; she had never played the piano or organ before and was a complete beginner but within half an hour was able to play a simple piece and try her hand at improvisation as well. Seeing her eyes light up and the joy it brought her, reminded me just how life-enhancing music can be for everyone, including young people.

Returning to the topic of improving tolerance and understanding through music - not only does group music-making introduce you to like-minded people but it also exposes you to others who may have different viewpoints, opinions and beliefs. The shared goal, with many people contributing to one outcome, helps to break down social and cultural barriers. The act of listening to

music, especially in a concert setting can also create meaningful connections between people through a shared experience.

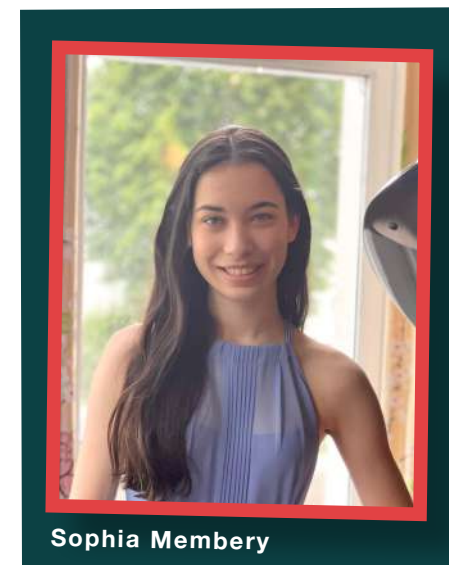
It is interesting to consider what can be learnt from creativity in the way Fighting Knife Crime London inspires young people in London. An important part of the charity's work lies in finding ways in which young people can find inspiration in their lives. Taking part in extra-curricular activities such as music can open the door to so many other opportunities and provide exposure to a multitude of other new experiences. Creativity provides mental stimulation and often goes hand in hand with inspiration. Not only can inspiration lead to and encourage creativity but that creativity can inspire others. Music is a form of self-expression and plays a role in guiding peoples' actions and aiding in the formation of identities. The healing effects of music are well evidenced, with music therapy often being used to improve attention and memory, as well as having a positive effect on those suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's. A recent programme in Newark, NJ where schools were equipped with the resources to provide stronger musical education for students, found that 68% of teachers reported improved academic performance once music had been introduced in the school community. 94% of teachers saw better social-emotional skills from their students and attendance was also improved. Learning about the culture of others through music allowed students to become more connected with one another.

There is always more to learn when it comes to music, whether it

be new repertoire, techniques and much more, which is why it is such an exciting activity to engage in. Music is a huge part of my life and I am forever grateful for the people I have met who have inspired, collaborated with and mentored me.

Sophia Mambery Young Musician

Sophia plays the piano, harp, violin, and viola, and recently passed her Associateship of the Royal College of Organists (ARCO), winning the Limpus, Frederick Shinn and Durrant prizes and the Lord St Audries Prize. A music scholar at St Paul's Girls' School, and St Michael and All Angels Church in Barnes, she has attended the Royal College of Music Junior Department for the last 8 years. She also studies singing, composition and conducting and performs at concerts in London.



Sophia Mambery



Celebrate Life team with some of the film cast and Prison Peace Education volunteers

Making the Documentary 'Power to Change'

By Wendy Lewis, Film-maker and artistic presenter, Celebrate Life Events

The first night I spent in London someone was murdered on my street. I had just left home, coming from a rural area of France where the worst crime I heard of was onions being stolen from a neighbour's

garden. Now I was in a big city, where a man had been stabbed to death just feet away from my home, and it didn't even make the news.

The local people seemed almost dismissive as they used the words



Celebrate Life event 'New Hope, New Beginnings' in Streatham 2022

'gang violence', as if that mattered less, or as though it wouldn't affect 'normal' people, like us, who aren't part of a gang.

But it did affect me. Every single time I walked home past that spot, in the back of my mind I wondered: Why did this happen? What could make someone join a gang? How could his family, who I saw visit the place with faces wrecked by grief, ever recover from such a trauma? It was such a dramatically different world than the one I grew up in, I could make no sense of it at all.

Strangely enough, 15 years later, I find myself exploring these questions, and more importantly the answers, through the power of documentary storytelling. But first, let me tell you how I arrived at this point.

By a mixture of chance and good luck, within a few months of coming to London I met Roni Redmond, whose creativity immediately sparked with mine, and we hatched a plan to organise peace-themed music events. About the same time, I met Rob Dunford, recently

retired from his job at ITV, who was happy to share with me his video-editing knowledge and skills. I had a passion for film-making but no training, equipment, software or know-how, so his help was invaluable.

In what felt like no time at all, we were putting together music events, and filming them to create short edits for YouTube. We called ourselves Celebrate Life but it wasn't until 2019 that we finally registered as a CIC with Companies House.

Wallee Mc Donnell was a name we heard again and again in those early days, as someone we should meet who could help us. He was already organising outstanding world music concerts at London's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, St Ethelburga's, and mutual friends rightly thought he was just the man to take Celebrate Life to the next level.

Sure enough, once Wallee joined the team, our events scaled up in size and scope, becoming collaborative celebrations of music, poetry, dance, food and film, still with the ethos of



Post-screening poetry from Errol McGlashan who features in the documentary *Power to Change*. This is in the Frontline Club, a media club in Paddington that champions independent journalism.

peace very much at the centre.

During this time both Roni and Wallee volunteered in Thameside prison running a Peace Education programme that was being trialled for the first time in the UK after great success in the US and South America. It was through this prison work alongside our Celebrate Life events, that we began to meet people whose stories were begging to be told.

This was the birth of **Power to Change**. There was no formal plan to make a feature-length documentary, there was no storyboard or script, and it was only halfway through filming that we realised we were going to need some kind of budget to finish this thing properly. But I honestly believe that that is part of the power and uniqueness of the film. We had no sponsors breathing down our necks and no agenda that we needed to conform to.

Thankfully, people already knew the good work we were doing, and donated to our GoFundMe, offered venues at a discount, music for the soundtrack, equipment, time, skill, talent, and most importantly their stories.

Each person in **Power to Change** has been affected by violence, be it as a perpetrator or as a victim, but the film doesn't stop there. Instead of only focusing on the causes of knife crime and the aftermath of grief, we give voices to people further down the line who have managed to make peace with what happened and reach a place of acceptance and even forgiveness. This makes the film unexpectedly positive. Every screening something transformative happens within the room, I think it's because what is said is so honest, and so real.

These people faced the kind of trauma we barely dare think about, and yet here they are smiling, in a good place, strong on the inside. They took us on their journey with them and we arrive at the end together with an irrepressible feeling of hope.

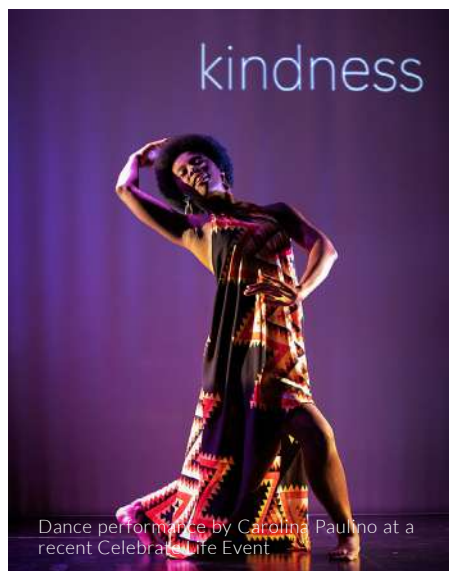
The impact of the film over the past year and a half has been overwhelming. We have been invited to screen it at independent cinemas, community centres, prisons, police stations, schools, the Frontline Club, Scotland Yard, and most recently the Houses of Parliament.



The four members of Celebrate Life CIC: (left to right) Wendy Lewis, Roni Redmond, Wallee Mc Donnell and Rob Dunford, taken after the screening at Westminster of *Power to Change*.



One of the activities in Celebrate Life's 'Get Creative 4 Peace' workshops, in Brixton hosted by CEFLnyx



Aside from more than 50 screenings, Celebrate Life continues to organise events and workshops. Roni and Wallee are still heavily involved with the Peace Education Programme (it has expanded to 12 UK prisons) and we have helped adapt a version of this for the young people of London.

Perhaps one of the most pleasant and unexpected side effects of all of this, has been meeting so many people who are doing genuinely fantastic work within their communities - positive forces for good whose impact cannot be quantified. I have learnt that just as one life taken can have such a profound impact on a community, so can one life saved. This has given me great encouragement and hope. There's still so much to do, but boil things down to an individual level and everything feels possible.

Below are some quotes from people who have viewed the film over the past year.

'This film has taught me a lot, it's opened my eyes. One thing about this world is that it's a lifelong learning process. No one is born a criminal. We need to tell our children they can reach the highest, and to believe in themselves.'

Mayor of Lambeth

'Watching this film the word 'victory' came to me. It had such a deep resonance of victory.'

Teacher

'The forgiveness part really got to me. It made me think who am I not to forgive the person who harmed me? I'm still alive, so I can forgive.'

Youth Leader

'This film was very easy to watch; even though it touches upon uncomfortable topics, it does so with grace and humility, so it is digestible and compelling. It's a story of the human spirit - the people in it are authentic and passionate, but I didn't feel that I was being 'sold' a solution. It left me with a tremendous feeling of hope.'

Teacher

'It's a powerful message, it needs to be more widely shared. I think it's something that will help young people in the community, enrich the community, and I think it will really help in preventing crime, especially around serious youth violence.'

**MET Police,
Superintendent, Brixton**

'If we want to get anything done, we have to do it - we are the people.'

Care worker

'From sadness and tragedy came inspiration and I felt empowered rather than hopeless. It was really inspiring and it kept me on the edge of my seat! - It's a call to action.'

Youth worker

'I thought the film was incredible, it was extremely powerful. It was a story of hope and redemption and no matter how desperate our circumstances there is a light if you are willing to see it.'

I want to say that if there is a film that you watch this year, make it this one.'

Lambeth Councillor

Wendy Lewis

Film-maker and artistic presenter,
Celebrate Life Events

Artist and film-maker, and documentary story-teller. You will usually see Wendy with camera in hand at the Celebrate Life events, or behind the AV desk lining up the visual content. Wendy is CLE's imaginative presence. She is also a singer/song-writer specialising in North Indian classical vocal and traditional Celtic melodies.



www.celebrate-life.co.uk



Wendy Lewis



How Do We Truly Tackle Knife Crime- Some Solutions

By Stephen Akinsanya, Founder, Life of Focus

99 young people aged under 25 lost their lives through the use of a knife in the 12 months up to March 2022. Shockingly 13 were aged under 16! Knife crime remains a critical issue affecting societies. There has been a

75% increase in knife crime in England and Wales between 2013 to 2022. So, we are all justified in seeking and demanding effective solutions.

Knife crime is a topic that none of us living in the UK can afford to ignore.

Sentiment such as “It’s a black problem in London”, “It has nothing to do with me or my family, “That behaviour only affects people from a certain area and class”, are comments I have often heard. As a defence barrister for 30 years, I have become acutely aware of the ages of the defendants I represent becoming younger for knife possession and homicide either directly as principals carrying a deadly weapon or falling foul of the joint enterprise law, which convicts groups of young people. My mission through my Life of Focus platform has been to educate and inform young people and their families about the legal ramifications of carrying a knife before they end up in an adult court room on trial. What are some of those strategies that effectively tackle youth violence through positive intervention? This article will explore targeted strategies centred around youth intervention to tackle knife crime and emphasizing the importance of engaging young individuals.

Early Intervention and Youth Empowerment

Early intervention with at-risk youth through programmes, I believe can significantly reduce knife crime. This may take the form of intervention/prevention in schools (primary and secondary) and colleges, in the community and whilst in custody. Many of these young, predominantly boys and young men, do not have any form of mentorship, have never been engaged in, skill-building activities, and support. It is widely accepted that there are a number of underlying factors that lead to anti-social and criminal behaviour involving the carrying and use of knives. Such programmes would address these issues head on.

Community focused Policing

With the level of trust at an all-time low, between certain communities and the police, especially in London, the importance of that relationship cannot be underestimated. Community policing fosters trust between law enforcement and most importantly the youth, leading to a collaborative approach to combat knife crime. Community-oriented policing is a must in reducing youth involvement in knife crime.

Education and awareness in the curriculum

My recent videos² and short animations demonstrate, educational campaigns about knife crime and the consequences can deter young individuals from engaging in such activities. These, and similar material play a vital role and must be available and be part of schools and community centres curricula in delivering information about legal, physical, and psychological repercussions. Through my own involvement and observations, seeing the graphic outcome of knife inflicted injuries also has a place in deterrence for the older age groups as well experiencing the adult court environment. There is the perception that society has become desensitized to violence and that social media plays a part in this, with endless footage of young people posing with, carrying and wielding large knives attracting ‘likes’ and comments on the platform. Exposing these young people to the reality of incarceration by prison visits, talking to offenders both current and ex may be another initiative worth pursuing. It is widely accepted and reflected in the available data that educating youth about knife crime leads to informed decisions and a decline in incidents.

Tougher legislation and sentencing

Some anti-knife crime campaigners have observed that young people don't fear lengthy terms of imprisonment for carrying weapons. The government has announced recent new legislation in relation to sale of machetes and the possession of such knives with intent to cause fear and to endanger life. It may well be time to give into the demand by the public for more stringent laws regarding knife possession coupled with longer penalties to send a powerful message against knife crime. In one of my recent broadcasts on Life in Focus, Alison Cope, who tragically lost her son to knife crime in 2013, called for more consistent sentencing to send out a clear message to young people, as some still feel they can 'buss case' by avoiding custody, when they appear in court for their second offence of carrying a knife, despite the 'three strikes' legislation currently in force.

Investing in young people and the resources that help them.

"Invest in young people for better and more productive communities." Unquestionably we have seen a consistent reduction of funding in the vital area of youth services, affecting the provision of safe spaces, retaining, and recruiting dedicated individuals to work with some of our most vulnerable youth. The cutting of these resources extends also to the areas of mental health support and addiction, which are very much at the heart of underlying issues driving knife crime. Recent data from the British Youth Council underscores the role of funding in reducing knife crime incidents among vulnerable youth through accessible support systems.

The most important contribution I believe is through the grass root programmes that operate within the communities around the country to deter young people for picking up a knife, whether through the discipline developed through boxing clubs or the creative art form of music. There should be other programmes available such as rugby, other team sports and viable alternative opportunities. Getting young people in this bracket to realise and unlock their true potential and to have a constructive distraction from knife crime culture will serve all of us well in the long run. I recently engaged with a young defendant recently convicted of running a very successful county line operation. Telling him that he possessed the business acumen to run a successful legal company gave him a different perspective on the choices he will have upon his eventual release from prison.

Collaborative and effective use of data

In order to truly make a real impression on combatting knife crime, a comprehensive strategy is required involving cohesive collaboration among authorities, community groups, charities, industry and most importantly our youth. It is uncertain how accurate the current data is but access to reliable data will ensure targeted interventions and efficient resource allocation.

Closing remarks

To combat knife crime effectively, by engaging youth through targeted interventions is essential. Recent data highlights the efficacy of strategies such as early intervention, community policing, education, legislation, and

youth-focused programmes. By empowering young individuals and involving them in creating safer communities, societies can address the root causes of knife crime and pave the way for a brighter future.

The recent speech delivered by Femi Koleoso, of the Ezra Collective, as they collected the Mercury Prize, was most inspiring and an example of what can be achieved through a shared dream, passion, collaboration, and dedication. They met in a youth club!

As a passionate lover of music, myself, I endorse the comments by Koleoso when he said "In moments of desperation, music can remind us there's more to live for."

I was compelled to release 4 short videos wearing my court attire at the start of this summer and two animations with the hope that the messages of reality of knife crime in the court room would reach young men.

In Q1 of 2024, my platform Life in Focus will host a workshop in London aimed at devising strategies to prevent youth violence and provide avenues for young individuals to realise and nurture their skills, aspirations, and lead a life free from the ramifications of crime.

We may not be able to completely eradicate criminal behaviour but reducing drastically the number of young lives ruined through knife crime and the ripple effect it causes must be all our commitment, after all we were all once children and dared to dream.

Further Reading

[1] <https://benkinsella.org.uk/knife-crime-statistics/>

[2] Also available on <https://www.fightingknife crime.london/video-zone>

Stephen Akinsanya,
Founder, Life of Focus

Stephen Akinsanya is a broadcaster, and author on all issues concerned with youth violence. He is committed to improving the lives of young people and using every means to achieve this. He is 30 years in practice and a member of 15 New Bridge Street Chambers.



Stephen Akinsanya





Short Sentences Really Do More Harm Than Good

By Edward Smyth, Writer and Speaker in the Field of Criminal Justice and Faith

It is perhaps a staggeringly obvious thing to say, but I will never forget the moment I was sent to prison. My barrister had assured me that it was a 'relatively unlikely' outcome; but I'd packed a bag, just in case.

'I am quite convinced there is nothing you need to be taught,' said the judge, peering over what I assume are the standard issue reading glasses issued to anyone elevated to the bench. My hopes rose. '...but I must make an example,' he continued. Back down came those same hopes. There followed the usual consideration of aggravating and mitigating factors and the arithmetic of credit for a guilty plea. The bottom

line: nine months. 'That's a good result,' observed my barrister in the cells of the court half an hour later, 'you'll be out in eighteen weeks. It'll pass in a flash.' I politely demurred: it didn't feel like a 'good result,' and neither did I think the next eighteen weeks likely to pass 'in a flash.' Indeed, they did not: rather they were the longest eighteen weeks of my life.

Long though they felt, however, eighteen weeks in custody as a result of a nine-month sentence falls well within the commonly agreed definition of a 'short sentence' (anything up to twelve months). Sentences of under twelve months are not uncommon: in

2022 half of sentenced admissions to prison were serving under twelve months, with forty per cent serving under six months (and let's remember that in most cases that means the time spent in prison will be six months and three months respectively). Indeed the 'principal offence' of most of those sentenced to less than twelve months attracted an average sentence length of less than three months (excluding knife possession offences). You might expect, then, given the huge numbers of prisoners serving these 'short' sentences that the prison infrastructure would be designed – or at least adapted – to make best use of that time.

From court I was taken to what was then a Category B 'local' prison. This was, to put it mildly, a shock to the system. Within a few days, though, a slip was pushed under my door, informing me that I had been classified as a 'Category D' prisoner, a category for 'those who can be reasonably trusted not to try to escape, and are given the privilege of an open prison.' This seemed to be good news: not something of which there had been an enormous amount since that Friday afternoon in court. So, I spoke to a senior officer on the wing to ask when I might expect to be moved to open conditions. My question was met with a laugh. 'Eighteen weeks, right? No chance. You're on the naughty step. Head down, grit your teeth, get through it, get out, don't come back. The prison will barely have worked out that you're here in eighteen weeks. I might be able to get you a job in the laundry if you're interested.'

This is the reality for most people serving a short prison sentence.

Our prisons – vastly understaffed, vastly overcrowded – and those who run them are simply trying to keep up with demand for cells; simply trying to accommodate the 43,000 new people we send to them each year and let's be blunt, simply trying to keep them alive. 'Purposeful activity' – that catch-all term for the kind of thing that we hope might result in someone's rehabilitation – is the exception, not the rule; and the bar for what counts as 'purposeful' is low. Very low.

Whether you think short sentences 'work' or not depends to an extent on what you think the purpose is of sending someone to prison in the first place. Legally speaking there are five 'purposes' of imprisonment: the 'punishment of offenders'; the 'reduction of crime (including its reduction by deterrence)'; the 'reform and rehabilitation of offenders'; the 'protection of the public'; and 'the making of reparations'. Each of these is an article in its own right; and so for the rest of the space afforded to me I want to focus on the two of these 'purposes' which I think sit at the heart of the list and to consider them through the prism of the young people with whom this magazine is concerned.

These two central purposes are 'the reform and rehabilitation of offenders' and the 'protection of the public'. To a point I think all the others feed into these; and to a point I think the two I have drawn out overlap.

But I should really lay my cards on the table and say that I believe the frequent use of short sentences, especially with regards to young people, represents an abject failure: a failure of the state's responsibility to those young people themselves, and a

failure of the state's responsibility to wider society. Readers of this magazine are unlikely to require a recitation of the statistics which underpin my assertion; but the headlines are these: of those who leave prison having served a sentence of twelve months or less, the reoffending rate is 63%, a figure which increases again for those who have served six months or less. The highest reoffending rates are for children aged 15-17 released from custody having served twelve months or less. 550 children aged 10-17 were sentenced to custody in the year to March 2022: of those serving a short sentence 70% reoffended within a year. It is not a pretty picture.

And of course, at the pointy end of those statistics are victims: people whom the state has decided to protect for a few short months, and who are then left to fend for themselves when a prisoner is released having served a short sentence, unrehabilitated, unreformed, angry, and desperate. Because the problem is this: the first time we send someone to prison the effect on their future is cataclysmic. The second time, it is incidental. The first time we send someone to prison their future education opportunities are decimated. Their future employment opportunities are severely hampered. They will find it nigh-on impossible to find secure, decent accommodation. And a short sentence is usually just long enough to lose a home (if they have one), a job (if they have one), and a relationship (if they have one). So what are we left with? Well, here's a good example: someone leaves prison having served a short sentence, aged 20. Somehow, they have managed to emerge without having fallen into a gang, and through sheer strength of character they decide to cut

themselves off from the bad influences that led them, however it happened, to prison. Somehow, they have enough money to buy a van and set themselves up cleaning windows. But then they try to get van insurance; and soon discover that because of their recent conviction – any conviction – it is £3,500 a year. This business is the only chance they have to rent somewhere; to begin to put their life back together, and so they chance it and drive without insurance. The end – legitimate employment and the start of a new life – justifies the means, they think. Two months later they have a minor bump, as a result of which it is revealed that they are driving without insurance. Another offence added to their criminal record; perhaps even a recall to prison. And then some of those conversations they had in prison the first time come to mind: offers of illegitimate employment which would pay much better than the legitimate alternative. They've tried 'going straight' and the hurdles were too high. Their future has been written off anyway, and so suddenly the risk of another prison sentence doesn't seem that bad – more of an occupational hazard, now. And then we have another young person whose future was written-off by three months in prison, and who, despite their initial efforts, finds that crime is the only thing which will pay. They have also realised that the consequences of getting caught for a second time are much, much less serious than those they have already experienced.

In this example, and in countless others, a young person emerges from a prison that has been incapable of facilitating rehabilitation – they emerge angrier and caring less about their own lives, and the lives of others. As a result, they offend again and again. And so has sending them

to prison 'reformed' them? No. Has it protected the public? Briefly, but at the cost of endangering them even more post-release. What an astonishing failure.

The alternatives are many and will be well-known to the readership of this magazine. Community sentences, diversion to drug, alcohol, and mental health services, the presumption of the commissioning of a pre-sentence report which can point towards appropriate alternatives to custody (use of which has fallen by 56% over the last decade) – all of these and much, much more are proven to be effective. Tinkering around the edges you might think. I would agree. But change happens incrementally and we face a political climate at present in which we will be lucky even to effect that. We are caught in what Professor Nicola Lacey terms the two main political parties' 'prisoners' dilemma': an inability – because of the importance of the floating voter – even to discuss the kind of solutions to problems of crime and justice that could be characterised by the opposing party as 'soft'. Thus we are caught in a death-spiral of populist punitiveness where, as prison is used more and more it becomes less and less effective, reoffending rates go up and up, reconviction rates and consequent prison sentences go up and up, and prison becomes less and less effective.

We must break out of this spiral for the sake of victims, offenders, and society at large. To do so will be a monstrously difficult task. But perhaps the first step, for which I recently called in a letter to The Times, is to press the government to follow through on their 2019 manifesto commitment to launch a Royal Commission into criminal justice. To take the political heat out of the discussion and to have a grown-up, evidence-led discussion is the only way I can see to

begin to change a system which fails almost everyone it touches.

Edward Smyth

Writer and Speaker in the
Field of Criminal Justice and Faith

Edward is a writer and speaker in the field of criminal justice and faith. He is a trustee of Sing Inside, Head of Philanthropy for St James's Church, Piccadilly, and the co-author, with Jonathan Aitken, of 'Doing Time: A Spiritual Survival Guide' (Lion Books: 2021). He is also a part-time PhD student in Criminology. Edward served 18 weeks in prison in 2015.

www.ersmyth.co.uk



Edward Smyth

Reference

Statistics taken from the Bromley Briefing – <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-january-2023/> - Jan 2023, and various Offender Management Statistics Bulletins.



The Role of AA In Fighting Knife Crime

Jonathan Ley, Founder and CEO, Make Time Count Today

The end of August sees the annual cornucopia of sights, sounds and smells that is the Notting Hill Carnival. An amazing event combining steel bands, Calypso music and Samba dancers. Not to mention the

Jerk chicken and other dishes from all around the world.

Unfortunately, it was again marred by another alarming characteristic of London life, knife violence, 8 non-fatal stabbings on the final day. I did a

quick google search on “Notting Hill Carnival”, the first four responses were articles on these stabbings followed by a call to move the event to a park. It’s such a shame that the great community work done by the carnival is continually overshadowed.

Knife violence in London is actually lower now than at its pre-pandemic peak when lock downs saw knife crimes fall by a third. Since 2021 however knife crimes have gradually been on the increase.

AI, or Artificial Intelligence, is on everyone’s lips at the moment, depending on who you read it’s going to transform everything for the better or destroy life as we know it. This is no different in areas of public life such as medicine and policing.

For Policing, the idea of AI scares people. Images of Minority Report or Robocop immediately spring to mind. For this reason, I will talk about AA, or Advanced Analytics, and their potential for transforming policing. The key difference between AI and AA, is that AA is human controlled, monitored and acts as a recommendation provided, not the final decision maker. If AI is ChatGPT writing your homework for you, think of AA as making some suggestions related to the references you might want to research for your assignment and some of the key arguments for and against your hypotheses that you may want to consider.

The advanced analytics of police data offers the potential to transform the way we deal with those people caught with possession of a knife. AA will help understand what interventions work to reduce reoffending and prevent further fatalities.

Currently around 60% of offenders receive an immediate custody sanction or suspended sentence. For those caught a second time the court system must impose a 6 months prison term or 4 months for young offenders. The average sentence was 7.4 months in 2021. What we know from data is that prisons aren’t impactful enough at rehabilitating people. Prison reduces post sentence employment chances and results in 60% reoffending rates.

AA has the ability to understand what works better than prison. By processing and analysing vast amounts of demographic information, offence histories, family backgrounds, school performances, and social environment data to create comprehensive profiles of knife crime offenders. Police data scientists can sift through this data to identify patterns, correlations, and risk factors that are indicative of potential success or failure in diversion programs.

Enhanced understanding of diversion strategies that work best for knife crime related offenders enables programs to channel individuals away from the traditional criminal justice system and towards rehabilitation, diversion and support. By harnessing analytical capabilities, police can gain deeper insights into the factors influencing the success of diversion programs and tailor diversion programs more effectively.

There are fantastic community organisations across the country working with offenders that produce incredible results in terms of reducing reoffending, arguably better than prison. Unfortunately, very little data and research exists that truly understand what works. Three



different offenders, Mary, Mark and Mikhail, different ages, educational backgrounds and other characteristics. What is the most appropriate intervention for each of them? Truth is we don't really know. Currently we spend little effort understanding the needs of individuals and diverting offenders based on the root cause of behaviour.

We need to be bold and use alternative forms of diversion, assigning offenders peer mentors and voluntary work otherwise we will never begin to collect data around the effectiveness of these diversions.

Once we have a larger menu of choices, predictive analytics can assist police in determining the most suitable diversion strategies for each individual. By collecting this data from past cases in terms of compliance, feedback and reoffending, police can forecast the likelihood of a person reoffending based on various factors. This enables

police to prioritise those at the highest risk and allocate appropriate resources.

For instance, if a model indicates that a specific type of person engages well in a peer mentoring scheme that significantly reduces recidivism, authorities can focus on directing similar individuals towards these programs. Another type of person may respond to engaging in sport and getting full time employment. Let's connect them with a local gym and a recruiter to get them a job. Think of the menu like Netflix, with two different offenders shown different options based on the most effective programmes.

AA models improve over time. As data on intervention outcomes accumulates, models can refine predictions and recommendations. This iterative learning process enhances the accuracy of future interventions, ensuring that strategies remain aligned with evolving circumstances.

When you go to see the doctor, you don't expect the same medicines prescribed as in Victorian times. We expect our doctors to know what's likely to work for us. If a medicine didn't stop the disease in 60% of cases, perhaps we would stop using it.

Budgets are tight throughout the public sector. PCCs face financial constraints when implementing diversion programs. Data can help optimise the allocation of resources by identifying the interventions that yield the highest impact. Through cost-benefit analyses, AA can assist PCC offices in deciding which programs are the most efficient in terms of reducing recidivism rates, thus maximising the use of limited resources. Moreover there are plenty of organisations that aren't looking for funding from PCCs,

they just need the referral stream to help people.

Prevention is however better than cure and AA can support this. Hotspot policing is used across many forces to make better decisions about where and when to deploy resources to have an impact in reported crime. AA can help understand this and use scarce resources more effectively. Analysing data and trends of offenders can help. AA should complement police expertise not try to replace it, help police understand neighbourhood concerns and collaborate with community stakeholders, including educators, social workers, and youth advocates, to ensure effective prevention strategies are followed. This collaborative approach can enhance the credibility of diversion strategies and foster a sense of ownership within the community.

While the potential benefits of AA in shaping diversion strategies are substantial, ethical considerations must not be overlooked. This is why I talk about AA, not a black box AA approach. It is imperative to ensure that the data used to train models is representative and unbiased. Biased or incomplete data could perpetuate existing disparities in the criminal justice system. Moreover, transparency in AA decision-making processes is essential to gain the trust of the public and ensure accountability.

The expanded use of AA in policing has the potential to reshape the way decisions are made regarding the outcomes and diversion strategies for offenders of knife crime. Its role in shaping effective diversion strategies can contribute to a more just and rehabilitative approach to knife justice,

helping police make more informed decisions that lead to better outcomes for offenders and society at large.

Jonathan Ley
Founder and CEO,
Make Time Count



MTCT connects all areas of the Criminal Justice sector to support victims and achieve justice. It uses the latest technology to ensure that police forces, service providers, offenders, victims, prisons and probation services, are digitally connected in a way that's never been done before.

www.maketimecount.today



Jonathan Ley

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