

# FIGHTING KNIFE CRIME

## CUT BY CLASS -

Deprivation, Policy and Impact - Learning through Research

in association with:



Helena Kennedy  
Centre for  
International Justice



DONATE

Connect With Us



[www.fightingknifecrime.london](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london)

Issue 18  
January 2026

SCAN HERE  
TO DOWNLOAD  
FIGHTING  
KNIFE CRIME  
LONDON  
MEDIA ASSETS



# FIGHTING KNIFE CRIME



SCAN HERE  
FOR OUR  
HOME PAGE  
AND  
HELPLINES

## MAKE THE CHANGE NOW

[www.fightingknifecrime.london](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london)

A completely **confidential** online space for young Londoners to find solutions to a better way of living

**KEEP SAFE  
FIND SUPPORT  
REACH OUT**

FIND A JOB • FIND A MENTOR • FIND FRIENDS  
MUSIC • MEDIA • ARTS • SPORT • NEW SKILLS

**Fighting Knife Crime London is about Changing the future for all our Young People**



SCAN FOR OUR  
LONDON-WIDE  
DIRECTORY OF  
ORGANISATIONS  
AND COMMUNITY  
PROJECTS

catch  
**22**

CATALYST  
IN COMMUNITIES

METROPOLITAN  
POLICE

MAKE  
TIME  
COUNT

YUTU

The Carbon Network

Positive  
Transformation  
Group

imabi

Local  
Village  
Network



FIND MORE  
SIGNPOSTING  
RESOURCES HERE  
FROM OUR PARTNERS  
AT LOCAL VILLAGE  
NETWORK

Point your phone camera at the QR codes and wait for your device to detect the link.

[www.fightingknifecrime.london](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london)

@KnifeCrimeLdn

@Fighting Knife Crime London

@Fighting Knife Crime London

Fighting Knife Crime LDN

info@fightingknifecrime.london

Can't find what you need? Contact [info@fightingknifecrime.london](mailto:info@fightingknifecrime.london)



FIGHTING  
KNIFE CRIME



Issue 18

[www.fightingknifecrime.london](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london)

## Contents

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

8 FKCL's Executive Summary

10 FKCL's Ten Primary Recommendations To Government

14 Foreword From Community Justice Hub Lead  
- Teri-Lisa Griffiths (Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Sheffield Hallam University)

## Research Articles

16 SECTION ONE: The Impact of Deprivation

16 The Price of Protection: Poverty and Knife Crime in the UK - Charlie Jacklin

19 How Deprivation Fuels Britain's Knife Crime Crisis - Shannon Newton

23 Locked Out: Exploring the Relationship Between Youth Homelessness and Reoffending - Jack Wootton

28 SECTION TWO: The Impact of Policy and Legislation

28 Modern Preventative Measures: The Online Safety Act and its Future in Protecting Young People - Tabitha Noyes

35 Beyond Borders: Policy Transfer in the Reduction of Youth Crime - Lewis Skyba

38 From Punishment to Prevention: How London's Violence Reduction Unit is Rewriting the Script on Knife Crime - Holly Jackson

44 SECTION THREE: The Impact of Society

44 Blades and Boundaries: Women and Girls in the World of Gangs and Knife Crime - Aysha Malik

49 Invest in Boys, Not Prison Beds - Felicity Williams

57 Exploring the Impact of the Media: Useful but Underutilised? - James Grant

61 SECTION FOUR: The Impact of Youth Programmes

61 Beyond the Pitch: How Youth Initiatives Protect Young People and Transform Mental Wellbeing - Amany Mohamed

67 Turning the Tide: How Effective Are Youth Programmes in Fighting Crime? - E Hoxha

73 Beyond the Blade: Communities Restoring Hope and Safety - Mohammed Wakeel Malik

NOTE: All references and footnotes have live links to enable greater research. Our signposting poster on page 2 gives immediate access to our own resources as well as those of Local Village Network.

Fighting Knife Crime London Magazine is published by Iconic Media Solutions Ltd. Whilst every care has been taken in compiling this publication, and the statements contained herein are believed to be correct, the publishers do not accept any liability or responsibility for inaccuracies or omissions. Reproduction of any part of this publication for profit is strictly forbidden.

[www.FightingKnifeCrime.London](http://www.FightingKnifeCrime.London)

# INTRODUCTION

## Progress is being made at last

By Bruce Houlder, Founder, Fighting Knife Crime London

**T**hese last few weeks have been interesting and heartening ones in many ways for those who seek to empower the future of young people. The new approach of many of our departments of state offers hope that, given time and genuine commitment, we can give our children and young people the chances they deserve, and reduce the worst effects of the folly and damage wrought on so many young lives. If policy is now translated into action then the encouraging trends in youth violence illustrated by the NHS statistics in this issue will continue to show a reducing curve.

It is unarguable that the reduction of youth services in the years between 2010 and 2020 is largely responsible for the loss of hope that many people have experienced. This was acknowledged by Lisa Nandy MP, in her department's recent policy paper Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy published on 10th December 2025. (see [www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy))

Despite the current economic climate and the challenges that face the government, there has been a real recognition that it is the responsibility of government working with communities to change and improve the lives of those who will make our future.

In the last few weeks alone we have added a series of very recent reports

to our Research section (see [www.fightingknifecrime.london/resources](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london/resources)). The reports emanating from the Home Office, the Department of Culture Media and Sport, and charities like the Youth Endowment Fund, really stand out.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> December the Home Office announced some of its stand-out successes, which the police the NHS and so many others can also take the credit for. This only serves to underscore the recommendations that are made in this issue of our magazine that targeted interventions are those that make the difference. This edition hopes to sharpen the aim.

### Lives Saved as Knife Robberies Fall and County Lines Gangs Dismantled

- Knife-point robberies down by 15% in worst-affected areas, reversing previous increases.
- County Lines programme** sees more than 3,000 lines closed, 8,000 arrests, and 600 vulnerable young people supported by specialist services.
- Year of action sees almost 20% drop in knife homicides and almost 60,000 knives taken off the streets

**Knife crime** is falling and communities are safer thanks to a year of decisive action by the Home Office and the police.

New statistics show that in the worst affected areas, knife-point robberies are down 15% since June last year, following targeted action from the government. This compares to a 14% rise in 2024.

In real-life terms this means almost 2,500 fewer people experienced the fear of being robbed under the threat of a knife.

At the same time, a government programme set up to take down County Lines - drug smuggling networks that cross regions and often involve the exploitation of children - has led to more than 8,000 arrests, more than 3,000 lines closed and more than 900 knives taken off the streets.

This also saw more than 4,000 exploited children and vulnerable people given support to turn them away from criminally exploitative County Lines gangs and over 600 young people supported by specialist services. There was a 25% drop in hospital admissions for knife stabbings in the areas where large quantities of Class A drugs originate from.

So, it seems apt that we look in this Issue at ways in which we can all improve the work being done - to help translate undertakings into action. This research highlights the targeted solutions and where we can find much of the evidence to support this government's ambition.

### Our 18<sup>th</sup> Edition

This issue, written by young people, represents a new approach for Fighting Knife Crime London (FKCL).

This month FKCL has given over its magazine to research we have invited from students, supervised by academic staff at Sheffield Hallam University. Teri-Lisa Griffiths, the University's lead on this project explains their approach in this edition. Much of it is not new, but research from multiple sources can be drawn together to make a particular case. Those who have contributed are drawn from several relevant disciplines. Every

factual assertion made is sourced to a live link, giving one-click access to the original sources should this be required by those who wish to understand more. They do not just look at London but teach us lessons from the regions, including Scotland.

Part of the case these students make is a plea for the abandonment of short-term approaches to the reduction of youth violence, and the advance of public welfare and safety. They draw attention to the evidence that has been too long ignored, and demonstrates that well-targeted prevention, reducing wasteful expenditure, and drawing on the best evidence and investing in best practice, can realise the change so long-held just beyond our reach.

This edition is divided into four broad themes, each with a series of research essays written by these young students. Each has lessons to teach us all. They are described as follows:

1. The Impact of Deprivation	Page 16
2. The Impact of Policy and Legislation	Page 28
3. The Impact of Society	Page 44
4. The Impact of Youth Programmes	Page 61

**The London Violence Reduction Unit's Strategic Needs Assessment**, published earlier this year, estimated that violence affecting children and young people in London cost a total of £1.2 billion per year. Like us they recognise that whilst resources are tight, investment in our young people remains central, both personal and financial. We have used our pages to highlight the tragic impact on families and communities. The toll this takes tells us every day that, hard though it unquestionably is, so much more needs to be done, not in the next 5 or 10 years, but today, tomorrow and the next day.

Now in the 21st century, and at a time when artificial intelligence brings us the hope of yet another industrial and technological revolution, the current social landscape still reveals a picture of long-standing systemic and intergenerational trauma. The London VRU, as we do, recognise that this 'necessitates trauma-informed, public health orientated responses'.

So, we encourage readers to look at the VRU's newly published roadmap, and the solutions it offers, <https://ti.london.gov.uk/roadmap/>. This reveals that the cost of serious violence in London is £3.3 million every day. In London, there are signs that trauma-informed practice is already making a real difference, with services across sectors working in relational and restorative ways that strengthen outcomes for young people, families and communities. Read recent reports too from the Youth Endowment Fund and you will see how serious the plight of our young people has become. As ever FKCL continues to post the most important new research papers on [www.fightingknifecrime.london/resources](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london/resources).

At the same time, FKCL's own studies across the spectrum of service available to young people in London and nationally, still show that well-meaning approaches too often still develop in silos, making it difficult to build shared learning or measure impact consistently. Many groups can become unconsciously invested in the idea that they have the answer. We must never allow that mindset to take root. We can always do better and be more imaginative. It seemed to us that the difficulty in driving effective policy change has for far too long been rooted in poor priorities, and a failure to examine the evidence that for comparatively small investment (in critical areas) huge savings and social benefits may follow.

This historic lack of policy-driven ambition and poor priorities (and we detect this is really changing) has meant that the next generation of nation-builders have been too long ignored, our children and the potential they may possess have been forgotten, and their right to a future filled with hope has been disrespected.

While there are real grounds for hope in the recent reduction of youth violence and homicides, we are still failing to push the boundaries of the possible, by failing to recognise and act upon what the research has long been telling us. The ability we now have to chart, with considerable accuracy, the critical areas in our streets, our boroughs, towns, and cities where poverty and specific crimes and acts violence go hand-in-hand, allows us to point directly to the areas we should concentrate resources. This alone makes the case for acting now and not delaying further until it costs twice as much in lost lives and hope.

People will complain that our welfare bill is large. Just so, and never more so than in the specific communities we can now so easily map. It is here we can use imagination to start to reduce that cost. Prevention, better health and security, and future hope are there for those that dare to live that hope today, rather than waiting for an elusive improved tomorrow that may not come.

The most startling aspect of Sheffield Hallam's research has been the evidence that clearly establishes that prevention and change is possible provided that good hearts, sound morality, and a more intelligent approach to the use of scant financial resources combine. Our present labour government is showing evidence of serious intent, and we have always supported them in this. The one thing that seems lacking is their ability to act on specific and some very well-

argued recommendations. We owe it to our children to make these investments because one day someone is going to have to do this when the desired results may no longer be possible at all. It is already hard to forgive those that withdrew funding from youth services in the early part of this century. It will be even more unforgivable if we fail to act on the clear evidence that violence is preventable.

Well-meaning choices made with the intention of reducing violence have not always been sensible, and sometimes the obvious gets ignored. One striking example was brought home to me recently at the Reducing Knife Harm conference at the Royal College of Psychiatrists in November. The Home Office was represented, and their representatives were clearly listening. The **Safer Knives Group** (read more about them [here](#)) working with Leeds University and **Lets Be Blunt** demonstrated the fact that 52.3% of homicides are caused by kitchen knives with sharp points. Only 3.6% of these are caused by zombie knives. Whilst it is important to remove zombie knives and similarly frightening weapons that have attracted the attention of young people disproportionately, a ban or licensing of pointed kitchen knives for professional use, could have already brought about a revolutionary reduction in the homicide rate. Accidental injuries, sometimes fatal punctures of the femoral artery (ask any senior trauma surgeon), caused to young people who carry these kitchen unprotected knives as well as sudden violent and impulsive actions in the home which result in one partner being killed are caused by kitchen knives. Such deaths could be dramatically reduced. A point may occasionally be handy, but also quite fatal.

So, I urge you to read what these amazing young people have learnt, and

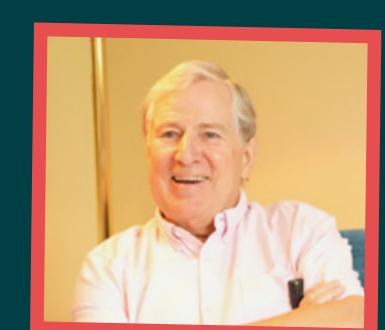
carefully evidenced in their articles. Please write to your Member of Parliament and urge them to support the government and argue for the necessary adjustment in priorities based on the evidence you will find here. What you read makes the case for targeted investment now. This case is unanswerable. A failure to act means – well – quite simply people will die.

If you find this research of value, and to further encourage the young people who have done this work please write to me at [bruce.houlder@fightingknifecrime.london](mailto:bruce.houlder@fightingknifecrime.london), and I will see that they hear what you have had to say. Doing this research has made a mark on them, and if it has made you think as well, we would like to hear from you. If you want to join in the change, then write to your MP and send the weblink to this edition of our magazine.

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

FIGHTING  
KNIFE CRIME

[www.fightingknifecrime.london](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london)



**Bruce Houlder**



## FKCL'S EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A**cross all four student papers, a consistent and compelling narrative emerges: youth violence is not an isolated criminal issue but a social, economic, and systemic one, fuelled by deprivation, structural inequality, online harms, gendered pressures, homelessness, and the collapse of youth provision. Their research collectively demonstrate that early intervention, long-term investment, and multi-agency collaboration offer the most evidence-based route to protecting young people and reducing violence.

### 1. Deprivation, Poverty, and the Loss of Support Structures (The Impact of Deprivation)

The papers on deprivation show decisively that youth violence is rooted in structural disadvantage: poverty,

unsafe housing, school exclusion, lack of opportunity, and the closure of youth services. Cuts of 73% to youth service budgets since 2010 have removed safe spaces and reduced early intervention capacity. Many young people, especially in deprived communities, report carrying knives primarily out of fear, not aggression. The loss of community clubs, mentoring, and recreational spaces leaves young people vulnerable to exploitation, bullying, and county lines recruitment.

The evidence shows that young people who are bullied or threatened—such as a 14-year-old girl who carried a knife after being chased with a machete—often turn to gangs for protection. When services disappear, the vacuum is filled by street networks that normalise weapon-carrying.

Early intervention is repeatedly

### 3. Society, Gender, and the Complex Causes of Youth Violence (The Impact of Society)

This section explores societal influences and approaches the evidence that youth crime is deeply gendered, but in complex ways:

- 85% of cautioned/sentenced children are boys, and 98% of the youth custody population is male.
- Masculinity norms, peer pressure, trauma, ACEs, and distrust of police heavily influence boys' decisions to carry knives.
- Simultaneously, girls' experiences are under-recognised, despite rising female involvement in gangs, exploitation, and violence.
- Girls face barriers to participating in youth programmes due to judgment, confidence issues, safety concerns, and the dominance of male-oriented spaces.

Media narratives amplify fear and sensationalism, feeding harmful myths and sometimes reinforcing weapon-carrying as a perceived necessity.

Society-wide drivers—social media, violent content, community disorganisation, exclusion from school, and experiences of abuse—show that youth crime is not an individual failing but a product of lived environments.

### 4. Youth Programmes and Early Intervention: Evidence of What Works (The Impact of Youth Programmes)

Across all these research papers, youth programmes emerge as one of the most powerful protective tools available. As with all these papers, the evidence is closely referenced.

This evidence shows:

- Early Intervention Youth Fund projects saw 23% reductions in drug offences and 33% reductions in public order offences.
- Police-led youth interventions demonstrated a significant drop in reoffending, with only 4 out of 69 participants offending post-engagement.
- Youth clubs improve confidence, routine, mental health, educational engagement, and long-term life chances.
- Sport programmes (e.g., Sheffield Wednesday FC) create structure,

discipline, resilience, and belonging—especially for boys—but require consistent funding to include counsellors, mentors, and trauma specialists.

Youth homelessness—particularly for children leaving custody—is identified as a serious and overlooked driver of reoffending. Without stable housing, even strong diversion schemes fail.

Overall, the research overwhelmingly supports the “spend to save” model: investment in youth provision prevents crime, reduces costs, and strengthens communities long-term.

## FKCL's Ten Primary Recommendations To Government

### 1. Restore and ring-fence long-term funding for youth provision

The evidence across all papers shows that short-term grants undermine effectiveness. We acknowledge to work that is being done to establish Youth Hubs across the country.

Government should commit to 10-year funding settlements for youth clubs, mentoring schemes, sports programmes, girls-only initiatives, and trauma-informed services.

### 2. Expand the public health approach through national VRUs

VRUs work when adapted locally.

Government should scale VRUs nationwide, ensuring:

- multi-disciplinary teams
- stable budgets
- youth leadership roles
- mandatory partnership with schools, NHS CAMHS, and social care

### 3. Guarantee stable accommodation for young people leaving custody

Homelessness is shown to be a major trigger for reoffending. Introduce a statutory duty to provide safe housing for all under-18s leaving custody, including supported accommodation.

### 4. Reform the National Curriculum to include digital literacy and online safety education

Current legislation is too blunt. Students recommend:

- contextual, age-specific online safety
- critical thinking and media literacy
- training for teachers to deliver digital safeguarding confidently

### 5. Targeted gender-responsive interventions

Evidence shows both boys and girls need tailored approaches.

Policies should fund:

- male mentoring and identity programmes
- girls-only sport and leadership spaces
- trauma-informed support for exploited girls
- family-based interventions

### 6. Strengthen early intervention in primary and early secondary school

Schools are the earliest and most consistent point of contact.

Government should expand:

- speech and language support
- school-based mental health teams
- mentoring for at-risk children
- attendance-improvement programmes

## 7. Invest in community sport as part of youth work, not recreation

Sport protects young people only when paired with youth workers, counsellors, and mentors.

Funding should cover holistic provision—including mental health specialists, behaviour coaches, and transport.

## 8. A national strategy to address material deprivation

Poverty repeatedly emerges as a root cause.

Policies should include:

- expanding free school meals
- increasing child benefit
- investing in safe housing
- restoring Sure Start-style early years centres

## 9. Evidence-led policy transfer, not wholesale importation

The government should adopt soft transfer frameworks and avoid direct copying of foreign policies that ignore local context.

## 10. A national communications strategy to counter harmful media narratives

Young people report fear driven by sensationalised media.

Government should invest in campaigns led by young people that:

- de-normalise knife-carrying
- showcase alternatives
- amplify positive stories of community programmes

“

**Kids as young as 12 are carrying machetes and swords.**

”

“

More mums are telling us they feel like they're the only ones protecting their children.

”

“

Without funding for structured activities, children are left open to exploitation and violence.

”

“

Youth groups aren't ineffective—the question is how consistently they are funded and targeted.

”

“

Football doesn't change lives—youth work around football does.

”

“

Girls disengage because they feel judged, watched, and unwelcome in male-dominated spaces.

”

“

Knife crime is not just a policing issue—it is a societal one.

”

“

Spend to save is the most efficient model—cutting prevention simply shifts the cost further down the line

”

“

Invest in boys, not prison beds

”

## FOREWORD

Teri-Lisa Griffiths, Community Justice Hub lead and Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Sheffield Hallam University, teri-lisa.griffiths@shu.ac.uk

A group of my students have been working hard this semester to research and write their contributions for this edition of the magazine. This opportunity has been offered to them as part of the Community Justice Hub, which is part of the wider applied learning offer within the Institute of Law and Justice at Sheffield Hallam University. Recognising the importance of opportunities for students to understand their academic studies within the context of the community and wider society, the Hubs provide a mechanism for students to repurpose on-campus learning spaces in order to engage with external organisations. The student writers featured in this edition are in the third year of their undergraduate studies, and many were introduced to the topic of youth justice through this assignment. We have heard from a variety of organisation representatives and elected officials during the process of this placement, providing students with a real connection to the ongoing work of supporting young people within South Yorkshire.

Their research has convinced them of the importance of early intervention for supporting young people. In this edition, you will find a variety of topics with a relationship to this overarching philosophy. The topics have been directed by the students' research and their own interests and experiences as young people including explorations of inequality, policy responses, the impact of social media, and specific youth

engagement initiatives within the South Yorkshire region.

Applied learning provides unique opportunities for students to appreciate the impact of their academic studies. More importantly, it supports students to enact their values and understand more about specific societal issues. Even if the students featured here do not pursue careers directly linked to youth justice, this experience helps to shape future professionals who recognise their responsibility, and potential, to influence society on matters that affect us all.

Thank you to Bruce Houlder for this unique opportunity to contribute to his ongoing work at Fighting Knife Crime London. I hope you find this edition insightful.

*Teri-Lisa Griffiths*

Community Justice Hub lead and Senior Lecturer in Criminology  
Sheffield Hallam University

**Sheffield  
Hallam  
University**

Helena Kennedy  
Centre for  
International Justice

[www.shu.ac.uk](http://www.shu.ac.uk)



Teri-Lisa Griffiths

# FIGHTING KNIFE CRIME

[www.fightingknifecrime.london](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london)



Subscribe  
Free to Our  
Magazine





## The Price of Protection: Poverty and Knife crime in the UK

By Charlie Jacklin

In this section, I will explore how poverty and funding cuts can directly influence the increase of knife crime, especially amongst young people. Behind the rhetoric of statistics, there is a much bigger picture of influences leading to knife crime. These can be inequality, lack of opportunity, and underfunding within communities. When funding is cut for youth centres or after school clubs it can cause harm to the young people who use them, as these spaces offer guidance and a sense of belonging within communities. Furthermore, I will investigate the influence of poverty and deprivation, showing how these conditions can cause people to feel unsafe and increase knife carrying as an act of self-defence. By understanding how poverty and funding can connect to youth violence, this section will support the proposal that investing in young people can protect their futures and build togetherness within communities.

### Poverty and funding cuts for deprived areas

Knife crime is often viewed as an individualised issue, where poor decision-making and bad influences have led a person down the wrong path, and whilst this may be true, it is also the case that there are myriad complex causes. Beneath every incident lies a web of deprivation and a lack of opportunities. Research presented in this section consistently shows that poverty and funding cuts create environments where young people are more exposed to violence and exploitation due to the loss of important safe spaces that promote positive activities.

BAME communities are the most affected with many concentrated in deprived areas where exclusion is most prevalent.<sup>1</sup> These communities experience fewer opportunities, underfunded education and restricted access to youth clubs and recreation centres. These

specific conditions increase exposure to crime and violence. Furthermore, poverty and youth violence link together due to structural imbalances, these can include high unemployment, poor housing, and lack of access to mental health care.<sup>2</sup> This increases their risk of criminal exploitation or involvement in violence, including a higher risk of being recruited into gangs and displaying antisocial behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Organisations such as Mind of My Own argue that early intervention is not only beneficial for saving money, but this approach also reduces the social and emotional costs of deprivation for young people.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst an early prevention focus may not stop all knife crime, it can help reduce the numbers and save children's lives; this consists of more job opportunities, sports activities, and youth clubs, where people can socialise and make friends and youth workers can offer young people guidance to break the cycle of deprivation and violence.

### First-hand accounts from people who have experienced knife crime

A report published on the website of the MP Chris Webb, on the 27th June 2025 focussed on the area and areas surrounding Blackpool and highlights the normalisation of carrying a knife amongst local young people. The report describes an event held by the organisation, Poverty Truth Network, where a 14-year-old girl described her experience with bullying and explained how it led to her carrying a knife and influenced her to join a gang for protection, as she spoke about being chased with a machete. One parent highlighted the failure of statutory services, stating, "More mums are telling us they feel like they're the only ones protecting their children". Two girls spoke

of knife carrying being common in their area: "kids as young as 12 are carrying machetes and swords", one said.<sup>5</sup> These first-hand experiences reflect what's happening in their communities, and in other areas across the United Kingdom right now. This also highlights how bullying, poverty, and lack of support systems lead these young people down unsafe paths. This provides further evidence that when schools, youth clubs, and local services are underfunded or shut down children have nowhere left to turn.

### Facts and findings surrounding knife crime

The statistics surrounding knife crime in England starkly illustrate the extent of the problem. They show that out of 570 homicides in England and Wales in 2023/24, 262 were killing with a sharp instrument, including knives and broken bottles - that is 46%.<sup>6</sup> As for hospital admissions, these figures are harder to interpret, as not every instance is reported and registered. However, the numbers for 2023/24 were 3,500 'hospital admissions', this is a 10.4% decrease from the previous year. The records of reported offences involving a sharp instrument was around 53,000; this was 1.2% across all age groups, lower than the year before. However, it is important to consider unreported crimes, which may be exacerbated when crime occurs within gangs, as they are much less likely to report.

### Prevention strategies

Through articulating the links between social and economic disadvantage and vulnerabilities to offending behaviour, the extent of the problem of knife crime, and its impact

on communities, I have demonstrated how refocussing funding on prevention can benefit our whole society. The Youth Endowment Fund<sup>7</sup>, present various approaches to preventing knife crime, including how much the prevention schemes cost, as well as the impact that these initiatives can have on young people. One of the schemes with the highest impact for prevention are sports programmes for young people. These schemes can support positive development and peer support, as well as strengthening participants' social skills and mental health. The research by the Youth Endowment Fund found that this type of prevention scheme can reduce aggression in children and promote their mental health. Whilst the Youth Endowment Fund does not yet provide a cost estimate for sport-based prevention initiatives, it is likely that such estimates will include facility and staffing costs.

Another prevention strategy that could have a significant impact on young people is focused deterrence. This approach combines clear communication about the consequences of knife crime with support for developing positive alternatives to gang involvement. Although the concept of focused deterrence may initially seem complex, it can be explained as identifying individuals who are most likely to become involved in knife-related crimes or gangs and providing targeted support to prevent this. These individuals often include those who have experienced exploitation during childhood. The impact of focused deterrence is considered high because it directly informs these individuals about the consequences of their actions while offering pathways away from crime.

However, due to its proven effectiveness, the cost of implementing

focused deterrence is also relatively high. For example, across two locations, the average cost was approximately £1,850 per person. This high price point may lead the government to overlook the scheme despite its strong evidence base and potential for significant impact, viewing it primarily as an expensive intervention.

### Further Reading

- [1] Cunneen, C. (2019). Youth justice and racialization: Comparative reflections. *Theoretical Criminology*, 24(3), 521-539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480619889039> (Original work published 2020)
- [2] Grimsby & Ford, Young people, violence and knives 2018, issue 3, UK justice policy review focus, <https://www.crimelawjustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/Knife%20crime.%20November.pdf>, accessed 2nd Dec.
- [3] Franklin, J., Larkham, J., & Mansoor, M. (2023) The well-worn path: Children's services spending 2010-11 to 2021-22. Pro Bono Economics, <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=64274c2e-73c3-4364-b995-4b31b6825dd8>, 20th Nov.
- [4] <https://mindofmyown.org.uk/cost-savings-from-early-intervention/>
- [5] Chris Webb, Teens Share their Shocking Experiences of Knife Crime, Chris Webb, <https://www.chriswebb.org/news/teens-share-their-shocking-experiences-of-knife-crime>, 19th Nov.
- [6] Grahame Allen, Helen Wong, Knife crime statistics England and Wales | 28th Oct 2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn04304/>, 20th Nov.
- [7] Youth Endowment fund, Focused deterrence | <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/focused-deterrence/>, 8th Nov.



# How deprivation fuels Britain's Knife Crime crisis

By Shannon Newton

### The significance

This article will examine the relationship between socio-economic deprivation and increasing knife-based violence in Britain, with a focus on child crime and poverty. I will use existing research to explain how financial cuts in low-income communities raise crime rates and impact the community. Throughout my research, I found there was a consistent relationship between deprivation and violent crime.

### The links between poverty and knife crime

It is widely acknowledged that deprivation is increasing in the UK. Research by the YMCA<sup>8</sup> shows that funding by local authorities for youth services has been cut by 73% since 2010 - a reduction of £1.2 billion. In 2024, a report by the Social Metrics Commission<sup>9</sup> found that the rate of poverty in the UK was higher than at any point in the 21st century. These cuts weren't solely felt in community youth clubs; they were mirrored in early intervention services. Programmes such as Sure Start, which supported disadvantaged families with children aged 0-5, have seen around 800 centres close since 2010 due to reduced funding<sup>10</sup>. Between 2021 and 2024 child poverty increased by 20%<sup>11</sup>. This statistic holds relevance as children are most susceptible to becoming involved in knife-based crimes due to poverty. The trend in knife crime since 2010 has been more complex: between 2013 and

2019 incidents increased, fell in 2020<sup>12</sup> (highly suspected to be due to COVID-19 restrictions) and has risen steadily since.

Throughout recent years, links have been made between poverty and knife-based violence. A study published in 2022<sup>13</sup> detailed an investigation that took place between December 2016 and March 2022 in a paediatric centre in the East Midlands. The findings demonstrated that the patients admitted for knife-based injuries often came from areas with worse deciles of socioeconomic status. It is important to note that the patients in this study were age 17 or younger. So, what links child poverty and knife crime? Children living in impoverished areas will often grow up with lower community resources, including youth clubs, this leads to a lack of structure in their social lives. Without funding for positive, structured activities, children are at increased risk from exploitation and involvement with organised crime groups, this often leads to violence<sup>14</sup>.



County lines activity is another risk factor. Areas with the most imports related to county lines have seen an increase in violence and weapons-related crimes<sup>15</sup>. It's estimated that there were 14,500 children involved in county lines between 2023-2024.<sup>16</sup> This includes children as young as 13. Between July 2024 and June 2025 there was 605 knives/sharp weapons seized from county lines stings<sup>17</sup>.

Economic vulnerability is one of the biggest risk factors which causes children to be exploited and end up in county lines or violent gangs. The Children's Society<sup>18</sup> has published a significant amount of research on the effects of childhood poverty. In the years 2017-18, 3.7 million children were living in 'absolute poverty' this means that their families could not afford basic needs like food and clothing. Many children feel the need to take on the financial issues of their families, and this leaves them open to exploitation by criminals.



### Why "spend to save" works

Early intervention is imperative when aiming to reduce violence committed by young people. It can take different forms, from home visits that help parents or school-based programmes and mentoring schemes that are often geared towards children who may be more vulnerable to criminal activity. It's argued that intervention schemes are most effective when offered during the child's early stages of life however there is evidence to suggest that it can be effective at any point during childhood and adolescence<sup>19</sup>. To understand why early intervention is so important we must also look at what happens without it. With no access to early intervention children are more likely to become involved in violent crimes, especially gang/knife-based crimes. With this comes extreme costs, not only societally but financially. The estimated cost of a stab wound treated by the NHS in the UK in 2008 was £7196 per victim<sup>20</sup>, with current inflation that could be up to £12,000 today. It costs taxpayers around £40,000 per year per prisoner<sup>21</sup> who is incarcerated for knife-based crimes. There can also be indirect economic impacts such as decreased footfall for local businesses in high crime areas.

As referred to earlier in this article, public resources such as youth groups and social clubs have faced significant cuts in funding, and many have closed. Spend to save allocates appropriate amounts of funding back into these early intervention schemes and aims to stop knife crime before it arises. This means that ultimately money is saved in other areas, such as the NHS and the judicial system.

As well as financial benefits, this model has a positive effect socially, less people being treated for knife trauma and less pressure on the NHS which as of September 2025 has a waiting list, for consultant led care, of 7.39 million people<sup>22</sup>. It would also reduce pressure on the prison system, which operated at 99.7% occupancy between October 2022 and August 2024, despite HMPPS stating that efficiency cannot be maintained above 95% occupancy<sup>23</sup>. It is therefore clear that spend to save is the most efficient model to help reduce knife crime as well as reduce long-term public spending and increase positive societal interaction and state service benefits.

### Alternative explanations for rising violence

Poverty is not the only factor that puts young people at risk of committing knife crimes. Factors such as mental health, social media, and adverse childhood experiences can all increase the risk of children becoming involved in knife crime. As of August 2025, areas that were often seen as high risk for incidents of stabbing have seen a 6% decrease in offences<sup>24</sup>. Lower ranking socio-economic areas are not the only areas affected by these crimes which is important to understand. However, it's equally as important to understand that even though poverty may not be the only factor putting young people at risk, the positive impact of adequate financial support cannot be underestimated, for example more funding put into mental health services or child protective services all act as early prevention schemes and adhere to the spend to save model.

### Confronting the cost of inaction

The core argument of this article was to highlight the challenges children in poverty face when they are failed by the system, a system which no longer provides them with social clubs and youth work to help them develop. This is made evident by the 73% funding cuts by local governing bodies to their youth centres, the increased burden on the NHS and the rising poverty rates. Whilst it is important to understand that poverty is never the sole factor of children becoming involved in knife crime and county lines, it is extremely important to realise how much influence it has. There are also broader implications to acknowledge, such as the strain put on public services and rising long-term costs. The importance of early intervention cannot be stressed enough, not only does it benefit the economy, but it can save young lives making it morally and economically positive for society. Ultimately, the evidence shows that reducing prevention and cutting corners does not have a net positive effect, it simply shifts the cost to later down the line.

As of the 10th of December 2025, the Labour Government has released a policy paper presenting their National Youth Strategy. This policy paper mentions local authorities working with young people to design youth programmes, funding places, and activities tailored towards engagement, as well as inviting young people to make decisions on their communities. It also mentions helping families in poverty and includes strategies to help children have a better start in life. These changes show a promising start to the reform of Government policies for refocussing on early intervention work.





Shannon Newton

**Further Reading**

- [8] Hallissey A, "Beyond The Brink?" <[https://ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ymca-youth-services-beyond-the-brink.pdf?utm\\_source=](https://ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ymca-youth-services-beyond-the-brink.pdf?utm_source=)> accessed December 10, 2025
- [9] Oakley M, "Social Metrics Commission - 2024 Report" (Social Metrics Commission, November 18, 2024) <[https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/social-metrics-commission-2024-report/?utm\\_source=](https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/social-metrics-commission-2024-report/?utm_source=)> accessed December 10, 2025
- [10] Unison, "Sure Start, Uncertain Future" (Unison.org 2024) <<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/06/Childrens-centres-report-final.pdf>> accessed December 10, 2025
- [11] "Child Poverty in the UK: 2024 Facts & Figures" (UNICEF UK, November 29, 2024) <<https://www.unicef.org/what-we-do/our-uk-work/child-poverty-uk/>> accessed December 10, 2025
- [12] Allen G and Wong H, "Knife Crime Statistics: England and Wales" (House of Commons Library, October 24, 2025) <<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04304/SN04304.pdf>> accessed December 10, 2025
- [13] Reilly J and others, "Injury by Knife Crime amongst Children Is Associated with Socioeconomic Deprivation: An Observational Study" (2022) 39 Paediatric Surgery International
- [14] News B, "Child Criminal Exploitation: Poverty 'shame' Driving Kids to Gangs - Expert" (BBC News, February 6, 2024) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-68097981>> accessed December 10, 2025
- [15] National Crime Agency. (n.d.). County lines [Drug trafficking threat]. NCA. [County Lines - National Crime Agency](#)

# Locked out: exploring the relationship between youth homelessness and reoffending

By Jack Wootton

## Introduction

For the last ten years, youth justice in England and Wales has undergone a significant transformation. The number of children entering custody has reached a record low, and the first-time entrants into the justice system have declined sharply (Beyond Youth Custody 2015-2024 updates)<sup>25</sup>. These developments demonstrate a progressive and rehabilitative approach to youth offending, but when we look more closely at this positive trend, there lies a troubling reality: youth homelessness is rising, and children who leave custody find themselves without safe or stable accommodation.

This gap between justice reform and social support reveals a systematic weakness that threatens the progress of falling custody rates. Early intervention, holistic support, and child-first approaches are needed now more than ever.

This article will show the profound impact that homelessness has on young people and the lack of meaningful action so far to manage this issue. I will also explore the priorities for effective early intervention and the basic rights of a child when they leave custody. This article aims to raise awareness and highlight that falling youth custody rates must be supported with viable housing stability for young people.

## New data shows a rapid decline in the number of young people in custody

The Youth Justice Board's 2024-2025 Annual Report highlights a drastic change when compared to the Beyond Youth Custody 2015.<sup>26</sup> In the years 2024-25,

the average number of children (aged 10-17) in custody fell to 430, marking a 3% decrease from the previous year and the lowest figure ever recorded. Likewise, the number of first-time entrants into the youth justice system dropped to just under 8,300, another record low. This indicates that fewer young people are entering the justice system and fewer still are receiving custodial sentences.

This trend seems encouraging, suggesting greater use of diversion schemes<sup>27</sup>, restorative practices<sup>28</sup>, and community-based measures<sup>29</sup>.

Restorative practices<sup>30</sup>, mainly restorative justice, enable all participants a way to have an active role and to take ownership of the process. The aim is to acknowledge the harm caused by the person who committed the crime and to meet the needs of the person/s who have been affected by their actions. These can be done, face-to-face, online, by letter and recorded videos or interviews. Restorative schemes also allow practitioners to have a broader range of language and behaviours. This broader toolkit enables them to engage with young people at different levels of their development. This way, they can be sensitive to certain approaches and not make presumptions or be judgmental. By doing this, they can then use it to help improve their relationships with children, young people and families, promoting a positive and sustainable change.<sup>31</sup>

Diversion schemes<sup>32</sup> have the potential to reduce crime, cut costs as well and achieve better outcomes for children. Diversion schemes are created by your local youth

justice services for young people to receive support. Completing a diversion scheme means that you will not receive a youth caution, you won't go to court, and you will have no criminal record. These can include personal skills and training classes, family counselling sessions, and drug and alcohol courses. There is evidence to suggest that youth diversion schemes can reduce offending compared to the formal criminal justice processes, and they can be cost-effective. Diversion schemes could also prevent further offending, cut the costs of the expensive aspects of the courts, police, and prosecution. By relaxing this requirement of 'admits responsibility', as young people must admit that they had done something illegal, that they would otherwise go to custody for and even get a criminal record for, it could open the schemes to young people who are more mistrustful of the criminal justice system, as many young people would expect this to be another form of punishment, where as it helps with a young person's development for their future.

Community-based measures<sup>33</sup> include recreational and educational leisure-time activities; these can have a significant effect on young people's development and well-being, as well as meeting the needs of young people in the area. Local authorities should put young people, particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable young people, at the centre of their decision-making when considering a young person's wellbeing, and how they could benefit from different schemes, such as sports clubs, community centres, after-school clubs, outdoor playgrounds and many more. This helps them to become an active member of society, improve their trust and tolerance and build their skills.

However, despite these encouraging signs, the youth justice data also exposes significant complexities. For example, 55% of first-time entrants received a court

sentence, compared to 48% who received a youth caution—the first time in a decade that court sentences have overtaken cautions. Additionally, the average time from offence to court completion reached 225 days, the longest delay ever recorded<sup>34</sup>. These prolonged timelines can destabilise young people further, especially those already experiencing adversity at home or within their communities.

Even more concerning is that 62% of children remanded to custody did not go on to receive a custodial sentence. Of those, 28% were acquitted or had their cases dismissed, while 72% received a non-custodial outcome. This means that most children placed on remand, often the most vulnerable, are exposed to the harmful effects of custody unnecessarily.

### Youth Homelessness Is Rising Among Custody Leavers

Custody figures may have fallen overall, but the number of young people experiencing homelessness has increased. Shelter (2025) found that 190,050 children are currently homeless in temporary accommodation, as of July 2025, which is a 12% increase in a year, and the ninth consecutive record since 2022<sup>35</sup>. Alongside these broader figures, Centrepoint (2023) and Narco (2024-25), and the Ministry of Justice<sup>36</sup> have reported that homelessness is disproportionately affecting children and young adults who have been involved in the criminal justice system.

Newly released data from the government, cited by Narco (2024-25) revealed that two-thirds of people leaving prison who are homeless reoffend within a year, showing a strong link between homelessness and reoffending. Too many young people experience homelessness after leaving custody. According to Centrepoint, young custody leavers

are twice as likely to experience rough sleeping as those without experience of leaving the prison system.

Homelessness does not only refer to rough sleeping; it includes sofa surfing, temporary accommodation, unsafe environments, and returning to households where conflict, neglect, domestic abuse, and even exploitation may have triggered the young person's offending in the first place. This structural instability leaves young people feeling abandoned when they need guidance and stability the most. (Children and Youth Service Review 2025)<sup>37</sup>

Research from Beyond Youth Custody (2015 and 2024 updates) showed that unstable or insecure housing is one of the biggest predictors of reoffending<sup>38</sup>. Without a safe place to live, young people struggle to access important resources such as education and employment, healthcare, support services and positive relationships, demonstrating the importance of stable accommodation for a successful resettlement after leaving custody.

Not only this, but because of the lack of guidance given, young people may resort to crime because of how unsafe they feel and how they are struggling financially. In the Children and Youth Service Review (2025)<sup>39</sup>, five studies had found that gang involvement was a risk factor for homelessness and offending. Harding (2019)<sup>40</sup> found that young people accepted accommodation from gangs in exchange for criminal activity.

### The Main Factors Influencing Homelessness in Young People

The extent of the homelessness crisis shows how justice reform has outpaced social support. Youth justice policies increasingly emphasise a child-first approach. Which prioritises developmental needs, trauma-informed practice, and

rehabilitation over punishment. The housing and social care systems have not reformed at the same pace; because of this, fewer children enter custody, but they still struggle to access safe accommodation. (Loughborough University 2021)<sup>41</sup>

In addition, there have been long-term cuts to local authority services<sup>42</sup>. The resultant reductions in youth services, social care capacity, and early intervention teams have weakened the support networks that young people have relied upon in the past. Without a stable family or community support many may drift into homelessness after release.

Research from Centrepoint<sup>43</sup>, which interviewed custody leavers aged 18-25 who became homeless, found that housing arrangements for custody leavers were often rushed or insecure. Centrepoint emphasised that young people need a resettlement plan to make sure their housing needs are met. The disruptions reported during transfers from custody were a result of inefficient joint workings between prisons, Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC), and the National Probation Service (NPS). However, the use of CRC's came to an end in June 2021, after time lags were discovered in the proven reoffending measures and is now solely monitored by the probation service, and so the impact of this change on effective joint working may not yet be known<sup>44</sup>. Pre- and post-release preparation is often delayed due to practitioners' workload and insufficient resources, creating barriers to young people receiving meaningful support.

Those young people who are in custody for short periods at a time, or those who are recalled to custody, may not be able to engage with housing and post-release planning, leading to a risk of poor

housing outcomes, increasing the risk of reoffending upon release.

As of August 2023, HM Prison and Probation Service<sup>45</sup> has increased the subsistence payment, which eligible prisoners receive on release from custody, from £46 to £89.52. However, this remains insufficient, especially with the cost-of-living crisis.

Even though custody rates are falling, the reoffending rate rose to 32.5% in the most recent reporting year, as stated by the Youth Justice Board's 2024–2025 report<sup>46</sup>. It is the first time that both the number of reoffences and the number of children who reoffended increased. Homelessness is a key driver, as without housing, stability becomes almost impossible, and the likelihood of returning to offending behaviour increases sharply.

The Youth Justice System cannot effectively reduce reoffending if it does not address homelessness. No amount of rehabilitation or intervention can succeed if a child has no safe place to sleep.

*Early intervention must include:*

- Stable housing solutions before and after custody
- Family support works to reduce breakdowns and prevent homelessness,
- Trauma-informed mental health and wellbeing services,
- Education engagement programmes, especially for excluded or at-risk young people,
- Community mentoring and trusted adults,
- Support for transitions (from custody to community, from school to employment),
- Youth services that build resilience, identity, and belonging

Child First research emphasises that children should be treated as children

first and offenders second. This means prioritising their welfare, development, rights, and long-term outcomes.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion: Progress in Custody Means Nothing Without Housing

Declining custody numbers represent real progress and are the result of reforms that treat children more fairly and recognise the harms of incarceration. But without stable housing, many young people still remain at risk of falling through the cracks. Youth homelessness is rising, and more young people are reoffending because many lack the structured support they need to have a stable life.

If the government, local authorities, and youth justice services want to turn falling custody numbers into genuine long-term success, they must prioritise early intervention, strengthen resettlement planning, and guarantee safe, secure accommodation as a basic right for every single child that leaves custody.

Reducing youth crime cannot and will not happen without tackling youth homelessness. When young people leave custody only to find themselves “locked out” of stable housing, the system has simply shifted the problem at hand, not solved it.



Jack Wootton

### Further Reading

- [25] Dr Tim Bateman, Beyond Youth Custody, 'Resettlement of Young People Leaving Custody' <<https://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/wp-content/uploads/Resettlement-of-young-people-leaving-custody-lessons-from-the-literature-March-2015.pdf>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [26] Dr Tim Bateman, Beyond Youth Custody, 'Resettlement of Young People Leaving Custody' <<https://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/wp-content/uploads/Resettlement-of-young-people-leaving-custody-lessons-from-the-literature-March-2015.pdf>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [27] HM Inspectorate of Probation, Youth justice-specific types of delivery 'Diversion' (27th October 2023) <<https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/our-research/evidence-base-youth-justice-specific-types-of-delivery/diversion/>>
- [28] Ministry of Justice, Restorative Practice (incorporating Restorative Justice Services) Policy Framework (6th February 2023) <<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63e12cb3e90e076264193957/restorative-practice-incorporating-restorative-justice-services-policy-framework.pdf>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [29] Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people's well-being, (27th September 2023) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities-youth-provision/statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-services-to-improve-young-peoples-well-being>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [30] Ministry of Justice, Restorative Practice (incorporating Restorative Justice Services) Policy Framework (6th February 2023) <<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63e12cb3e90e076264193957/restorative-practice-incorporating-restorative-justice-services-policy-framework.pdf>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [31] Leeds City Council, One minute guide: Restorative practice <<https://www.leeds.gov.uk/one-minute-guides/restorative-practice>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [32] HM Inspectorate of Probation, Youth justice-specific types of delivery 'Diversion' (27th October 2023) <<https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/our-research/evidence-base-youth-justice-specific-types-of-delivery/diversion/>>
- [33] Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people's well-being, (27th September 2023) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities-youth-provision/statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-services-to-improve-young-peoples-well-being>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [34] Youth Justice Board, Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25 <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f0ba80e8e4040c38a3cf4f/Youth\\_Justice\\_Board\\_Annual\\_Report\\_and\\_Accounts\\_2024\\_to\\_2025.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f0ba80e8e4040c38a3cf4f/Youth_Justice_Board_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2024_to_2025.pdf)> accessed 10th December 2025
- [35] Shelter, Strategic Plan 2025-29 <[https://england.shelter.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/our\\_strategy/strategic\\_plan\\_2025-29](https://england.shelter.org.uk/what_we_do/our_strategy/strategic_plan_2025-29)> accessed 10th December 2025
- [36] Narco, Annual Report for the year ending 31 March 2025 <<https://acro.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/14130849/Nacro-Annual-Report-24-25-FINAL.pdf>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [37] Youth Justice Board, Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25 <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f0ba80e8e4040c38a3cf4f/Youth\\_Justice\\_Board\\_Annual\\_Report\\_and\\_Accounts\\_2024\\_to\\_2025.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f0ba80e8e4040c38a3cf4f/Youth_Justice_Board_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2024_to_2025.pdf)> accessed 10th December 2025
- [38] Youth Justice Board, Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25 <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f0ba80e8e4040c38a3cf4f/Youth\\_Justice\\_Board\\_Annual\\_Report\\_and\\_Accounts\\_2024\\_to\\_2025.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f0ba80e8e4040c38a3cf4f/Youth_Justice_Board_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2024_to_2025.pdf)> accessed 10th December 2025
- [39] Tara Self, Children and Youth Services Review, The relationships between youth homelessness and offending: A systematic review of the UK literature <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740924006042#bb0095>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [40] Billy Harding, Centrepoint, Escaping the Trap (Centrepoint 2019) <<https://centrepoint.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/escaping-the-trap.pdf>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [41] S Case, A Browning, Child First Justice: the research evidence-base (Full Report 2020) <[https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/Child\\_First\\_Justice\\_the\\_research\\_evidence-base\\_Full\\_report\\_14152040/file=26748341](https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/Child_First_Justice_the_research_evidence-base_Full_report_14152040/file=26748341)> accessed 10th December 2025
- [42] Children's Society, Stopping the spiral (July 2022) <[https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/Stopping\\_the\\_spiral\\_Childrens\\_Services\\_Funding\\_Alliance.pdf](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/Stopping_the_spiral_Childrens_Services_Funding_Alliance.pdf)> accessed 10th December 2025
- [43] C Drummond, A Gill, Policy Report Centrepoint June 2018 <<https://centrepoint.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/centrepoint-custody-leavers-report.pdf>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [44] Ministry of Justice, Official statistics, final proven reoffending statistics for Community Rehabilitation Companies and the National Probation Service, July to September 2020, (28th July 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/payment-by-results-statistics-july-to-september-2021/final-proven-reoffending-statistics-for-community-rehabilitation-companies-and-the-national-probation-service-july-to-september-2020#fn1>> accessed 10th December 2025
- [45] HM Prison Probation Service, Discharge, November 2024 <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67483b3e6f60e77679723929/2024\\_11\\_04\\_PSI-22-2011-discharge\\_PPP-PF\\_revisions.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67483b3e6f60e77679723929/2024_11_04_PSI-22-2011-discharge_PPP-PF_revisions.pdf)> accessed 10th December 2025
- [46] Youth Justice Board, Annual Report & Accounts 2024/25 <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f0ba80e8e4040c38a3cf4f/Youth\\_Justice\\_Board\\_Annual\\_Report\\_and\\_Accounts\\_2024\\_to\\_2025.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f0ba80e8e4040c38a3cf4f/Youth_Justice_Board_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2024_to_2025.pdf)> accessed 10th December 2025
- [47] S Case, A Browning, Child First Justice: the research evidence-base (Full Report 2020) <[https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/Child\\_First\\_Justice\\_the\\_research\\_evidence-base\\_Full\\_report\\_14152040/file=26748341](https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/Child_First_Justice_the_research_evidence-base_Full_report_14152040/file=26748341)> accessed 10th December 2025



## Modern preventative measures: the Online Safety Act and its future in protecting young people

By Tabitha Noyes

**T**he focus of this article is the **Online Safety Act 2023**. Due to its recent enactment, there is little research on its effectiveness. However, it is an important topic to explore when considering the media influence on young people and their vulnerability to criminal activity. The passing of the Online Safety Act demonstrates the Government's awareness of the internet's role in shaping crime patterns, such as knife carrying, amongst young people. This edition of the magazine focuses on how early investment in young people can help reduce crime rates and therefore save public money due to lower spending on expensive rehabilitation of young people. Because of the current lack of evidence on the effectiveness of the Act as a preventative measure, this article will have a future-facing outlook. I will explore how the Act currently

keeps young people safe online and how effective investments could support the future of young people's safety online. Overall, I will discuss how effective investments into safe spaces for young people online could help keep many away from harmful trends such as knife carrying.

### Why there is a need for initiatives that protect young people online

The 'Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for Online Safety' states that young people are becoming increasingly present online.<sup>1</sup> This along with many published statistics about young people's behaviour online shows how these spaces can have a large impact on their behaviour in real life. In 2023, 96% of 21 surveyed 3- to 17-year-olds had gone online; furthermore, by the age of 11, 9 in 10 of these young people owned a phone.<sup>2</sup> Half of the children

aged 3 to 12 have at least one social media app despite the minimum age of 13. However, the most important statistic from this study was one on the topic of media literacy, which I will return to throughout this article. In the study, young people aged 12 to 17 were shown a mock up social media profile and were then asked to identify if the profile was real or not. 69% of them correctly identified it as fake, but 16% thought it was genuine and 15% were not sure.<sup>3</sup> This shows how even though the online space is ever evolving and becoming increasingly accessed by young people, young people's media literacy is not necessarily improving. Furthermore, an online consultation with 3,975 young people identified via Childline and NetAware found that 30% of respondents reported having seen violent or hateful content online.<sup>4</sup> To further support the point that online moderation is necessary for young people today, a mixed methods study reported within Ofcom's report on children's media use and attitudes shows that social media can act as a catalyst and trigger for serious incidents of face-to-face violence between young people.<sup>5</sup> Another Ofcom report states that '[they were] concerned about how online content can be used to encourage violence using weapons' and that online spaces allow young people to normalise and glamorise carrying knives.<sup>6</sup> To quote Internet Matters, 'this milestone [the Online Safety Act] matters because the risks children face online remain high. Our latest [survey] shows that 3 in 4 children aged 9 to 17 experience harm online from exposure to violent content to unwanted contact from strangers.'<sup>7</sup> Overall, these statistics highlight an ever-growing online

landscape that plays a vital role in young people's lives, highlighting the necessity of safe online moderation.

### What is the Online Safety Act?

The Online Safety Act is arguably one of the biggest online safety initiatives introduced so far in the UK. It appoints Ofcom as the enforcer of the Act and sets out many goals for the initiative including many new laws surrounding the online space. It has been stated that a priority content concern is material which depicts or encourages serious violence or injury which clearly targets offences to do with weapons such as knives.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, for all content deemed inappropriate for those under the age of 18, assurance technology is utilised to limit what content underage users can see. The government has stated many times that protecting young people is the heart of the Online Safety Act.<sup>9</sup> They have also marketed this act as a preventative measure, stating that moderation is supposed to stop young people from seeing harmful content altogether. Ofcom have been given the power to fine companies a proportion of their income if they do not comply with their moderation standards and in some cases can even bring criminal action against senior managers.<sup>10</sup> Currently, Ofcom has an ongoing case towards the online messaging board site 4chan. This includes a fine of £20,000 that they expect 4chan to pay. Furthermore, there is a daily fine of £100 for either 60 days or until 4chan provides Ofcom with the requested information.<sup>11</sup> However, a key question is whether large companies with lots of revenue will really be affected by these fines or whether they will just accept the fine and continue to operate as they were.

How Ofcom will react to such insouciant commercial standoffs remains to be seen.

The final important thing to mention when giving a broad overview of the Online Safety Act is that services will be required to publish an annual report on online safety related information such as their algorithms and what content it causes users to see.<sup>12</sup> This is particularly important to ensure the protection of young people online.

### How does the Online Safety Act currently set out to protect young people online?

The Online Safety Act designed a set of moderation guidelines for companies that set out to make their platforms safer by design. One of the main things this safer by design interface sets out to do, is to make sure that all report buttons are easy to find, use and understand.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, following a report, platforms should direct the user to any relevant helplines or charities.<sup>14</sup> Any illegal harms reported to a service, should be reported to law enforcement, along with the details.<sup>15</sup> The guidelines further state that when creating platform safety features all users should be considered, especially those who have low media literacy<sup>16</sup>. As noted above, young people often lack media literacy so by design this should make platforms consider young people in their approach to content moderation and reporting. Ofcom are also performing their own illegal content and harm checks by ensuring that automatic content checks occur before content is uploaded. This is important as we don't know how many young people (especially those already involved in harmful spaces) will utilise the platform's report features.

These content checks and automatic moderation systems are targeting many types of content, but one of the vital types they are targeting is content related to the sale of knives and other offensive weapons, aiming to reduce the ease of obtaining these items<sup>17</sup>. Finally, one very important clarification from this Act is that parents and carers are able to request information from services following a young person's death.<sup>18</sup> This request allows coroners to access data that will help clarify how online activity may have contributed to the death of the young person.

Despite these advances, there are still many gaps within the Act and key criticisms suggest that the protections do not sufficiently consider young people.

### Faults and gaps within the Online Safety Act

One glaring fault within the Online Safety Act is that Ofcom is said to have a small task force. Considering the vastness of the online space, a small task force is unlikely to be able to moderate many spaces.<sup>19</sup> Ofcom states that they want to keep up with evidence on the impact, prevalence, and types of content that affect young people of different ages, especially keeping up with harmful trends (such as knife carrying), additional pressure on the small taskforce. This kind of large-scale content moderation and surveillance would not only take a lot of oversight by Ofcom but would also require strong collaboration between online applications, Ofcom, and law enforcement. When it comes to content moderation, Ofcom states they are going to continue to monitor progress and be evidence driven<sup>20</sup>. This shows hope for the future as they assess what

is effective at stopping young people from accessing harmful content. There are a couple of things that could make content moderation and blocking even harder, such as end-to-end encryption and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). End-to-end encryption allows people to private message without outside moderation and is commonly used by messaging apps such as WhatsApp. This means that harmful spaces, many of which include young people, could continue to operate unchecked. VPNs also pose an issue to the age verification proposal; this is because they allow a person to access a website as if they are operating from a different region, which allows the user to access the website without any age verification<sup>21</sup>. VPNs are easy to access and navigate with many of them being free or obtainable for a small cost, this allows for an easy way to access moderated content. However, it is important to highlight that although VPNs are legal within the UK, since the Act passed advertisements for and content pushing VPNs is being restricted.<sup>22</sup> The article '*Access denied: the UK online safety act misses its mark*' highlights that this is one of the biggest threats to the effectiveness of the Online Safety Act.<sup>23</sup> They suggest that the more you restrict internet access, the more determined and inventive young people get to find a way around it. This concept is especially prevalent when trying to moderate trends amongst young people, as trends do not just spread online but also via the influence of peers. When young people find a way to access harmful content (such as spaces that sell offensive weapons or promote knife crime) the more young people there are that can tell peers how to access this content. Overall, this section highlights



how difficult it can be to monitor young people's online activities. It is also important to note that online spaces are only one method for promoting harmful trends amongst young people. Funding initiatives for online safety can take a holistic approach to incorporate positive messages and reduce involvement in crime overall.

### Future initiatives and developments to keep young people safe online

Although these changes are already underway, many questions remain about how effective they are for creating a safe online space for young people. This section will propose ideas for more effective policies for online safety. The first thing to discuss is the proposed update to the National Curriculum.<sup>24</sup> The National Curriculum has not been updated in a decade, despite significant developments in the online space and the increasing engagement of young people, making an update long overdue. It is important to mention that 16- to 19-year-olds are not included in the National Curriculum, but their education has been reviewed as well. The changes set to happen to the National Curriculum are as follows; boosting critical skills which means an increased focus on media and digital literacy and improved

computer education, including a Computing GCSE and a possible Level 3 qualification in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence (AI). However, this curriculum change is still nascent, so we do not yet understand the significance of these changes.



#### 'Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety'<sup>25</sup>

The overarching focus of Phippen Andy's book is on the idea that young people want help, support, and education, not saviours.<sup>26</sup> This highlights young peoples' need for support from adults in their community, rather than large companies and regulators far away and detached from their lives. They want help that is specific to their lives and experiences, which such bodies cannot provide.<sup>27</sup> This support should be provided within communities from people such as teachers, as they understand the area that a young person lives in and the experiences felt by them. Furthermore, many of their peers will share experiences, making the classroom a great place to provide this education and support. It is also surely true that effective support cannot take a 'one size fits all' approach, as something that affects one young person might not affect another.<sup>28</sup> This makes the National Curriculum change more significant, as it

can be personalised to a young persons' experience unlike the Online Safety Act, which takes a broader approach. This shows that an effective moderation policy should consider the roles of family, the education system, social services, and broader societal influences on a young person as the current policy is oversimplified and assumes that the same form of harmful content affects all young people.<sup>29</sup> Effective moderation should also include empowering young people with the knowledge they need to navigate the online space effectively; this would avoid the erasure of the positives that the online space can provide.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, this book presents the idea that although these moderation tactics are marketed as preventative, they are actually reactionary as they are being developed at a time that the online space is already making a huge impact on young people's lives.<sup>31</sup> The author also makes a comparison between online policies and the evolving drug policy landscape, stating that a shift in online policies to education, awareness, and support could yield more sustainable outcomes, such as those seen in drug policies and awareness schemes.<sup>32</sup> This further shows how a change to the current curriculum could make a huge impact on the effectiveness of online safety policies. Finally, the most important point raised in this book is that the media portrayal of safety issues focuses on the most severe scenarios creating a distorted view of the prevalence and nature of online harms.<sup>33</sup> This results in a policy that is not aimed at the everyday experience of many young people online, creating an overly restrictive policy that ignores the many positives the online space can provide.

Overall, this article has outlined how current online safety policies bring some

benefit to young people. However, for the biggest impact we need increased investment into young people's support systems and education around the current digital landscape. Young people need to be given the knowledge to navigate these spaces alone and need much greater investment of time and money into efforts to promote their safety. These investments have some hope of coming to fruition as a new curriculum is already in consideration and with the influence of young people and their close support systems, it could make a huge impact. On a global scale, different Governments are presenting ideas for keeping young people safe online, such as Australia's recent social media ban for under-16. This suggests any future changes to the Act are uncertain as policy transfer steadily influences the development of the online safety landscape globally. Finally, investment into online safety with a focus on context specific approaches that targets outside factors could be hugely effective in preventing online spaces from causing more young people to be impacted by harmful trends.



Tabitha Noyes

#### Further Reading

- [1] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for Online Safety' (gov.uk, 2nd July 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety/statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety>
- [2] Ofcom, 'Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2024' (Ofcom.org, 19th April 2024) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/children-media-use-and-attitudes-2024/childrens-media-literacy-report-2024.pdf?v=368229>
- [3] Ofcom, 'Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2024' (Ofcom.org, 19th April 2024) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/children-media-use-and-attitudes-2024/childrens-media-literacy-report-2024.pdf?v=368229>
- [4] Myers, C.A & Hudson, N, 'Content and activity that is harmful to children within scope of the Online Safety Bill: A Rapid Evidence Assessment' (natcen.ac.uk, 27th May 2022) <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/content-and-activity-harmful-children-within-scope-online-safety-bill#:~:text=About%20the%20study&text=The%20review%20focused%20on%20harmful,give%20rise%20to%20eating%20disorders>
- [5] Myers, C.A & Hudson, N, 'Content and activity that is harmful to children within scope of the Online Safety Bill: A Rapid Evidence Assessment' (natcen.ac.uk, 27th May 2022) <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/content-and-activity-harmful-children-within-scope-online-safety-bill#:~:text=About%20the%20study&text=The%20review%20focused%20on%20harmful,give%20rise%20to%20eating%20disorders>
- [6] Ofcom, 'How the Online Safety Act will help to tackle knife crime' (Ofcom.org, 20th May 2025) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/protecting-children/how-the-online-safety-act-will-help-to-tackle-knife-crime>
- [7] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 'Keeping children safe online: changes to the Online Safety Act explained' (gov.uk, 1st August 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/keeping-children-safe-online-changes-to-the-online-safety-act-explained>
- [8] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Online Safety Act: explainer' (gov.uk, 24th April 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>
- [9] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Online Safety Act: explainer' (gov.uk, 24th April 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>
- [10] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Online Safety Act: explainer' (gov.uk, 24th April 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>
- [11] Ofcom, 'Ofcom issues update on Online Safety Act investigations' (Ofcom.org, 13th October 2025) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/illegal-and-harmful-content/ofcom-issues-update-on-online-safety-act-investigations>

[12] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Online Safety Act: explainer' (gov.uk, 24th April 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>

[13] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology 'Live streaming: improve the safety of your online platform' (gov.uk, 29th June 2021) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/live-streaming-improve-the-safety-of-your-online-platform>

[14] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology 'Live streaming: improve the safety of your online platform' (gov.uk, 29th June 2021) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/live-streaming-improve-the-safety-of-your-online-platform>

[15] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology 'Understanding and reporting online harms on your online platform' (gov.uk, 29th June 2021) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/understanding-and-reporting-online-harms-on-your-online-platform>

[16] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology 'Principles of safer online platform design' (gov.uk, 29th June 2021) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/principles-of-safer-online-platform-design>

[17] Ofcom, 'How the Online Safety Act will help to tackle knife crime' (Ofcom.org, 20th May 2025) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/protecting-children/how-the-online-safety-act-will-help-to-tackle-knife-crime>

[18] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for Online Safety' (gov.uk, 2nd July 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety/statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety>

[19] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Online Safety Act: explainer' (gov.uk, 24th April 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>

[20] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for Online Safety' (gov.uk, 2nd July 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety/statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety>

[21] Elly Rostom, 'Access Denied: The UK Online Safety Act Misses Its Mark' (cepa.org, August 18th 2025) <https://cepa.org/article/access-denied-the-uk-online-safety-act-misses-its-mark/>

[22] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 'Keeping children safe online: changes to the Online Safety Act explained' (gov.uk, 1st August 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/keeping-children-safe-online-changes-to-the-online-safety-act-explained>

[23] Elly Rostom, 'Access Denied: The UK Online Safety Act Misses Its Mark' (cepa.org, August 18th 2025) <https://cepa.org/article/access-denied-the-uk-online-safety-act-misses-its-mark/>

[24] Department for Education, 'What you need to know about the changes to the National Curriculum' (educationhub.blog.gov, 5th November 2025) <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/11/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-changes-to-the-national-curriculum/>

[25] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

[26] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

[27] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

[28] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

[29] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

[30] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

[31] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

[32] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

[33] Phippen Andy, *Policy and Rights Challenges in Children's Online Behaviour and Safety* (2017 - 2023), p.149-163 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-80286-7#:~:text=About%20this%20book,claim%20to%20wish%20to%20protect>

## Beyond Borders: Policy Transfer in the reduction of youth crime

By Lewis Skyba

### Introduction

Policy transfer refers to adapting and implementing policies from other jurisdictions to address local challenges, such as youth and knife crime. Rather than creating strategies from nothing, the UK and more specific regions like South Yorkshire and London can learn and adapt successful frameworks for reducing youth crime and knife crime.

The two main approaches are soft transfer or hard transfer. Soft transfer focuses on adapting basic frameworks, ideas, and values to accommodate different communities. Hard transfer focuses on transferring existing strategies wholesale from one place to another, whether within the UK or international. Throughout this article, I will explore the evidence for the effectiveness of both soft transfer and hard transfer of policy, specifically for dealing with reducing youth crime and knife crime in South Yorkshire.

### Learning from other countries:

An example of this is the early prevention approach used in Nordic countries. In an article by the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)<sup>34</sup>, other countries such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden, attention was raised to the number of young people involved with street gangs and crime (including knife crime). For example, in Sweden, in 2022 there was a sharp increase in gang violence committed by young people aged 15-20, from 16.9% to 29.7% over a decade<sup>35</sup>. Similar patterns were recognised by other

Nordic countries. This increase led them to pay more attention to early intervention preventative measures. Using findings from Sweden, Denmark and Norway, the article illustrated that youth violence and knife crime is especially evident in at-risk and disadvantaged areas, and these countries deployed extra efforts to aim to reduce potential offending in these areas. An example is that in Denmark, they introduced mentorship programs and increased community-based efforts, with policing in higher-risk areas, which has shown a 12% drop in youth gang violence and youth crime since its introduction in 2017<sup>36</sup>. These methods employed elsewhere are seen to work, which implies that an increase of funding to adapt these frameworks to the UK may show an increase in the prevention of knife crime especially among youth. The UK could benefit greatly from adapting these policies, whether through a hard transfer of ideas or through adaptation and collaboration of a soft transfer of the policy.

### Hard transfer: the advantages and disadvantages

Hard transfer of policies refers to the wholesale copying of policies effective in other parts of the world and parts of the UK. There is evidence that this approach is ineffective for reducing knife crime. In a research article published by William Graham, titled 'Exploring criminal justice policy transfer models and mobilities using a case study of violence reduction',<sup>37</sup> it was demonstrated that

the **Glasgow Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV)** initially tried to directly copy policies from other cultures and communities. However, this approach had little to no effective impact in reducing youth crime. The Glasgow CIRV used hard transfer for a policy that aimed to "tackle homicides associated with gangs and groups associated with drug supply and acquisitive crime"<sup>38</sup> which also included violent crime and young offender crime from an a Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) in Cincinnati. Through the **Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence**, they found that when they tried to implement the policy back in Glasgow, the same way as it was in Cincinnati, a common issue was present. Drinking and drunk violent crimes were much more prominent in Glasgow compared to Cincinnati. Additionally, they found that a hard-transfer policy didn't account for the fact that gun crime was a much larger issue in the US compared to Glasgow, where knife crimes were more prominent. So it seems that a hard transfer of a policy has limited success, as it doesn't take into consideration the immense impact that differing cultures has on the cultivation and execution of violent crime amongst young people in different areas of the world and UK. Direct copying policy can overlook key contextual factors, as it does not adapt and reshape to local realities, which is where soft transfer may have more success.

#### Soft transfer: the advantages and disadvantages

Soft transfer of policies has proven to be an effective method of applying strategies that aim to reduce early youth violence and knife crime. Soft transfer considers collaboration and adaptation, rather than copying policies. One of these methods is through the setting

up of Violence Reduction Units (VRU's). Originating in Scotland, they look at early intervention strategies to support young people vulnerable to involvement with crime and violence, with the aim of reducing crime over the long-term. VRU's are dedicated in the belief that 'violence is preventable, not inevitable'<sup>39</sup>, and aims to reduce knife crime within Scotland and the UK using a 'public health approach', treating violence as something that can be cured. The introduction of VRUs was crucial in the reduction of knife crime, seeing a significant reduction of hospital admissions in Scotland as a result of an assault with a sharp object, down 'from 1414 in 2008-09, to 438 during 2023-24'<sup>40</sup>. Seeing this evidence, it was later adapted to be implemented in the UK, adapting potential cultural differences and behaviours between Scotland and the UK. A difference that should be noted is the different cultures within schools in Scotland and the UK and South Yorkshire. South Yorkshire is considered to have higher exclusion rates and have a higher diverse culture within families and school life, which means that when adapting policies and the strategies of VRUs, the government must be mindful of these facts and accommodate accordingly. Whether through more police involvement in schools, or a larger effort to have preventative methods present with closer ties to the school, extra measures may need to be put in place. As you move through the country, it should be noted that hard transfer of policy does not consider these things, which ends up being its shortcoming.

Mentoring is another method to which we can aim to reduce knife crime. Mentoring provides young people with consistent, trusted support from a grounded, positive role model. These

role models aim to reframe a potential at-risk young person's mind and assist them in changing their mindset towards the circumstances around violence and put them on a more positive path. Research from Nadia Butler and others into the power and influence of mentoring produces 'significant positive changes on measures of knowledge and attitudes towards violence prevention'<sup>41</sup>. The research participants were students aged 11-18 and were asked to answer a survey based on their knowledge surrounding youth violence before and after meeting with a mentor and discussing issues and beliefs surrounding this. The soft transfer of role model systems from around the world and the rest of the UK are proven to be an effective method in reducing youth crime and helping those who are at-risk.

Considering the adaptation and inclusion of VRUs and mentoring, there is clear evidence of a statistical impact which can be assessed through verified government statistics<sup>42</sup>. For example, between 2023 and 2024, there was a significant reduction in hospital admissions due to any violent injury from 7.96 in 2023 to 10.39 in 2024. The most recent figures for 2025 show a further reduction. Another supporting statistic is that the estimated reduction in homicides and hospital admissions due to violent injury with a sharp object was around 1.6 (per 100,000) people, said to be a larger reduction than the year prior. Shown in the statistics is a reduction in hospital visits due to any violent injuries, and an estimated continual reduction in assaults by sharp objects in people under 24. The success of Violence Reduction Units and Mentoring as a method of soft transfer across the UK shows how learning from other policies, collaboration with

each other and a common united goal can lead to real reductions in youth and knife crime.

#### Conclusion:

To conclude, the evidence suggests that the transfer of policies, if done correctly and considering local context, can play a valuable role in reducing youth and knife crime. Hard transfer, involving the direct copying of policies from one area to another, often fails due to the overlooking of cultural, social and structural differences between locations and communities. Apart from this, soft transfer adapts ideas and values from the frameworks whilst moulding them to fit local needs and has demonstrated far greater success. The effectiveness of Violence Reduction Units, alongside mentoring programmes and early intervention strategies across Scotland and adapted within the UK shows that collaborative learning and flexible adapted and sustained investment can lead to a meaningful impact on the reduction of violence. It is of my firm belief, and backed by evidence, that the increase of funding towards the early stages of identifying and preventing youth crime should further assist in preventing youth crime and protecting the youth of tomorrow.



**Lewis Skyba**

**Further Reading**

[34] Sivi Loponen, 'Youth violence and prevention in the Nordic countries' (<https://lgiu.org/blog-article/youth-violence-and-prevention-in-the-nordic-countries>, published 17th October 2024) accessed November 2025

[35] ibid

[36] ibid

[37] William Graham, 'Exploring criminal justice policy transfer models and mobilities using a case study of violence reduction' (2022) 22 *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 381

[38] ibid - William Graham, 'Exploring criminal justice policy transfer models and mobilities using a case study of violence reduction' (2022) 22 *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 381

[39] Leslie Evans, 'Tackling knife crime in Scotland - 10 years on' (<https://civilservice.blog.gov.uk/2018/05/24/tackling-knife-crime-in-scotland-10-years-on/>, published 24th May 2018) Accessed November 2025

[40] Public Health Scotland, *Unintentional Injuries in Scotland: Hospital Admissions - Year ending 31 March 2024* (PHS, 29 October 2024) <https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/29687/2024-10-29-ui-2024-report-final.pdf> accessed 3 December 2025.

[41] Nadia Butler and others, 'The Mentors in Violence Prevention programme: impact on students' knowledge and attitudes related to violence, prejudice, and abuse, and willingness to intervene as a bystander in secondary schools in England' (2024) *BMC Public Health* 729

[42] Home Office, *Violence Reduction Units year ending March 2024 evaluation report* (11 June 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/violence-reduction-units-year-ending-march-2024-evaluation-report/violence-reduction-units-year-ending-march-2024-evaluation-report> accessed 3 November 2025.



## From punishment to prevention: How London's Violence Reduction Unit is rewriting the script on knife crime

By Holly Jackson

### How London is tackling knife crime differently

Knife crime in London is still a prevalent issue, which disproportionately affects the population of youth groups leading to the devastating loss of young lives.

What if the solution lies not within tougher policing but within a more effective prevention plan? This is where an innovative change is taking place in the form of **London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU)**. Created in 2019

by Mayor Sadiq Khan, the London VRU transforms the focus of tackling knife crime from blame to understanding, from enforcement to prevention.<sup>43,44</sup> London's public health approach can inform future youth violence policy to facilitate positive change for future generations using VRUs.

### From policing to public health

Current statistics on knife crime show trends stating that children aged 10-14 are making up a growing proportion of younger suspected offenders in violent crimes in London.<sup>45</sup> There are a range of contributing factors which indicate whether young people will be likely to be involved in knife crime such as social deprivation, school exclusion, trauma, lack of opportunity and criminal exploitation. Since 2010, youth service budgets in England have been reduced by over 70%, removing safe spaces and positive outlets for young people and leading them to turn to street networks for belonging and protection.<sup>46,47</sup> There are also severe limitations to traditional policing approaches which the use of VRUs aims to address. Historically, London's strategy on knife crime relied heavily on enforcement and while these measures can disturb immediate threats, they often fail to address the symptoms of why youth violence occurs. Many young people in affected communities don't trust the police - with data highlighting that Black people are far more likely to be stopped and searched- often without arrest, which creates resentment and alienation. For example, one study demonstrated that there were 24.5 'stop and searches' per 1000 black people compared with 5.9 per 1000 white people.<sup>48</sup> This pushes

groups that need help the most, further away from support services due to fear of being criminalised. Studies have also shown that only 46% of Londoners believe the police do a good job locally, which is 10% lower than five years ago and down from 69% ten years ago<sup>49</sup> A new report from Policy Exchange<sup>50</sup> in December 2025 assesses the performance of the Metropolitan Police at the three-year point of Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley's term of office. The report shows that public confidence in the Metropolitan Police has fallen further in the last three years, since the start of Sir Mark Rowley's term as Commissioner - to an all-time low, since modern records began.

These policing systems tend to treat vulnerable young people as offenders rather than victims of larger powers at play- for instance a teenager exploited by a gang may be arrested rather than safeguarded. This can lead young people to feel like they have no way out of bad situations. Police enforcement is essential in protecting the public after a crime has been committed but fails to address the root of crimes through prevention work. The VRU's approach is different. Influenced by Glasgow's pioneering Violence Reduction Unit, which helped cut Scotland's murder rate by half, London's version treats violence as a public health problem.<sup>51</sup> That means asking why it happens, not just who commits it. Lib Peck, Director of London's VRU, has stated that the mission was set up to "learn from and apply the successful public health approach used in Glasgow and elsewhere to tackle violent crime and the underlying causes of violent crime".<sup>52</sup> It's a philosophy grounded in prevention — supporting young

people before they ever pick up a knife. VRUs seek to do what policing alone never could: stop the violence before it starts.

### Inside London's Violence Reduction Unit

VRU's provide a multi-disciplinary approach by bringing together the police, local councils, schools, health services, youth organisations, and community leaders by focussing on early intervention, mentorship, and creating safer opportunities for young people. A key part of VRU's work focuses on supporting young people who are particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in violence. This means funding education programmes, youth clubs and mentoring schemes. Initiatives like *MyEnds* empower communities in violence-affected neighbourhoods to create and lead their own solutions through projects such as peer mediation projects, mental health workshops and youth clubs.<sup>53</sup> Leading from the public health model, the VRU draws from data analysis and research to understand patterns of violence and assess which interventions are most effective. For example, in London a VRU initiative placed youth workers in police custody suites and hospitals. As a result, 90% of 10-17-year-olds who have engaged in youth worker programmes after arrest of violent offences did not reoffend in the next 12 months. The scheme was reported to have helped around 800 children through custody-based youth work interventions.<sup>54,55</sup> However, a limitation to this study is that a longer-term evaluation was absent. Also in London, youth work

interventions are said to reduce risk of harm for young people involved in violence. For example, interventions by youth workers in hospitals and custody leads to "85% of young people supported" and "no longer involved in gang activity" and an 83% reduction in their risk of harm/involvement in violence.<sup>56</sup> The VRU initiative also works to support those affected by violent crimes such as the victims, with counselling services and opportunities in career and employment.

### Building a network of prevention

The VRU's can be best described as a web of partnerships across the city: youth clubs; -schools; health workers; community groups; police and social services, all working in unison.

For instance, the *MyEnds* programme funds local communities in areas most affected by violence to find their own solutions. One neighbourhood might focus on mentoring and apprenticeships and another might fund outreach workers to mediate and deescalate conflicts. The power lies in local people leading local solutions. An example is the Rescue and Response scheme which specialised in supporting young people that have been criminally exploited, for example through drug trafficking.<sup>57</sup> By offering counselling, education and safe spaces for those affected it gives teenagers a chance to regain stability. This also occurs in schools where students at risk of exposure to violence are supported by mentors. Despite the value of this scheme, the funding has decreased by 50% from £1,849,689 in 2023/24 to £924,845 in 2024/25 due to the increasing strain on London's public services caused by inflation.<sup>58</sup>



Image: Freepik - frimufilms

### Lessons from Scotland: the blueprint behind London's violence reduction unit

London's VRU was directly inspired by Scotland's success story. In 2005, Glasgow suffered from one of the highest murder rates in Europe.<sup>59</sup> The Scottish VRU treated violence like an epidemic –utilising education, family support, and rehabilitation rather than focusing solely on retribution. This method proved to be highly effective with rates of homicide, knife-assaults and violence falling dramatically amongst young people. These results have been made clear in the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence programme: No Knives Better Lives. It was found that among gang-members involved, there was a 59% decrease in knife carrying, as opposed to a 19% decrease in similar areas without the programme. There was also an 85% decrease in weapons carrying.<sup>60</sup> And a 70% decrease in knife-related assaults compared to rates from decades ago.<sup>61</sup> London's policymakers decided to implement this approach into their own strategy for tackling knife crime. Replicating this model was not simple due to London's

larger population, its diversity and complexity. However, the key lessons from Glasgow's model were clear. Early intervention, community involvement and supportive relationships for young people is vital.

### The policy shift: from blame to belonging

Through the ideas VRU's follow, violence isn't perceived as an individual incompetency, but a condition affected by the socio-economic climate. This challenges the idea that punishment alone can fix what are ultimately social failures. Regarding policy, the VRU's strategy suggests a transition toward long-term solutions. It requires investment in youth services- many of which were cut and underfunded by austerity. It also promotes information sharing between schools, hospitals, and police to promote intervention for those at risk. Crucially, VRU's insist on listening to young people themselves. As one teenage participant in the VRU-promoted youth project Young People's Action Group stated: "At first... I broke out of my shell ... Now ... I was being the outspoken version of myself ... My experiences in the YPAG ... I look back and what we achieved has given me so much opportunity".<sup>62</sup>

### Keeping London's young people safe: the fight for funding

Although the use of VRU's across London have made a significant impact on preventing knife crime and providing support within communities, short-term grants threaten the likelihood of the current £9.4-million remaining consistent. This is due to national budget cuts covering a range of public needs. It has been shown that youth service



budgets in England have been reduced by 73% since 2010.<sup>63</sup> It is important that safe spaces and prevention plans are put in place for vulnerable young people as relevant statistics clearly state that the price of prevention is far less than the cost of policing, NHS costs, court proceedings and the cost of incarcerating the perpetrators of violent crimes. The Home Office has estimated that the average cost of a single homicide is an astounding £3.2 million.<sup>64</sup> However, a violent crime where the victim is injured (but not killed) costs around £14,000 in health and justice spending.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the mean hospital cost for a severe blunt trauma injury was stated to amount to £21,173 per patient.<sup>66</sup> In regard to the perpetrators of knife-related crimes, the UK Government, HM Prison and Probation Service has announced that the price to keep one person in prison costs £50,000 annually.<sup>67</sup>

In 2024, 6,315 people received a custodial sentence for knife-related crimes, young people under the age of 18 making up 17% of this figure.<sup>68,69</sup> In 2024, the total custodial population of children (under the age of 18) in England & Wales was around 440.<sup>70</sup> The data is clear, compensating for knife-based crimes after they have already occurred can be extortionate.

For the price of incarcerating one young person, initiatives like youth groups and early intervention programmes could be funded for many young people. These include community sport initiatives, peer mediation in school and youth employment projects. Though the expenses designated to dealing with the aftermath of violent crimes are unavoidable once they have occurred, it does not mean that they are inevitable. With sufficient prevention plans in place using VRU's, it is possible to divert a large amount of young people away from violence. Allocating expenses towards prevention isn't just ethical, it is also cost-effective. This way we can build up our communities-not our prisons.



Holly Jackson

## Further Reading

- [43, 44] London Mayor and Greater London Authority, 'About London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU)' (London City Hall) <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru/about-us>
- [45] Serious Violence in London- A report prepared for London's VRU- April 2025
- [46] Larkham, J and Ren, A, A long road to recovery: Local authority spending on early intervention children's services 2010/11 to 2023/24 (PBE, 7 May 2025) <https://pbe.co.uk/a-long-road-to-recover>
- [47] HM Inspectorate of Probation, 'Children involved in urban street gangs' (Evidence Base - Youth Justice, Specific sub-groups) <https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/our-research/evidence-base-youth-justice/specific-sub-groups/children-involved-in-urban-street-gangs>
- [48] GOV UK, 'Stop and search' (Ethnicity Facts and Figures) (published 3 July 2024) <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/policing/stop-and-search/latest>
- [49] Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), Draft Police and Crime Plan 2025-2029 (London City Hall) <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/mayors-office-policing-and-crime-mopac/keep-date-mopac-work/mopac-publications/draft-police-and-crime-plan-2025-2029>
- [50] <https://www.fightingknifecrime.london/report/a-long-long-way-to-go-an-assessment-of-the-metropolitan-police-at-the-commissioners-mid-term>
- [51] Scottish Government, Violence Prevention Framework for Scotland: Annual Progress Report 2023-2024 (2024) <https://www.gov.scot/publications/violence-prevention-framework-scotland-annual-progress-report-2023-2024/pages/2/>
- [52] Mayor of London, Lib Peck appointed to lead London's new Violence Reduction Unit (14 January 2019) <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/lib-peck-to-lead-violence-reduction-unit>
- [53] London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), "MyEnds" programme (London City Hall) <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru/our-programmes/myends>
- [54] Mayor's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), Mayor's Violence Reduction Unit secures funding boost to deliver key youth work interventions driving down violence (London City Hall, 11 February 2025) <https://www.london.gov.uk/media-centre/mayors-press-release/mayors-violence-reduction-unit-secures-funding-boost-to-deliver-key-youth-work-interventions-driving-down-violence>
- [55] The Guardian, Youth workers in London custody centres stop 90% reoffending, says report (4 June 2025) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/04/youth-workers-in-london-custody-centres-stop-90-reoffending-says-report>
- [56] Mayor's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), Mayor's Violence Reduction Unit secures funding boost to deliver key youth work interventions driving down violence (London City Hall, 11 February 2025) <https://www.london.gov.uk/media-centre/mayors-violence-reduction-unit-secures-funding-boost-to-deliver-key-youth-work-interventions-driving-down-violence>
- [57] Brent Council, 'Rescue and Response' (Brent Council) <https://www.brent.gov.uk/huiscance-crime-and-community-safety/rescue-and-response>
- [58] London Assembly, 'Funding London's emergency services - 2024-25' (London City Hall, 5 January 2024) <https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/london-assembly-press-releases/funding-londons-emergency-services-2024-25>
- [59] LSE British Politics and Policy, 'Changing patterns of violence in Glasgow and London: is there evidence of Scottish exceptionalism?' (blog post, 17 December 2018) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/patterns-of-violence-glasgow-london/>
- [60] No Knives Better Lives- <https://www.noknivesbetterlives.com/peer-education/knife-facts-a-glasgow-success-story/>
- [61] YouthLink Scotland, 'NEW 10 YEAR REPORT CELEBRATES SCOTLAND'S PREVENTION APPROACH TO KNIFE CRIME' (media release, 19 June 2019) <https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/nkb10-year-release.pdf>
- [62] GLA (Greater London Authority), 'Leading change with the Young People's Action Group' (City Hall blog, 17 August 2022) <https://www.london.gov.uk/city-hall-blog/leading-change-young-peoples-action-group>
- [63] CYP Now, 'Council spending on youth services in England falls by 73% since 2010' (29 January 2025) <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/content/news/council-spending-on-youth-services-in-england-falls-by-73-since-2010>
- [64] Home Office, 'The economic and social costs of crime' (2nd edn, July 2018) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-economic-and-social-costs-of-crime>
- [65] Home Office, 'The economic and social costs of crime' (Second edition, July 2018) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b684f22e5274a14f45342c9/the-economic-and-social-costs-of-crime-horr-99.pdf>
- [66] Michael C Christensen and others, 'Outcomes and costs of blunt trauma in England and Wales' [2008] *Critical Care* 12:R23 <https://ccforum.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/cc6797>
- [67] House of Commons Library, 'UK prison population statistics' (Research Briefing, SNO4334, 08 July 2024) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sno4334/>
- [68] Ministry of Justice, 'Knife and Offensive Weapon Sentencing Statistics: October to December 2024' (GOV.UK, 15 May 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/knife-and-offensive-weapon-sentencing-statistics-2024/knife-and-offensive-weapon-sentencing-statistics-october-to-december-2024>
- [69] Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 'Youth justice statistics: 2023 to 2024' (GOV.UK, 30 January 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024>
- [70] Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 'Youth justice statistics: 2023 to 2024' (GOV.UK, 30 January 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024>



## Blades and boundaries: Women and girls in the world of gangs and knife crime

By Aysha Malik

### The extent of the problem

The pervasive focus on young men in public discourse, whether through the media or news coverage, creates a gender data gap that leaves young women and girls in gangs essentially invisible. My initial research confirmed that there is a lack of public awareness and government policies despite the research on young women and girls. From the perspectives of young boys within gangs it is clear how women are exploited and stereotyped within these gangs by members.<sup>1</sup> In the year ending March 2024, around 2,000 girls received a caution or sentence, compared to about 11,400 boys, which highlights reasons why there is a greater focus and early intervention strategy for boys. However, young women and girls should not be ignored because of this.<sup>2</sup> This failure has a direct, detrimental impact on vulnerable lives.

We cannot design proper, tailored interventions without first establishing the evidence base, the understanding, and the reasons needed to reach these young women and girls and help them before they become deeply entrenched in exploitation. Consequently, funding must be secured for early intervention measures which would build far more public awareness.

Throughout this piece, I will explore the role of young women and girls within gangs and present community perspectives from South Yorkshire on how funding and early interventions are crucial for supporting women and girls.

### The role of women in gang culture

When we talk about gang culture, the conversation is overwhelmingly focused on males, due to the prevalence of their involvement. However, there is evidence to demonstrate the

involvement of women and girls. These young women are essential to the gang structure, often playing a gendered subservient role in service of male gang members. The criminalisation of girls in gangs fails to recognise the extent of their exploitation and services to support them are practically nonexistent.<sup>3</sup> However, their story is not one-dimensional. While many girls might initially become involved as the girlfriends of gang members, their position is rarely fixed, it is a complex journey where their roles can quickly develop far beyond that initial label.<sup>4</sup> This potentially makes it more difficult to offer the right support.

Gangs capitalise on the fact women are relatively invisible; they use this to their advantage by advancing their economic interest in county lines and using women to avoid detection by police.<sup>5</sup> Women often play a secondary or auxiliary role in gangs and are less likely to engage in violent offending. For example, they provide safe houses, act as alibis, and hold drugs, money, or weapons. This consistent assignment to less visible support roles, though highly functional for the gang, further reinforces the false perception that their involvement is minor or irrelevant.<sup>6</sup>

Control over female members is exerted through physical and sexual abuse, threats, coercive control, isolating them from family and friends, intimidation, humiliation, and economic abuse, such as debt bondage. Furthermore, this victimisation is heavily physical, sexual, and emotional in nature, such as the use of revenge porn.<sup>7</sup>

The recruitment of young women into gangs differs from that of their male counterparts. For instance, recruitment can occur simply through

social media, with teenagers hosting 'parties' where sexual exploitation by gang members will occur.<sup>8</sup> This method of infiltration means the experiences of young women and girls are often not properly understood, leading frontline practitioners to historically overlook the reality of gendered coercive control within gang structures.

Increased awareness amongst the public of the roles of women and girls within gang structures can strengthen calls for improved support mechanisms for exiting criminal activity. Building awareness begins at the heart of our communities.

### Voices from the community



### Mums United

Mums United is a Sheffield-based organisation focused on shielding the community's, vulnerable young people, women, and groups from the growing threats of youth violence and exploitation. They go beyond immediate support by hosting workshops, comprehensive programmes, and community events specifically designed to empower and positively steer the city's youth.

Local charities, like Mums United, provide a vital source of information for building awareness within their

communities. Sahira Irshad, the Chair and Founder of Mums United, provides a vital perspective on the young women and girls who are on the brink of joining gangs, detailing their motivations, and sharing her perspectives on where funding and effective prevention strategies should be focused.

### Perspectives on the recruitment of girls

Sahira suggests that the path into this exploitative lifestyle often begins with something simple: attraction to a materialistic façade. Young women and girls are drawn in by boys their own age, members of these gangs, who project an image of success. They appear well-dressed and financially secure, embodying a "provider" persona that promises a coveted, materialistic lifestyle. The girls may be more susceptible to this façade due to their previous experiences of economic deprivation.<sup>9</sup>

This initial attraction progresses through a subtle, yet deliberate, process of grooming. As Sahira says, "The boys use compliments and attention to entice the girls, making the manipulation feel organic and inconspicuous". This is crucial, as the grooming does not typically involve older men, which is the type of exploitation most frequently reported in the media; it is peer-on-peer exploitation that rapidly progresses.<sup>10</sup> Sahira's perspective is echoed within research; for these young women, the appeal is deeply rooted in their circumstances. All they see initially are the materialistic rewards and the promise of escaping their reality. It is an exploitation of vulnerability.<sup>11</sup> Many girls are filmed being sexually exploited or abused and this is then used as coercive

control. Those who have debt bonds are then told to take intimate pictures to pay their debt off.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Sahira suggests that social media significantly amplifies this pressure, impacting women's self-esteem and reinforcing the desire for a specific, seemingly accessible "high status" lifestyle. The entire process is designed to be highly effective and easily concealed. It is clear social media plays a huge role in gang recruitment.<sup>13</sup>

### Early intervention strategies

Sahira suggested that "there needs to be more safe spaces created for girls." We see so many youth groups and spaces which are heavily male dominated. These spaces have to be open, with no judgment". Sahira mentioned she has been able to get some girls to engage with her group, she has witnessed how girls are vulnerable to joining these gangs. One-to-one support is crucial to enable vulnerable girls to regain control of their lives. Support should focus on discussing healthy relationships and encouraging value beyond materialism.

Sahira stressed that education is vital, specifically the need for targeted funding to teach these girls about abuse in all its forms. Too many young women are completely unaware that abuse includes coercive control and psychological manipulation. Providing clear education on this subject is essential; it is the foundation for "building strong, healthy relationships and values." Sahira highlighted the educational classes at Mums United, notably the 'Breaking the Cycle' programme, in which girls learn more about coercive control and the different types of abuse, alongside the 'Boyfriend Model', which is to help

these young women and girls recognise signs of abuse, manipulation, and understand safe relationships. This education must be delivered in an organic, open learning environment. They need support rebuilding their self-confidence, learning to value themselves without needing validation or attention from men.<sup>14</sup> These necessary interventions to support these vulnerable young women and girls require funding.

### Priority areas for funding

Drawing from Mums United's hands-on experience, Sahira provided a clear picture of what girls need, want, and what they currently lack compared to their male counterparts. Her insights emphasise the importance of using activities that genuinely interest them as a positive diversion. She suggested investing in diverse programming, including creative workshops, filming workshops, make-up sessions, and fashion shows, activities that many traditional youth groups overlook, but that actively appeal to young women. This approach mirrors the effective engagement tactics often used with young men.

Sahira advocated that funding should prioritise sports activities like boxing, ensuring these sessions are female-only to give them dedicated space. This provision creates a comfortable, safe environment where girls can build discipline and physical confidence without the presence or pressure of males, directly addressing the underlying need for control and self-worth often sought in gang life. Targeted funding for these specific areas is essential to offering meaningful alternatives, rebalancing the dominance of male focussed youth interventions.

### Support, rehabilitation, and hope

Current support groups suffer from a notable gender bias, catering predominantly to males. We require investment in semi-gendered focus approaches alongside existing gender-neutral programmes, to adequately support young women and girls. Their involvement in violence is frequently linked to distress at home, with high rates of reported sexual abuse, addiction, assault, and familial unemployment. Consequently, family-based programmes are crucial for equipping these young women with knowledge of their choices and healthy coping mechanisms. Research suggests that focusing on girls' peer and community environments may be beneficial to reducing both their criminality and gang membership. Programs encouraging youth to develop prosocial friendships and engage in normative peer activities could be paths to reduction. Furthermore, focusing on disorganised neighbourhoods may be able to decrease girls' gang involvement.<sup>15</sup> This investment is financially prudent: preventing just one in ten young offenders from ending up in custody could save society over £100 million a year in the UK (subject to inflation). Moreover, the impact of girls' specific support work can be far-reaching, positively affecting the individual, her family, and the community of which she is often an integral part.<sup>16</sup>

There is a need for targeted interventions that specifically support young women and girls, who are either in local authority care or who carry personal histories of trauma and abuse. Many existing services are not commissioned or equipped to address the specialised needs of these young women and girls, leaving a significant gap in essential care.<sup>17</sup> There is a need to change, do better and provide

more dedicated support for young women and girls.

### Rewriting the Future

Public perception must shift to recognise the hidden realities faced by young women and girls. Through more awareness the public can push the government to implement more policies focussed on young women and girls. A published report for 2025 shows some changes the government is planning to make, such as implementing specific funding for underrepresented groups like women.<sup>18</sup> However, this alone is not enough. There must be investment in early intervention services. This means prioritising female-only support and educational programs, like those by Mums United, that tackle coercive control, build self-confidence, and foster prosocial peer environments. By focusing on the individual, her family, and her community simultaneously, this will help to heal trauma, be financially prudent and provide essential support to these young women.<sup>19</sup>

### Further Reading

- [1] Crime and Delinquency Volume 66, issue 88, 'Deficit or Credit? A Comparative, Qualitative Study of Gender Agency and Female Gang Membership in Los Angeles and Glasgow' (July 2020) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/0011128718794192>> last accessed 28 November 2025 page 1090
- [2] Manchester Centre for Youth Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, 'Keeping Girls and Young Women Safe' (2022) <<https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Keeping-Girls-And-Young-Women-Safe-MMU-and-COYI-report.pdf>> last accessed 12 November 2025 page 39
- [3] Jessica Southgate, 'Seeing differently: working with girls affected by gangs' (2011) <[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/6755b27aed4f303b5d89663b/1733669499111/research-paper\\_2011\\_02\\_updated\\_may\\_2012\\_southgate.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/6755b27aed4f303b5d89663b/1733669499111/research-paper_2011_02_updated_may_2012_southgate.pdf)> last accessed 12 November 2025
- [4] Clare Choak, 'Young women on road: FEMININITIES, RACE AND GANGS IN LONDON' (December 2018) <<https://uel-repository.worktribe.com/output/482028/young-women-on-road-femininities-race-and-gangs-in-london>> accessed 12 November 2025 page 220 of PDF

[5] Tirion Elisabeth Havard, James A Densley, Andrew Whittaker, Jane Wills, 'Street gangs and coercive control: the gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines' (2021) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17488958211051513>> accessed 1 December 2025, page 1

[6] Jessica Southgate, 'Seeing differently: working with girls affected by gangs' (2011) <[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/6755b27aed4f303b5d89663b/1733669499111/research-paper\\_2011\\_02\\_updated\\_may\\_2012\\_southgate.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/6755b27aed4f303b5d89663b/1733669499111/research-paper_2011_02_updated_may_2012_southgate.pdf)> accessed 12 November 2025, page 12

[7] Tirion Elisabeth Havard, James A Densley, Andrew Whittaker, Jane Wills, 'Street gangs and coercive control: the gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines' (2021) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17488958211051513>>

[8] Tirion Elisabeth Havard, James A Densley, Andrew Whittaker, Jane Wills, 'Street gangs and coercive control: the gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines' (2021) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17488958211051513>>

[9] Clare Choak, 'Young women on road: FEMININITIES, RACE AND GANGS IN LONDON' (December 2018) <<https://uel-repository.worktribe.com/output/482028/young-women-on-road-femininities-race-and-gangs-in-london>> accessed 28 November 2025, page 178

[10] Tirion Elisabeth Havard, James A Densley, Andrew Whittaker, Jane Wills, 'Street gangs and coercive control: the gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines' (2021) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17488958211051513>>

[11] Tirion Elisabeth Havard, James A Densley, Andrew Whittaker, Jane Wills, 'Street gangs and coercive control: the gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines' (2021) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17488958211051513>>

[12] The Children's Society, 'Debt bondage in a criminal exploitation and county lines context' (2022) <<https://www.kirklees safeguardingchildren.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Debt-Bondage-in-a-Criminal-Exploitation-and-County-Lines-context-A-support-resource-for-professionals.pdf>> accessed 28 November 2025, page 2 and 4

[13] Beatrice Casgrande, 'Online Gang Recruitment's Tactics exploit youth's vulnerabilities: A Systematic review' (May 2025) <<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1967197/FULLTEXT02.pdf>> last accessed 10 December 2025

[14] Jessica Southgate, 'Seeing differently: working with girls affected by gangs' (2011) <[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/6755b27aed4f303b5d89663b/1733669499111/research-paper\\_2011\\_02\\_updated\\_may\\_2012\\_southgate.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/6755b27aed4f303b5d89663b/1733669499111/research-paper_2011_02_updated_may_2012_southgate.pdf)> accessed 12 November 2025

[15] Zenta E. Gomez Auyong, Sven Smith, Christopher J. Ferguson, 'Girls in Gangs: Exploring Risk in a British Youth Context' (13 December 2018) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/0011128718763130>> page 1712 (discussion section)

[16] Jessica Southgate, 'Seeing differently: working with girls affected by gangs' (2011) <[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/6755b27aed4f303b5d89663b/1733669499111/research-paper\\_2011\\_02\\_updated\\_may\\_2012\\_southgate.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/6755b27aed4f303b5d89663b/1733669499111/research-paper_2011_02_updated_may_2012_southgate.pdf)> accessed 12 November 2025, page 9

[17] Tirion Elisabeth Havard, James A Densley, Andrew Whittaker, Jane Wills, 'Street gangs and coercive control: the gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines' (2021) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17488958211051513>> last accessed 8 December 2025

[18] Department for culture, media and sport, 'Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy' (Govuk, 10 December 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy>> last accessed 10 December 2025

[19] NHS Digital, Hospital Admitted Patient Care Activity, 2024-25: External causes tables, 25 September 2025 cited in, 'Knife crime statistics: England and Wales' Graham Allen and Helen Wong (House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 24 October 2025) <<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04304/SN04304.pdf>> accessed 12 November 2025, page 28



## Invest in boys, not prison beds

By Felicity Williams

This article aims to help build a case for challenging the long-term funding cuts to youth provision. The starting premise is that funding can be better spent on initiatives focused on prevention of violence rather than the costly incarceration of young people. I will explore the importance and impact of early intervention and prevention to make the case for how this is a better use of time and money in reducing youth knife crime. Government data for 2023 showed that 84% of child first time entrants (FTEs) into the justice system were boys, despite

the fact boys only make up 51% of the general population of 10 to 17-year-olds.<sup>20</sup> This statistic highlights that boys are being disproportionately represented within the youth justice system. This shows the importance of considering gender as a factor in youth crime. Therefore, I will explore how and why we might want to take a gendered approach to early intervention. We also must appreciate how gender interlinks with other socio-economic factors that help to shape the identities and thought processes of young

people. In a study and review of existing research written by Dorcas Gwata, Antonio Ventriglio, Peter Hughes and Martin Deahl, the themes of 'ineffective mental health systems, structural violence and inequalities, policing, safety and community engagement, vulnerability and resilience in minority communities' arose when investigating the impact of knife crime.<sup>21</sup> This strengthens the proposal that there are many more factors than gender which create and influence youth crime, which is essential to recognise when looking for solutions. This next section looks at the causes of youth-related knife crime in the context of gender, specifically for boys, as well as how these findings can inform solutions.

### Gendered statistics

A further exploration of Government statistics highlights the differences in gender and youth crime, where we see boys are disproportionately involved. In the year ending March 2024, the statistics for children receiving a caution or sentence demonstrated that most were older children, aged between 15-17, and 85% were boys.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that if early intervention considers gender, it needs to create a foundation which endures into the later teen stages. Additionally, boys make up most proven offences statistics, remand episodes statistics, and are significantly more likely to be remanded in custody, making up 98% of the youth custody population.<sup>23</sup> These statistics show boys are consistently overrepresented within each part of the youth justice system, highlighting the necessity to focus on what causes boys to engage in youth violence.

### Perceptions – why do children carry knives?

In their review of the existing academic literature, Ana Figuera, Emma Alleyne

and Jane Wood, identified two key drivers for why young people carry knives.<sup>24</sup> These reasons are cited as 'fear of further victimisation' and 'masculine gender norms', with further reasons also identified as lack of trust in the police or belonging to an organised criminal group.<sup>25</sup> In the next section, I will draw on findings from the studies cited in Figuera et al's review.

### Study findings and causes

When we look through the findings of the studies provided in this journal article,<sup>26</sup> Bailey et al. highlight the relevance of addressing knife crime through gender, as the authors found that 16 – 34-year-old white males are more likely to be involved with knife crime at every level, as victims, offenders or victim- offenders.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Brennan found that a driver for weapon carrying was experience of violence rather than fear of victimisation, as well as distrusting the police and belonging to an organised criminal group.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that the commonly cited driver of young people carrying knives because of fear is more complex than we think. The study from King introduces the importance of masculinity in the thoughts of young men and a factor in why they carry knives, however this study focuses on Black, Asian minority ethnic (BAME) men.<sup>29</sup> In this same study, masculinity is outlined as 'constructed, negotiated and performed,'<sup>30</sup> as well as 'multiple, fluid and contextual, dependent on time and place,'<sup>31</sup> and 'relational, defined in opposition to femininity'.<sup>32</sup> This shows how complex masculinity is and suggests the impact society could have on what this means.

A study by Gray et al investigated the importance of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in which a relationship between serious youth violence and ACEs is highlighted.<sup>33</sup>

ACEs are described by the World Health Organisation as sources of stress which a child experiences in their life.<sup>34</sup> The HM Inspectorate of Probation recognises a substantial link between justice-involved children and childhood trauma.<sup>35</sup> The impact of trauma on a developing brain is also discussed here,<sup>36</sup> which shows the power ACEs may have on a young person. When they look at treatment, a lot of offending children with ACEs may not find standard behavioural treatments as effective.<sup>37</sup> An alternative approach they offer instead involves focusing on learning routines and feeling safe, a holistic, foundation building approach.<sup>38</sup> This may look like enhanced case management, based on the Trauma Recovery Model.<sup>39</sup> Where children are thought to be developmentally trapped due to trauma, they can be treated with a trauma informed approach which centres treatment around the acknowledgement of the child's negative experiences.<sup>40</sup> This offers a holistic approach which is tailored to each child, targeting those who are vulnerable and taking into consideration characteristics, which is where gender may be considered.

A review of this approach showed a multiagency approach is desirable, and the children also reported the one-to-one experience positive,<sup>41</sup> which shows the importance of stability and a dedicated space for children. There is also evidence that the interventions of Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can prevent crime.<sup>42</sup> A report from The Youth Endowment Fund concludes there are mixed findings on whether ACEs affect girls or boys more.<sup>43</sup> This really highlights that youth crime may need to be looked at on a much more individual level still.

The College of Policing identify three causes for knife crime being 'self-protection,' 'self-presentation' and for

facilitating crime.<sup>44</sup> This supports the idea that young men carry out of fear of others carrying knives or wanting to appear a certain way, likely masculine and intimidating. The College of Policing also recognise another reason for knife carrying is to facilitate other crimes, where the knife is being carried to be actively used,<sup>45</sup> which can be linked in support to the findings previously mentioned from Brennan's study where young people are carrying as part of an organised criminal peer group, where they are also likely pressured to commit crimes.<sup>46</sup> The UK Police similarly identify that knife carrying in children can be a sign of child criminal exploitation,<sup>47</sup> which involves children carrying due to gang involvement where they are being encouraged and exploited to commit crimes. The College of Policing also recognise risk factors such as gender, age, adverse childhood experiences, education<sup>48</sup>. These risk factors are a reminder that although gender is recognised, the reasons for young people carrying a knife are influenced by other factors also.

### Statistics behind knife carrying

For a broader view on why children are carrying knives, the Youth Endowment Fund produce and evaluate statistics on young people and knife carrying.<sup>49</sup> They found the children who carry are more likely to be vulnerable,<sup>50</sup> which may mean targeted approaches are more effective. It was found that 45% of children who carried weapons did not feel safe at home, and that the children who carried knives were more likely to feel safe in places other children would not, like parks and open spaces.<sup>51</sup> This suggests targeting home life and community spaces could be valuable, where the multi - agency approach previously mentioned detailing

a collaboration between services would be best. The Youth Endowment Fund also found the majority of children who were carrying had seen violent content and promotion of weapons among young people on social media, as well as a good proportion of the children who were not carrying.<sup>52</sup> This suggests social media could be a key factor in knife carrying among young people, pushing stories and media representations of violence and knife crime to children, adding to fear, or even desensitizing and normalising this for them. The effect of social media on children can be divided by gender, where algorithms are often tailored to its users and will be showing boys different and targeted content, potentially promoting masculinity and violence. This is evidenced from a study detailed in The Guardian which details how TikTok's algorithm can and will target and feed young people harmful content based on gender and age.<sup>53</sup>

### Fear

The BBC article 'Young people are scared, even those carrying knives' supports the assertion that children are carrying out of fear of youth violence in general.<sup>54</sup> Although this article focuses on children in the West Midlands, this may reflect what children are feeling nationally.<sup>55</sup> This article highlights how some children do not have much confidence in the effects that changes to laws surrounding knives may bring, such as certain knives becoming illegal to own.<sup>56</sup> This may support that a distrust of the police causes knife carrying, but also a wider distrust of the justice system and those in charge. More locally in South Yorkshire, it is identified that young boys aged 11 to 14 are more likely to carry knives due fear or for social status.<sup>57</sup>

A campaign was launched this year to encourage awareness and inform on the devastation of knife crime to help prevention and was targeted at young boys showing there are gendered approaches which recognise the gender disparity in knife crime<sup>58</sup>. These articles support the concept of fear as a motivation for knife carrying, as well as the desire to appear to peers as tough or masculine.

### Consequences

Another interesting area of young people's perspective is how they perceive the consequences of carrying a knife. In the report from Gray et al, there are two perspectives relating to consequences; the consequences children feel of not carrying a knife when they feel vulnerable and at risk of violence, and the actual legal repercussions and risks of carrying a knife.<sup>59</sup> In this report, the authors highlight that young people 'lack consequential thinking',<sup>60</sup> meaning they are not as likely to consider or place importance in the long-term legal risks. This means an effective way to prevent knife carrying could be to place focus on properly educating and communicating the legal consequences to children. There has recently been an event like this, 'Caught to Court' in Westminster Magistrates Court, which has received positive feedback from students and helped them to understand the consequences of carrying a knife and why they should not.<sup>61</sup> This demonstrates that education, especially in an interactive and informative way, can be helpful in prevention.<sup>62</sup>

### Societal factors- what shapes these perceptions?

When we examine what shapes the ideas that drive young people to carry

weapons, it is necessary to look at our wider society. The Youth Justice Board 'Knife Crime Insights Pack' cites how the pandemic impacted young peoples' development.<sup>63</sup> This was a substantial change for everyone in society, so it is interesting to see how it affected young people. The article "Child violent crime suspects 'getting younger'" from BBC News discusses how schoolteachers have recognised a negative impact on the language skills of children after the pandemic.<sup>64</sup> It is also highlighted that due to lack of engagement within education, linked to the disruption caused by the pandemic, children struggle to articulate themselves, which can manifest into bad behaviour as an alternative outlet, which then leads to increased exclusions.<sup>65</sup> The solution to the behaviour and youth violence problem the schoolteachers suggest is intervening as early as possible, with a focus on supporting the speech and language skills of children.<sup>66</sup> This further supports the idea that education can be a powerful tool in preventing youth crime, where an effort to engage children and expand their skills, helps them personally and keeps them in school. This article also highlights how teachers can notice changes in children and can be an effective way to discover which children may need more targeted intervention.

The Guardian also discusses the findings where children who have been permanently excluded over suspension 'are twice as likely to commit serious violence' than their peers who had been 'on the same path' but not excluded.<sup>67</sup> This is notable in the context of a 16% increase in permanent exclusions in the academic year 2023 – 2024 compared to the previous year.<sup>68</sup> The most recent data voices 'Permanent exclusions have also decreased since autumn term 2023/24

but remain higher than the pre-pandemic autumn term'.<sup>69</sup> Permanent exclusions are still said to be mainly caused by persistent disruptive behaviour<sup>70</sup>. This could mean that the most vulnerable children may be sent towards a path of youth violence if they are receiving exclusions instead of support.



### Role models online

The discussion of the role of social media in youth crime also includes exposure to toxic masculinity delivered to boys from online personalities. This issue was recently discussed by MPs and published in Hansard. They highlighted the impact of negative role models as an issue, particularly for young boys<sup>71</sup>. In this debate, a speech from Sir Gareth Southgate was mentioned,<sup>72</sup> who spoke about how crucial positive role models are for young boys to help turn them away from toxic online personalities<sup>73</sup>. The Youth Endowment Fund highlights how positive role models through mentoring can help reduce youth violence, and how support can be tailored to specific issues, for example to knife crime.<sup>74</sup> However, they also highlight that this is a costly intervention and not necessarily the most impactful with mixed findings.<sup>75</sup> This shows how role models can have a negative effect on young people,

but they also can be used as a positive tool of prevention, especially when targeting characteristics such as gender to make this more effective. Therefore, boys being able to relate to the men online through gender can be turned into a positive thing.

The Youth Justice Board also highlights how knife violence statistics have seen a decrease in the UK, despite the media telling us the 'knife crime is an epidemic'<sup>76</sup> which suggests the changes identified have been working. This may further support that there the media plays a part in pushing crime and knife violence on young people. From the stories on the news to the fights in schools, children can access it all online and it is feeding their fear according to The Guardian.<sup>77</sup>

### Solution

All this evidence makes it apparent that funding needs to be spread to many areas to effectively reduce youth knife crime. The themes from this research are of what society are young boys are living in, and how it affects them, fear of becoming a victim, wanting to adhere to masculine gender norms pushed by peers and online spaces, a lack of space for them in their homes or their community, and even a lack of support from their schools. The funding should target these areas to make sure children feel supported from many sectors.

### The approaches in place and suggestions

The Youth Justice Board has voiced that 'Initiatives that do work are social skills training, mentoring and tailored support with education, housing and employment'.<sup>78</sup> This strengthens the idea that investing into these areas is a more

effective use of funding, building a space for young people in society.

The government multi-agency approach to serious youth violence recognises that 'the extent and impact of serious youth violence is much more far reaching than many adults realise', where 'carrying a knife is the norm for some children'.<sup>79</sup> This approach also recognises the importance of prioritising the vulnerable and at-risk children.<sup>80</sup> It was found where there was a true collaboration between children, families, communities and services, was the most effective approach.<sup>81</sup> This further shows the effectiveness of an approach where services and institutions work together and the benefits of targeting vulnerable young people.

In the Labour manifesto, they state they 'aim to halve knife crime in a decade', with 'knife carrying triggering rapid intervention and tough consequences', which includes referrals to Youth Offending Teams and penalties in place.<sup>82</sup> They also aim put a specific focus on early intervention,<sup>83</sup> which involves the introduction of Young Futures Hubs which brings 'community-focused services under one roof', for young people at risk to help and prevent them going down a path of violence and crime.<sup>84</sup> Again, this shows the importance of supporting the vulnerable and at-risk children, which may include boys.

### The future

Schools may be the best place for early intervention, the earlier the better and with a focus on speech and language skills as suggested by the teachers in the BBC article 'Child violent crime suspects 'getting younger'.<sup>85</sup> As schools have substantial contact with children, they also may be best at spotting, targeting

and supporting the children who are most vulnerable as they seem more likely statistically to fall into youth violence.



**Felicity Williams**

### Further Reading

- [20] Youth Justice Statistics, 'Youth justice Statistics 2023 to 2024' (GOV.UK, 30 January 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [21] Dorcas Gwata Antonio Ventriglio Peter Hughes Martin Deahl, 'Structural inequalities, knife crime: A qualitative study' (2024) 70(4) Abstract <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0027640231221092>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [22] Youth Justice Statistics, 'Youth justice Statistics 2023 to 2024' (GOV.UK, 30 January 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [23] Youth Justice Statistics, 'Youth justice Statistics 2023 to 2024' (GOV.UK, 30 January 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [24] Ana Figueira, Emma Alleyne, Jane Wood, 'Fear and Masculinity as Motivational Narratives for Knife-Related Crime: A Systematic Review of the Literature' (2024) 25(5) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15248380241266206>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [25] Ana Figueira, Emma Alleyne, Jane Wood, 'Fear and Masculinity as Motivational Narratives for Knife-Related Crime: A Systematic Review of the Literature' (2024) 25(5) Abstract <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15248380241266206>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [26] Ana Figueira, Emma Alleyne, Jane Wood, 'Fear and Masculinity as Motivational Narratives for Knife-Related Crime: A Systematic Review of the Literature' (2024) 25(5) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15248380241266206>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [27] Laura Bailey, Vincent Harinam, Barak Ariel, 'Victims, offenders and victim-offender overlaps of knife crime: A social network analysis approach using police records' (2020) Abstract <<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0242621>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [28] Ian R Brennan, 'Violence, worry and trust in the emergence of weapon-carrying' (2021) 20(4) Abstract <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14773708211046193>> token=wge85pEM6hEAAAAA63AeQ0hxE  
XhE3VLaeoF\_3UbdRa1P7CuUdHBypOgIt4XU4  
AxIBuFkOJmhSQKCh71ewFTuPxarQ> accessed 10 December 2025
- [29] Brendan King, John Swain, 'The characteristics of street codes and competing performances of masculinity on an inner-city housing estate' (24 April 2022) <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2022.2065910#abstract>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [30] Brendan King, John Swain, 'The characteristics of street codes and competing performances of masculinity on an inner-city housing estate' (24 April 2022) Theoretical orientation <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2022.2065910#abstract>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [31] Brendan King, John Swain, 'The characteristics of street codes and competing performances of masculinity on an inner-city housing estate' (24 April 2022) Theoretical orientation <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2022.2065910#abstract>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [32] Brendan King, John Swain, 'The characteristics of street codes and competing performances of masculinity on an inner-city housing estate' (24 April 2022) Theoretical orientation <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2022.2065910#abstract>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [33] Paul Gray, Hannah Smithson, Deborah Jump, 'Serious youth violence and its relationship with adverse childhood experiences' (Manchester Metropolitan University, 11 October 2021) 1.2 Adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed practice <<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/627789/1/Serious%20Youth%20Violence%20Report.pdf>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [34] World Health Organisation, 'Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire (ACE-IQ)' (28 January 2020) <[https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/adverse-childhood-experiences-international-questionnaire-\(ace-iq\)](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/adverse-childhood-experiences-international-questionnaire-(ace-iq))> accessed 10 December 2025
- [35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42] HM Inspectorate of Probation, 'Adversity and trauma' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 10 March 2023) <<https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/our-research/evidence-base-youth-justice-specific-areas-of-delivery/adversity-and-trauma/>> accessed 10 December 2025
- [43] Dr Aase Villadsen, Dr Nicolás Libuy, Professor Emla Fitzsimons, 'Adverse and positive childhood experiences and their associations with children's involvement in violence: analyses of data from the Millennium Cohort Study' (Youth Endowment Fund, January 2025) Gender differences 162-163 <<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/FinalReport ACEsPCEs MCS.pdf>> accessed 10 December 2025

[44,45] Abigail McNeill and Levin Wheller, 'Understanding the causes of knife crime' (1 January 2019) <<https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/knife-crime-evidence-briefing/understanding-causes-knife-crime>> accessed 10 December 2025

[46] Ian R Brennan, 'Violence, worry and trust in the emergence of weapon-carrying' (2021) 20(4) Abstract <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/1477-7378.08211046193>> accessed 10 December 2025

[47] 'Child criminal exploitation' (Police.UK) <<https://www.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/caa/child-abuse/child-criminal-exploitation/>> accessed 10 December 2025

[48] Abigail McNeill and Levin Wheller, 'Understanding the causes of knife crime' (1 January 2019) <<https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/knife-crime-evidence-briefing/understanding-causes-knife-crime>> accessed 10 December 2025

[49, 50, 51, 52] Dr Cassandra Popham, 'Behind the knife crime statistics: understanding children who carry weapons' (23 May 2024) <<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/behind-the-knife-crime-statistics-understanding-children-who-carry-weapons/>> accessed 10 December 2025

[53] Sally Weale, 'Social media algorithms 'amplifying misogynistic content'' The Guardian (London, 6 February 2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/feb/06/social-media-algorithms-amplifying-misogynistic-content>> accessed 10 December 2025

[54, 55, 56] Tracey Higgins, Maisie Olah, 'Young people are scared, even those carrying knives' BBC News (Birmingham and Black Country, 25 September 2025) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3dxgnry48o>> accessed 10 December 2025

[57, 58] Chloe Aslett, 'Drive to stop boys as young as 11 carrying knives' BBC News (South Yorkshire, 29 January 2025) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c29e1jzqgxwo>> accessed 10 December 2025

[59, 60] Paul Gray, Hannah Smithson, Deborah Jump, 'Serious youth violence and its relationship with adverse childhood experiences' (Manchester Metropolitan University, 11 October 2021) CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS 23, 25 <<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/627789/1/Serious%20Youth%20Violence%20Report.pdf>> accessed 10 December 2025

[61,62] Sian Wharton-Goodman, 'Making justice real: how hands-on learning helped students understand knife crime' (GOV.UK, 20 October 2025) <<https://insidehmcts.blog.gov.uk/2025/10/20/making-justice-real-how-hands-on-learning-helped-students-understand-knife-crime/>> accessed 10 December 2025

[63] Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, Youth Justice Board publishes knife crime insights pack (GOV.UK, 5 February 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/youth-justice-board-publishes-knife-crime-insights-pack>> accessed 10 December 2025

[64, 65, 66] Sonja Jessup, 'Child violent crime suspects 'getting younger'' BBC News (London, 18 June 2025) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y6l36q6pgo>> accessed 10 December 2025

[67] Anna Fazackerley, 'Teenagers excluded from school twice as likely to commit serious violence' The Guardian (London, 22 March 2025) <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/mar/22/teenagers-excluded-from-school-twice-as-likely-to-commit-serious-violence>> accessed 10 December 2025

[68, 69, 70] 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England' (GOV.UK, 10 July 2025) <<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24>> accessed 10 December 2025

[71, 72] House of Commons, 'Knife Crime: Children and Young People' HC Deb 20 March 2025, vol 764 <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-03-20/debates/E8F0359F-BC0E-45A8-9399-8CAA6877D774/KnifeCrimeChildrenAndYoungPeople>> accessed 10 December 2025

[73] Grace Dean, 'Sir Gareth Southgate: Boys need role models not gaming and porn' BBC News (UK, 19 March 2025) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ceqjpzg0qwnq>> accessed 10 December 2025

[74] Poppy - Youth advisory board, 'The power of mentoring to reduce youth violence' (Youth endowment fund, 13 June 2025) <<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/the-power-of-mentoring-to-reduce-youth-violence/>> accessed 10 December 2025

[75] Youth endowment fund toolkit, 'Mentoring' <<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/mentoring-2/>> accessed 10 December 2025

[76] Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 'Youth Justice Board publishes knife crime insights pack' (GOV.UK, 5 February 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/youth-justice-board-publishes-knife-crime-insights-pack>> accessed 10 December 2025

[77] Robert Booth, 'Violence on social media making teenagers afraid to go out, study finds' The Guardian (London, 25 November 2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/nov/25/violence-on-social-media-making-teenagers-afraid-to-go-out-study-finds>> accessed 10 December 2025

[78] Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 'Youth Justice Board publishes knife crime insights pack' (GOV.UK, 5 February 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/youth-justice-board-publishes-knife-crime-insights-pack>> accessed 10 December 2025

[79, 80, 81] Ofsted, Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 'Multi-agency responses to serious youth violence: working together to support and protect children' (GOV.UK, 20 November 2024) <[https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-agency-responses-to-serious-youth-violence-working-together-to-support-and-protect-children#executive-summary](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-agency-responses-to-serious-youth-violence-working-together-to-support-and-protect-children/multi-agency-responses-to-serious-youth-violence-working-together-to-support-and-protect-children#executive-summary)> accessed 10 December 2025

[82,83] Labour, 'Take back our streets' (Labour manifesto 2024) <<https://labour.org.uk/change/take-back-our-streets/>> accessed 10 December 2025

[84] Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer KCB KQC MP, 'Young Futures Hubs to launch offering vulnerable young people lifeline' (GOV.UK, 15 July 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/young-futures-hubs-to-launch-offering-vulnerable-young-people-lifeline>> accessed 10 December 2025

[85] Sonja Jessup, 'Child violent crime suspects 'getting younger' BBC News (London, 18 June 2025) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y6l36q6pgo>> accessed 10 December 2025



## Exploring the impact of the Media: useful but underutilised?

By James Grant

Knife crime among young people remains one of the most pressing issues in the South Yorkshire region and the UK. In the year ending March 2023, there were around 18,500 cautions and convictions for possession of a knife, according to the Ministry of Justice.<sup>86</sup> While policymakers, schools, and charities work tirelessly to curb this trend, another powerful force is shaping perceptions and behaviour, the media. For many young people, images of knives and violence are part of their daily scroll online, from popular Netflix TV shows like 'Top Boy' and 'Squid Game', to social media posts showing police seizures of knives and other harmful weapons. Many argue that this shows how the media has a negative impact on the youth of today when it comes to youth crime and antisocial behaviour. However, I believe there is a case to be made that the media could significantly help reduce youth

knife crime in South Yorkshire and the rest of the UK, if invested well and given enough attention to by the UK Government. Here's why.

### The current impact of the media on youth knife crime

Most kids in the UK will have access to a television daily, whether it's to watch national broadcasts, Netflix or YouTube. Now it is likely that some of these shows that these children are watching may be below the recommended viewing age given by the BBFC.

Shows like Top Boy have earned praise for their authentic portrayal of urban life, unflinching in their depiction of poverty, violence, the drug trade, and the series doesn't shy away from showing knife crime as an integral part of this 'gang culture'. While this show may depict the consequences of violence, it also portrays its main characters Dushane and Sully living a successful

and rich lifestyle funded by these knife crimes and drug deals.

For impressionable young viewers, the message of the show can sometimes be muddled. Violence may be shown, but so is wealth, along with respect and power. In some communities where a kid's options may feel limited and role models may seem scarce, the characters in shows such as 'Top Boy' may become some of their aspirational figures.

### Social media

As well as television, social media can be seen to have a major influence on a young person's relationship with knife crime. Many children are usually able to access social media from 13 years old and onwards because of online safety regulations and policies, but this is still a young age for these kids to see some of the things that can be posted on social media platforms. Many children, and even adults use some social media platforms like Snapchat or Instagram just to message their friends or post about their life, but there are many social media platforms such as Reddit, Snapchat and X that have little restrictions on what can be posted on their platforms. Unfortunately, due to this, there may potentially be many photos online of knives that may be accessible to a child.

Research commissioned by London authorities has revealed deeply concerning patterns in how young people respond to knife-related content online.

When police post images of seized knives on social media, often intended as deterrents or evidence of enforcement, it may not actually be doing its job. A study found that 53

percent of young people surveyed who encountered these images felt unsafe, scared, and worried;<sup>87</sup> and 55 percent believed their families and communities would feel afraid and fearful seeing such posts.<sup>88</sup> Worryingly, eight percent of young people admitted they would be more likely to carry a knife after seeing images of weapons confiscated in their area.<sup>89</sup>

Rather than reassuring them of police protection in their local area, these posts triggered a defensive response due to worries that large and dangerous weapons are present in their community. Researchers have also noted signs of desensitization among some young people repeatedly exposed to knife imagery online.<sup>90</sup> When images of weapons become normalized in social media feeds, the shock value diminishes, and the perceived severity of knife possession may decrease.

### Current legal framework

The Government has attempted to address social media on aspects of youth crime and other harmful content, however, there remains challenges when it comes to enforcement and its effectiveness.

The Online Safety Act 2023<sup>91</sup> represents the Government's biggest effort yet to regulate digital spaces. It places legal duties on social media companies and search services to protect users from illegal content and content harmful to children. Platforms must implement systems to reduce risks of illegal activity and remove such content when it appears. Crucially for knife crime prevention, they must also prevent children from accessing content that encourages dangerous behaviour, including violence and weapons.

Section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 makes it an offense to send grossly offensive, indecent, obscene, or menacing messages over public electronic communications networks<sup>92</sup>. This provision has been used to prosecute individuals for online posts and comments, as seen in cases like *Chambers v DPP* [2012]<sup>93</sup>, though its application to knife crime specifically often depends on whether the post amounts to threats or encouragement of violence.

However, laws alone cannot stop the current problem of youth knife crime in the UK, legislation can remove the most harmful content and prosecute clear offenders, but it cannot address the underlying appeal of knife crime imagery or the complex reasons young people feel drawn to or threatened by weapons.

### Making a change:

What's desperately needed is not just content removal but content replacement. Strong adult figures like teachers, parents, youth workers, celebrities, and other role models, must actively provide counter-narratives to what young people see on television and social media. They need to explain that the "high lifestyle" shown in dramas is fiction, that most people involved in knife crime experience trauma, imprisonment, or death rather than wealth and respect. They need to contextualize police posts showing seized weapons, explaining that these images represent dangers removed from streets, not threats still present. This was highlighted in the new national youth strategy that was recently released by the Government which argues for greater support to younger people in the UK by 'halving the

gap in who gets to do enriching activities between disadvantaged young people and their peers'<sup>94</sup> and providing 'half a million more young people with an adult who can listen and support to them from outside of their house'<sup>95</sup>. This is a step in the right direction by the government, but there is still a lot that could be done.

### The need for early intervention

There is a big argument for early intervention when it comes to youth knife crime in this country. According to the Minister of State at the time, Edward Argar, in 2024 it cost the government £129,000 to keep one young person in a young offender's institution per year.<sup>96</sup> Focusing more on early intervention would not only hope to reduce the number of young people even being placed in these Young Offenders Institutions but it would also significantly reduce costs massively for the Government, which in a time where the country is significantly in debt, could be crucial.

Social media could play a massive role in this early intervention. Scrolling, messaging and posting on social media is a part of most children's day to day lives and the Government could use this to help educate them on knife crime issues.

In the 2023/24 financial year, the UK government spent £1.3 million running their social media accounts (including prison institutions).<sup>97</sup> This is currently the equivalent to keeping 11 children in a Young Offenders Institution, a fraction of the current expenditure on youth knife crime prevention. The Government could effectively use social media to run campaigns, raise awareness and educate younger people about fighting this knife crime culture. The UK Home Office has already had some success with this through their #knifefree campaign, despite

the little amount of funding that social media is currently receiving. Despite social media not being the main tool used in the #knifefree campaign, the Home Office still showed the significance of it as their post announcing this campaign reached over 250,000 engagements compared to the 1000 engagements that they usually get in their other social media posts.<sup>98</sup> This shows that with greater funding and research to tailor the campaign towards the younger age groups, the media can play a vital role in early prevention through its vast outreach online and accessible education on the matter.

The government could also use social media for this matter by collaborating with famous celebrities and sportspeople to endorse an anti-knife crime message.

#### To conclude...

Television shows don't create knife crime, nor do social media posts directly put weapons in young hands. But they do shape perceptions, influence fears, and sometimes blur the line between consequence and glamour.

Addressing this requires a coordinated response. Content creators must consider their responsibility in how they portray knife crime. Police forces need to think carefully about how their social media presence might affect vulnerable young people. Social media platforms must enforce safety standards more rigorously. And crucially, communities must rally to ensure young people are exposed to strong, positive voices that can contextualize and counter what they see on screens.

Because ultimately, the goal isn't to shield young people from reality, it's to ensure they understand it fully, including the consequences of these actions, before they make choices that could end their own lives or take someone else's.



James Grant

#### Further Reading

- [86] Grahame Allen and Helen Wong, Knife crime statistics England and Wales (House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 28th October 2025) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn04304/> accessed 10th December 2025
- [87] Study shows impact of knife imagery not universal, but is more profound for some young people affected by violence, London City Hall (25th January 2023) [https://www.london.gov.uk/media-centre/mayors-press-releases/study-shows-impact-knife-imagery-not-universal-more-profound-some-young-people-affected-violence?utm\\_](https://www.london.gov.uk/media-centre/mayors-press-releases/study-shows-impact-knife-imagery-not-universal-more-profound-some-young-people-affected-violence?utm_) accessed 29th October 2025
- [88,89,90] ibid
- [91] Online Safety Act 2023
- [92] Communications Act 2003, s 127
- [93] Chambers vs DPP [2012] EWHC 2157
- [94] The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 'Youth Matters: Your National Strategy' (GOV.UK, 10th December 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy#:~:text=Community%20around%20them>Youth%20Matters%3A%20Your%20National%20Youth%20Strategy%20sets%20out%20how%20the%20age%2025%20across%20England>, accessed 10th December 2025
- [95] ibid
- [96] TheyWorkForYou, 'Youth Custody: Per Capita Costs' (TheyWorkForYou 11th January 2024) <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrants/?id=2024-01-05.8178.h> accessed 12th November 2025
- [97] UK Parliament, 'Written Question 33779, 25th February 2025 (UK Parliament: Written Questions and Answers, 25th February 2025) [https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions-detail/2025-02-25/33779?utm\\_](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions-detail/2025-02-25/33779?utm_) accessed 5th November 2025
- [98] BBC News, 'Home Office emails reveal concern over 'racist' chicken shop scheme (BBC News, 29th April 2021) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-56844675> accessed 5th November 2025



## Beyond the Pitch: How Youth Initiatives Protect Young People and Transform Mental Wellbeing

By Amany Mohamed

**A**cross the United Kingdom, youth initiatives have become essential in providing young people purpose, safety and connection in a time when many feel isolated and overlooked. From football sessions and mentoring schemes to creative workshops, tutoring programmes and community projects, these spaces offer far more than just after-school entertainment. Research from the Department for Education has highlighted that young people with limited access to safe recreational spaces or structured activities are more vulnerable to risk taking behaviour and exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

They provide structure, role models, and a sense of belonging that many young people struggle to find elsewhere. In areas affected by social inequality or youth violence, such initiatives can be the difference between isolation and opportunity. However, their success depends on how well they respond to local realities such as gender, age,

cultural background and accessibility.<sup>2</sup> Understanding what makes these spaces effective, and who still gets left out, reveals both the power and the limitations of youth programmes today.

Recent national research has shown that one in five children now display signs of a probable mental health disorder and that young people living in deprived communities experience higher levels of anxiety, stress, and trauma.<sup>3</sup> These pressures shape how they behave, how they learn and how they form relationships. Youth programmes can provide safe environments where young people can express themselves, regulate their emotions, and build positive identities.

#### Youth initiatives as a foundation for belonging

Youth initiatives are often described as the backbone of community engagement for young people. They operate at the intersection of education, leisure and social support, creating environments where young people can grow without

the pressures of formal schooling or unstable home lives.

These spaces promote development in multiple ways: socially, by encouraging teamwork and communication; emotionally, by building confidence and self-worth; and intellectually, by offering mentoring and tutoring that fills the gaps left by overstretched schools.<sup>4</sup>

The Department of Culture, Media and Sport conducted research on youth initiatives and found that between 2011 and 2021, funding for youth provision has declined in real terms from £1058.2 million to £408.5 million<sup>5</sup>. It is further shown that 95% of local authorities reduced their real terms spending on youth services<sup>6</sup>. The value of youth clubs and programmes lies not only in the activities themselves but in the relationships they nurture. Youth workers often become consistent figures in young people's lives, offering advice and guidance that go beyond the specific skill being taught, which therefore creates an open communication link which builds trust with the young person<sup>7</sup>. This consistency is particularly important in deprived areas, where frequent changes in school staff or youth services can create instability. For many young people, a youth initiative is the only setting where they can feel supported.

Youth clubs provide access to other positive initiatives such as art, programmes and wilderness activities. These programmes often include walking, hiking and practical skills training. These activities help the young person learn new skills and support their self-esteem, communication and behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

However, accessibility remains uneven. Funding cuts across the UK have forced many local authorities to close youth

centres, and in some areas, only charity or volunteer-led programmes remain<sup>9</sup>. These tend to rely on short-term grants, meaning that projects can disappear as quickly as they emerge. This instability disrupts trust and engagement, as young people lose faith in systems that promise continuity but fail to deliver it. Long-term investment is therefore essential to make these initiatives sustainable.

#### **Sport as a catalyst for discipline and social change**

Sports initiatives remain one of the most visible tools of youth engagement, although their impact depends fundamentally on how they are funded and supported. Programmes such as the Sheffield Wednesday FC Community Programme demonstrate that sport can be used as a form of social intervention, building routine, discipline, belonging and wellbeing.

In a visit to our Community Justice Hub, the inspirational youth and integration worker Paul Hebda emphasised that these outcomes rely on sustained funding and strong partnerships. Sport becomes a safe space only when young people know that staff will be present, sessions will run consistently, and the programme is embedded within trusted local networks.

The image of football as a free or accessible activity hides the reality of how costly it is to run youth sport clubs. Hebda explained that while the club provides symbolic support through match day incentives, recognisable uniforms, and access to facilities, the club itself does not fund community youth work. Instead, the community programme relies on approximately one hundred thousand pounds of Premier League funding each year.

There is little funding left to expand the programme into areas where young people require the most support, such as mental health and specialist mentoring. Despite this limitation, the community trust continues to maintain strong attendance and a visible community presence, which creates stability that many other programmes struggle to offer. Hebda described this as a tight budget in the face of growing community needs. In areas affected by deprivation and youth violence, this budget must cover staffing, venue hire, safeguarding training, transportation, equipment, administration, and delivery.

This financial pressure matters because football on its own does not change lives. Hebda clarified that the most meaningful impact comes from well-funded youth work, particularly from larger programmes like Premier League Kicks. With increased funding, the Sheffield Wednesday programme would be able to employ counsellors, behaviour specialists, youth workers, and health educators. These professionals could deliver targeted support on issues such as trauma, nutrition, low self-esteem, and conflict resolution. According to Hebda, without this holistic provision, sport risks becoming a distraction rather than a prevention strategy. Young people may consistently attend sessions and enjoy playing football yet leave without long term skills, which provide direction and stability.<sup>10</sup>

Funding also affects inclusion. Football has the potential to build confidence among girls, yet many continue to disengage due to male dominated spaces and lack of representation. Research by Women in Sport found that more than one million girls stop participating in sport by the age of sixteen because of fear

of judgement and lack of confidence.<sup>11</sup> Hebda confirmed that girls only sessions and female coaches significantly improve participation. These changes require additional staff time, specific training and the use of extra or adapted spaces. In the same way, disabled young people need specialist settings and trained staff to participate fully.

Sport can build discipline, identity and belonging, yet it cannot resolve poverty, trauma, or a lack of opportunities without investment that recognises sport as youth work. When funding supports mental health workers, tutoring and safeguarding specialists alongside football, sport becomes a pathway away from violence and towards opportunity. When funding is limited, sport becomes a temporary escape, unable to compete with the pressures of deprivation or the influence of street culture.

#### **Girls in youth initiatives: participation, barriers and progress.**

Girls often experience youth initiatives differently from boys and their engagement is shaped by confidence, safety, and representation and the expectations placed on them inside and outside their communities.<sup>12</sup> Although many programmes aim to be inclusive, girls continue to face greater barriers to participation. Research by Women in Sport shows that more than one million girls disengage from sport during adolescence because of fear and judgement, body confidence concerns and the belief that sports that the youth sport spaces are designed for boys.<sup>13</sup> These pressures are strengthened in communities where girls have fewer public spaces to gather safely or where social expectations influence how freely they can move outside the home. Many



girls in mixed-gender school sport report feeling excluded or judged because school sports remain dominated by masculine norms, which means that females often face "inequalities in obtaining recognition in sport, and discrimination in accessing male-orientated sports".<sup>14</sup> As a result, girls only sessions become an essential part of youth provision because they create this familiar and comfortable environment that allows young women to participate without feeling judged nor watched.

Despite these challenges, we see youth initiatives that invest in girls see positive results. Programmes that employ female coaches, prioritise emotional safety and adapt activities to meet the needs of girls tend to achieve higher engagement and longer retention. However, progress remains uneven. Limited funding means that girls-only sessions are usually unavailable, and many organisations cannot hire trained female staff or secure private spaces that support girls' participation.<sup>15</sup>

In the following sections, I will explore the issues of inclusion and mental health in more detail.

### Mental health and the hidden struggle of young people

Mental health has become one of the most urgent issues affecting young people in the UK and it sits at the heart of why youth initiatives are so essential. Many young people are experiencing heightened levels of anxiety, low moods and emotional instability, often linked to pressures at school, uncertainty at home and wider stresses of their communities. NHS Digital reports that one in five children now present with signs of a probable mental health disorder and its rise has created a growing gap between how young people can regulate their

emotions, reconnect with others and experience support from trusted adults.<sup>16</sup>

Sport based programmes are particularly effective as physical activity naturally reduces stress and creates routine.<sup>17</sup> Football sessions at the SWFC Community Trust, provides a safe space where young people can release tension and allow them to feel part of a team.

Loneliness further intensifies the emotional challenges faced by young people. Public Health England has identified chronic loneliness as one of the strongest predictors of risky behaviours and disengagement.<sup>18</sup> Sport directly counters this creating social connection and meaningful peer relationships. Mental health support should not be an extra feature of youth initiatives but an essential part of their design. When programmes are well funded and delivered by trained staff, they become protective spaces that help young people manage stress and rebuild their sense of self.

Youth crime cannot be separated from the wider conditions that shape young people's lives. In communities where funding cuts have closed youth centres, reduced mentoring programmes and limited access to safe recreational spaces, young people are left without the support structures that protect them from isolation and risky environments. The Home Office has identified a clear link between the absence of youth provision and increased vulnerability to serious violence, noting that young people are most at risk when they have nowhere safe to go. Sports initiatives funded consistently and delivered by trained staff, such as those provided by the Sheffield Wednesday Community Foundation, offer a protective alternative. They create supervised

environments, meaningful relationships and emotional stability that reduce the likelihood of young people being drawn towards unsafe peer groups. Without sustained investment, these programmes cannot operate at the scale required to prevent harm.

In conclusion, Youth initiatives across the UK reveal that sport is one of the most consistent protective forces in young people's lives. Football and other community sport programmes create structure, belonging and emotional safety at a time when mental health difficulties are rising sharply among adolescents. For many young people, especially those living in areas affected by instability, these programmes offer the only secure environment where they can regulate their emotions, build confidence and feel connected to others. Yet the benefits are not shared equally. Girls continue to face barriers such as male dominated spaces, lack of representation and limited access to girls only sessions. When funding is insufficient, these barriers widen and girls are pushed to the margins of youth provision, losing out on the same mental health and social advantages that boys receive through consistent participation.

Across all groups, the importance of sustained funding cannot be overstated. When investment is limited, programmes cannot provide safe spaces, trained staff or inclusive environments, and young people lose the stability that keeps them engaged. Research shows that the absence of secure youth provision increases vulnerability and contributes to the conditions in which youth violence, including knife crime, can escalate. When communities invest in sport-based interventions, they invest in emotional resilience, safer neighbourhoods and opportunities for young people to

develop identity and purpose. The evidence is clear that sport, when supported properly, transforms lives and protects those most at risk.

A community that funds safe spaces for its young people is a community that chooses hope over harm, and a future that every child deserves to grow into.



**Amany Mohamed**

### Further Reading

- [1] Department for Education, Characteristics of Children in Need 2023 (DFE 2023) <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2023> > accessed 21 November 2025.
- [2] Larson, R. W., & Ngo, B. (2017). Introduction to special issue: The importance of culture in youth programs. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 32(1), 3-10.
- [3] NHS England, 'One in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023' (NHS England, 21 November 2023) <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/> accessed 21 November 2025. (england.nhs.uk)
- [4] Brady, B., Silke, C., & Shaw, A. (2022). A rapid review of the benefits and outcomes of universal youth work.
- [5] Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Youth provision and life outcomes: a study of the local impact of youth clubs (executive summary)* (GOV.UK, 29 February 2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-research/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-a-study-of-the-local-impact-of-youth-clubs-executive-summary> accessed 05 November 2025.
- [6] Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Youth provision and life outcomes: a study of the local impact of youth clubs (executive summary)* (GOV.UK, 29 February 2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-research/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-a-study-of-the-local-impact-of-youth-clubs-executive-summary> [accessed 05 November 2005]

[7] Fernandes, S., & Rua, O.L. Innovation in Youth Work. CREATIVITY AND BUSINESS INNOVATION, 89. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Orlando-Lima-Rua/publication/364042308\\_Creativity\\_and\\_Business\\_Innovation\\_Volume\\_III/\\_links/65b7deb31e1ec12eff5fc518/Creativity-and-Business-Innovation-Volume-III.pdf#page=97](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Orlando-Lima-Rua/publication/364042308_Creativity_and_Business_Innovation_Volume_III/_links/65b7deb31e1ec12eff5fc518/Creativity-and-Business-Innovation-Volume-III.pdf#page=97)

[8] Youth Endowment Fund, 'Adventure and wilderness therapy'. (Youth endowment fund, 2023) <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/adventure-and-wilderness-therapy/> accessed 10 December 2025

[9] <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/must-know-youth-services>

[10] Youth Endowment Fund, 'The Vital Role of Youth Work in Reducing Violence' (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023) <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/the-vital-role-of-youth-work-in-reducing-violence-and-supporting-young-people/> accessed 19 November 2025.

[11] Women in Sport, 'More than one million teenage girls fall out of love with sport' (Women in Sport, 3 March 2022) <https://womenssport.org/news/more-than-1-million-teenage-girls-fall-out-of-love-with-sport/> accessed 19 November 2025.

[12] Annan, L.G., Gaoua, N., Mileva, K., & Borges, M. (2022). What makes young people get involved with street gangs in London? A study of the perceived risk factors. *Journal of community psychology*, 50(5), 2198-2213

[13] Women in Sport, 'More than one million teenage girls fall out of love with sport' (Women in Sport, 7 March 2022) <https://womenssport.org/news/more-than-1-million-teenage-girls-fall-out-of-love-with-sport/> accessed 10 December 2025

[14] Majella McSharry, "It's just because we're girls": How female students experience and negotiate masculinist school sport (2017) 36 *Irish Educational Studies* 341.

[15] Ljungmann C.K. *Perceived barriers to sports participation among adolescent girls from low socioeconomic status neighbourhoods* (2024) *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (advance online publication) <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.2286013> accessed 10 December 2025

[16] NHS England, 'One in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023' (NHS England, 21 November 2023) <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/> accessed 10 December 2025.

[17] Q Fu et al, *The effects of physical activity on the mental health of children and adolescents* (2025) [online] <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12016293/> accessed 23 November 2025.

[18] Public Health England, *Improving Young People's Health and Wellbeing* (Public Health England 2019) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-young-people-s-health-and-wellbeing-a-framework-for-public-health> accessed 21 November 2025.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annan LG, Gaoua N, Mileva K and Borges M, 'What makes young people get involved with street gangs in London? A study of the perceived risk factors' (2022) 50 *Journal of Community Psychology* 2198.

Brady B, Silke C and Shaw A, 'A rapid review of the benefits and outcomes of universal youth work' (2022).

Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Youth provision and life outcomes: a study of the local impact of youth clubs (executive summary)* (GOV.UK, 29 February 2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-research/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-a-study-of-the-local-impact-of-youth-clubs-executive-summary> accessed 5 November 2025.

Department for Education, *Characteristics of Children in Need 2023* (DFE 2023) <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2023> accessed 21 November 2025.

Fernandes S and Rua OL, 'Innovation in Youth Work' in *Creativity and Business Innovation (Volume III)* [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Orlando-Lima-Rua/publication/364042308\\_Creativity\\_and\\_Business\\_Innovation\\_Volume\\_III/\\_links/65b7deb31e1ec12eff5fc518/Creativity-and-Business-Innovation-Volume-III.pdf#page=97](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Orlando-Lima-Rua/publication/364042308_Creativity_and_Business_Innovation_Volume_III/_links/65b7deb31e1ec12eff5fc518/Creativity-and-Business-Innovation-Volume-III.pdf#page=97) accessed 10 December 2025.

Fu Q and others, 'The effects of physical activity on the mental health of children and adolescents' (2025) <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12016293/> accessed 23 November 2025.

Ljungmann CK, 'Perceived barriers to sports participation among adolescent girls from low socioeconomic status neighbourhoods' (2024) *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (advance online publication) <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.2286013> accessed 10 December 2025.

Local Government Association, Must Know: Youth Services <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/must-know-youth-services> accessed 10 December 2025.

McSharry M, "It is just because we are girls": How female students experience and negotiate masculinist school sport' (2017) 36 *Irish Educational Studies* 341. NHS England, 'One in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023' (NHS England, 21 November 2023) <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/> accessed 10 December 2025.

Public Health England, *Improving Young People's Health and Wellbeing* (Public Health England 2019) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-young-people-s-health-and-wellbeing-a-framework-for-public-health> accessed 21 November 2025.

Youth Endowment Fund, 'Adventure and wilderness therapy' (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023) <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/adventure-and-wilderness-therapy/> accessed 10 December 2025.

Youth Endowment Fund, 'The Vital Role of Youth Work in Reducing Violence' (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023) <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/the-vital-role-of-youth-work-in-reducing-violence-and-supporting-young-people/> accessed 19 November 2025.

Women in Sport, 'More than one million teenage girls fall out of love with sport' (Women in Sport, 3 March 2022) <https://womenssport.org/news/more-than-1-million-teenage-girls-fall-out-of-love-with-sport/> accessed 19 November 2025.



## Turning the tide: How effective are youth programs in fighting crime

By E Hoxha

The effectiveness of youth groups on youth crime is a big question among people and the media, is it working? Why are we still seeing youth violence? Is it worth the money? This article aims to discuss the effectiveness and what impact youth groups are having on young people, crime rates, and society.

### Youth crime background

Before examining the effectiveness of youth groups, we need to start by understanding what youth groups and youth intervention programmes are working against and the main factors and trends in youth crime.

Youth crime is a prevalent issue as it has a direct effect on social and economic aspects in society. The average cost of keeping a single child in a Young Offender Institution is around £119,000 per year. A cost that is funded by taxpayers and the government, therefore directly affects the community. As youth sentencing rates increase, so increased levels of funding will be required.

A key part of the cost to society is that these institutions are not improving the rehabilitation of young people, as reoffending has increased to 32.5%.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, these institutions are having an increased economic impact on society, year after year, as they are not deterring young people from committing crimes or intervening in the risk factors associated with youth crime. If 30 fewer children avoided a custodial sentence, it would have saved an estimated £4 million - £9 million between March 2023 and March 2024.<sup>20</sup>

During the years 2023 to 2024, the number of sentencing occasions involving minors had increased by 8% compared to the previous year in England and Wales, which is the second consecutive year-on-year increase.<sup>21</sup> The same publication revealed there was an increase of 21% in the number of custodial sentences compared to the previous year. It also revealed in the year ending March 2024, there were 6,607 arrests of young people in South Yorkshire, a decrease compared

to 7,354 in the year ending March 2020.

Some of the common crimes committed by young people have been burglary, which has risen by 37% and theft and handling of stolen goods, an increase 23% compared to the previous year. However, there was a decrease in crimes such as drug offences by 16% and criminal damage by 9%.<sup>22</sup> This reveals that children are committing crimes that give more material and financial reward, a predictable response to financial hardship. This could show that youth groups and invention programmes may need to involve more opportunities, such as paid work experience, to give young people a legal positive way of earning money and influence these statistics to decrease.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) states that children involved in drug offences and crime are often victims.<sup>23</sup> They are more vulnerable, often experienced parental substance misuse, neglect, and violence in the home. Children involved in gang crime are 68% more likely than other young offenders to have a parent with substance misuse issues.<sup>24</sup>

### Intervention methods

The patterns explored previously show that current custodial systems are not working in reducing youth crime and often are too late to make a difference. This is why non-custodial, early interventions and youth groups are often recommended as an approach to youth crime. The College of Policing states that "they aim to prevent the escalation of offending, including intergenerational cycles of crime, and reduce the demand that families may place on services".<sup>25</sup> The general aim of these programmes

and groups is to give community-based support that prevents and removes young people from being involved with serious crime and reoffending.

Interventions typically focus on supporting young people at risk whilst addressing the root causes of offending. This is often achieved by giving young people a community and a sense of belonging to reduce the chance of them seeking this feeling in gangs and peer groups that are involved in crime.

Early Interventions can be provided by schools and involve local community-based charities, which involve identifying the early signs of risk and involvement in crime as early as possible to prevent behaviour and actions escalating to persistent and more serious offending. They can offer behaviour support services, which can help young people to manage negative emotions, develop self-regulation skills and conflict resolution, helping young people to engage more. Another method is mentoring or peer mentoring, as children are more likely to join a gang due to their need for a social group that will protect them, according to the NSPCC.<sup>26</sup> Mentors provide a safe person a child can trust who will direct them away from criminal activities, whilst addressing the loneliness or isolation a child may feel which is a risk factor for youth crime.

Collectively or alone, these approaches aim to address the root causes of young people at risk of being involved in youth crime and improve a child's resilience to being pressured or manipulated into being involved, as well as keeping them engaged in positive environments and school. A research report by the Scottish government found that "school and education-based approaches are effective in reducing

youth violence" which included social and emotional learning programmes.<sup>27</sup>

### Evaluation on effectiveness

Demonstrating the effectiveness of these programmes is crucial, as it informs the community and government whether they are worth funding, informs policy making, and provides credibility for continued use and expansion of these programmes. By utilising research, testimonials from professionals involved and recorded improvements in local and national areas, such as school engagement and offending rates, we are then able to assess how effective these programmes and interventions are.

The first piece of evidence comes from the Home Office evaluation report in February 2025.<sup>28</sup> The report consists of an evaluation of the Early Intervention Youth Fund (EIYF), an initiative funded by the Home Office aiming to reduce young people's involvement in crime. It covers the first 29 EIYF projects, assessing the implementation and its overall outcome and impact. The evaluation included a control group to provide a baseline comparison to its findings.

The analysis of data shows a significant reduction in drug-related offences of 23% and a reduction of 33% in public order offences in EIYF areas (compared to non-funded control group areas). It also showed a 17% reduction in violence against the person. Whilst there was no reduction compared to control groups in offences such as robbery, criminal damage or theft, there was no increase in these offences. Testimonial evidence from the evaluation included police officers reporting that there was a reduction in specific young people in local hotspots, and during nights an EIYF session was being delivered, there

was a reported reduction in Anti-Social Behaviour during that time. The young people involved with these projects provided testimonial evidence on the impact of the project on their behaviour and involvement in criminal activities, with one young person stating,

**"I used to get involved in robbing and that. Instead of going out with all the bad people, I just come here and box."<sup>29</sup>**

Measurable differences were observed in young people's behaviour, such as evidence of improved school attendance by participants. As well as following one-to-one mentoring through the programme, there was evidence of improved behaviour and school progress from the young people. Overall, the report found that the project had made improvements to crime rates and the young people's behaviour and lives.

Another research report by the Department of Education, aims to provide an understanding of 'what works' in early interventions intended to prevent and reduce youth crime or anti-social behaviour in children aged 8 or above.<sup>30</sup> This research found that Safer School Partnerships (SSPs) projects resulted in increased attendance when comparing 15 schools with SSPs in place to a sample group of 15 schools that did not. Attendance can decrease risk factors of being involved in youth crime, as it provides a structured environment where children can feel a sense of belonging. As well as being important for teachers to observe a child's behaviour and notice any changes in behaviour or risk factors, with studies showing that children who

were absent 20% or more of school were 3.10 times more likely to be involved in police recorded offending.<sup>31</sup> Early findings found that the use of Intensive Intervention Projects (IIPs) resulted in improvements to attendance, self-esteem, communication in families and reduced anti-social behaviour.

The research concluded by highlighting that there was a need for more well-designed programmes that were effective. A key argument for the use of early intervention programmes is to keep young people out of the judicial system and save money; therefore, the programmes in place need to be effective, otherwise it's a poor investment and makes youth intervention less effective.

The next evaluation focused on police led youth interventions; it discusses the impact and effectiveness of interventions in England.<sup>32</sup> It showed that the project had reasonable success in reducing offending rates, as out of the 69 active participants in the project, only 4 had offended since engagement, indicating that the programme had a significant reduction in reoffending. It is difficult to estimate a cost-to-benefit ratio; the research suggested that the project had returns of 170% suggesting that the project generated considerably more social and economic value than it costs to run.

The final report came from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and discussed the long-term effects of youth groups and explored the effects of participation in youth clubs on outcomes later in life and used datasets spanning over 2 decades.<sup>33</sup>

The study found that youth groups have the short-term effects

of participants feeling increased confidence, safer and experienced a sense of belonging. The long-term effects were found that 46% youth club participants had a higher academic background (NVQ4+) in adulthood. Being in post-secondary education has been shown to improve someone's likelihood of not being involved in crime.<sup>34</sup> Research shows that the young adults who had received a custodial sentence have a lower level of educational achievement, with only 36.9% achieving the expected level of English and maths by the end of key stage 2, compared with 72.4% of those without criminal convictions.<sup>35</sup> These differences highlight how youth groups, through building confidence, connection, and long-term educational engagement, may contribute to breaking the cycle of offending.

#### Testimonial evidence on effectiveness

Whilst research is crucial to understand the effectiveness of youth groups, first-hand accounts from people directly involved in working with young people is equally important. Their experience and direct involvement provide an insight into youth groups' effect on children's lives and the community around them.

Jack Harvey is a trainee teacher in Sheffield and an Assistant Instructor at NEST ITF (International Taekwon-Do Federation) TAEKWONDO, Rotherham. In his own words, Jack explains his perception on effects of youth groups on young people's lives:

"For the last 13 years, I have practiced, lived, and breathed traditional taekwondo. My journey began when I was six, I trained for 6 years and began my instructing career when I achieved my 1st degree black belt at age 12. Now at 19 I can say I have seen ways that martial arts changes lives in ways that few people outside of the sport would believe. What might look like just kicking and punching from the outside is, in truth, a structured path that keeps children away from gangs, violence, and the kind of danger that is all too easy to fall into growing up in current time.

Our club is a small, local space and most students come from the same community with all different backgrounds. Some come to build confidence, some to increase their level of discipline, and some because they're at risk of going down the wrong path. Over the years, I've seen kids walk through our doors angry, lost, and lacking direction, only to find focus and pride through Taekwondo. Martial arts don't just teach you how to fight; they teach you when not to. It's about control, respect, and the ability to walk away from danger rather than get caught up in it, as well as giving children a place to positively interact with peers and develop relationships with role models who they can trust to talk to.

Being a younger instructor gives me a unique perspective because of that; I often relate to the younger students differently. They open up to me about what's going on in their lives, things they might not tell other adults. I've seen kids who were going down

the path of youth crime swap that environment for training sessions and friendships, support that lifts them up. When I see those same kids earning belts, smiling, and showing respect, it reminds me why I do this.

I have learned that Taekwondo's greatest strength is in its ability to keep people grounded and safe. Personally, I have seen this group and similar groups working with young people turn lives around and have a positive impact on behaviour, aspirations, school involvement, and children's relationships with safe, positive influences.

Martial arts, at its heart, is about avoiding danger, not chasing it. And in a world where so many young people are tempted by risky choices, sometimes all it takes is stepping onto the mats to find a better path."



Pictured: Jack Harvey, a trainee teacher in Sheffield and an assistant instructor at NEST ITF TAEKWONDO, Rotherham

**Jack Harvey**

Youth crime continues to place significant stress and pressure on society and the economy; the evidence that has been outlined demonstrates that custodial approaches are not cost effective or not successful in reducing offending rates in young people.

However, research and reports referenced here has shown that intervention programmes and youth groups have a measurable impact on young people's behaviour, education engagement and life outcomes. Reduction in drug related offences, and improvement in educational attendance and achievement, does indicate that these interventions are effective in addressing youth crime causes, consequences and positive impacts all round.

Whilst youth violence remains a hot topic in the media and communities, this is not an indication that youth groups are ineffective; it simply reflects the complexity of youth crime and the financial and social factors surrounding it.

The question we ask about youth groups shouldn't be "are youth groups effective?" but rather "how consistently are they implemented, funded, supported and targeted at children at risk".

Continued funding and investment is a key component, not only due to the 'spend to save' model, but because early investment leads to long term socioeconomic benefits, improved community safety, and offers young people greater opportunities.

Ultimately, youth groups are not a single solution but a key part in a wider preventative approach. When they are adequately funded, evidence based, and focus on identifying and resolving risk factors, youth programmes are shown to be effective.

## Further Reading

- [19] Youth justice board, 'Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024' (Gov UK, 30 January 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024#further-information>>
- [20] The youth justice board, 'Youth Justice Board Cost Benefit Analysis (July 2025)' (Youth Justice Resource Hub, 4 July 2025) <<https://yjresourcehub.uk/youth-justice-board-cost-benefit-analysis-2025/>>
- [21] Youth justice board, 'Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024' (Gov UK, 30 January 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024#further-information>>
- [22] Youth justice board, 'Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024' (Gov UK, 30 January 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024#further-information>>
- [23] Nspcc, 'Protecting children from county lines' (Learningnspcc.org.uk, 18 February 2025) <<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/county-lines/>>
- [24] Children's commissioner for England, 'Keeping kids safe: Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation' (Childrenscommissioner.gov.uk, February 2019) <<https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Gangs.pdf>>
- [25] College of policing, 'Vulnerability and Violent Crime Programme Evaluation of the Think Family Early Intervention programme Full technical report' (College of Policing, July 2021) <<https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2021-07/vvcp-evaluation-tfei-key-findings-practice-implications.pdf?v=1626108484>>
- [26] Nspcc, 'Protecting children from county lines' (Learningnspcc.org.uk, 18 February 2025) <<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/county-lines/>>
- [27] Dr Kirsten Russell, 'What Works to Prevent Youth Violence: A Summary of the Evidence' (Svrucouk, February 2021) <[https://www.svrucouk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/570415\\_SCT0121834710-001\\_p2\\_YVMainReport.pdf](https://www.svrucouk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/570415_SCT0121834710-001_p2_YVMainReport.pdf)>
- [28,29] Home office, 'Evaluation of the Early Intervention Youth Fund: Impact report' (Gov UK, 13 February 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-early-intervention-youth-fund-impact-report/evaluation-of-the-early-intervention-youth-fund-impact-report>>
- [30] Andy ross and others, 'Prevention and Reduction: A review of strategies for intervening early to prevent or reduce youth crime and anti-social behaviour' (Department for Education, UK Government, Unknown date) <<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7a36f2e5274a34770e5114/DFE-RR111.pdf>>
- [31] Dr Jasmine Rollings and others, 'Association between school exclusion, suspension, absence and violent crime' (Youth Endowment Fund, February 2023) <<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/secondary-data-analysis/an-examination-of-the-association-between-school-absence-exclusion-and-violent-crime/>>

[32] Jonathan Hobson and others, 'International Criminal Justice Review' [2018] 31(3) Are Police-Led Social Crime Prevention Initiatives Effective? A Process and Outcome Evaluation of a UK Youth Intervention <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/105767718814891>>

[33] Sqw group, 'Youth provision and life outcomes: A study of longitudinal research' (Govuk, February 2024) <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fac3c3703c42001158f03f/Strand\\_1\\_Report\\_Youth\\_Evidence\\_Base\\_-\\_SQW\\_v13-accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fac3c3703c42001158f03f/Strand_1_Report_Youth_Evidence_Base_-_SQW_v13-accessible.pdf)>

[34] Brian Bell and others, 'Why Does Education Reduce Crime?' [2022] 130(3) The University of Chicago Press: Journals <<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/717895>>



## Beyond the blade: Communities restoring hope and safety

By Mohammed Wakeel Malik

### Introduction

Knife crime continues to affect communities across the United Kingdom, causing harm and fear in everyday life. While London often dominates headlines, the problem extends beyond the capital. Towns and cities across the country are dealing with its devastating consequences and Sheffield is no exception. In South Yorkshire, communities are uniting to tackle this issue, working tirelessly to restore hope and create safer environments for young people.

The urgency of these efforts is clear. In the 12 months to June 2025, England and Wales recorded 51,527 knife-enabled offences, according to the Office for National Statistics; a figure that, despite a 5% decrease from the previous year, remains alarmingly high<sup>36</sup>. Behind these numbers are young lives at risk: NHS data show that nearly 13% of hospital admissions for sharp-object assaults involved under-18s, amounting to about 3,460 cases<sup>37</sup>.

Sheffield reflects this national challenge. The Home Office reports 15,028 knife-enabled robberies across seven high-risk forces (including South Yorkshire), down 6% year-on-year<sup>38</sup>. Yet, South Yorkshire Police recorded 560 knife robberies in June 2025 alone, alongside a 32% rise in youth violent arrests since 2020, as noted by the Youth Justice board<sup>39</sup>. These figures highlight why community efforts must go beyond policing and offer early intervention and sustained support for young people.

Grassroots initiatives and collaborative programs aim to inspire communities, strengthen relationships, and provide positive alternatives to violence. They focus on building trust, resilience, and opportunities that steer young people away from harmful choices. By promoting education, empowerment and community cohesion, these actions pave the way toward lasting change. To understand how this vision translates into action, we turn to the workshops that empower young people at the heart of these communities.

#### Community workshops: Educating and empowering youth

Initiatives like 'One Knife, Many Lives', hosted by Firvale Community Hub, brings together young people aged 11-16 to learn about the dangers of knife crime from both practical and spiritual perspectives<sup>40</sup>. These workshops are not just lectures, they are interactive, engaging, and designed to make young people feel heard and supported. The sessions create safe spaces where young children can openly discuss issues such as peer pressure, conflict resolution, and the real-life consequences of carrying a knife. This openness helps dispel myths around knife carrying and encourages

honest conversations about why some young people feel compelled to carry weapons.

Campaigners like Anthony Olaseinde, from *Always an Alternative*<sup>41</sup>, share powerful lived experiences, offering practical safety strategies and highlighting the long-term impact of violent choices. His approach resonates because it combines realism with hope, showing that change is possible. Alongside him, Imam Amar Hafiz, from *Jamia Al-Karam*<sup>42</sup>, introduces ethical and faith-based principles that emphasise the sanctity of life, reinforcing moral responsibility, and community values.



To make the experience rewarding, the hub provides a certificate of completion, which not only recognises achievement but also motivates continued engagement. These certificates serve as a reminder of the commitment to positive change and can even enhance confidence and self-worth among participants. Beyond these sessions themselves, the workshops often include role-playing activities, group discussions, and scenario-based exercises that allow young people to practice decision-making in challenging situations. This hands-on approach ensures that lessons are not just theoretical but applicable to real-life contexts.

While these workshops are transformative, they represent only one part of a much larger effort to address knife crime.

#### Beyond awareness: Year-round support

Beyond these workshops, the Firvale Community Hub runs year-round programmes that focus on personal development, leadership skills, and trauma-informed support for those affected by violence<sup>43</sup>. These programmes provide continuity, ensuring that young people have access to guidance and resources beyond short-term interventions. They offer one-to-one and group therapy sessions, substance misuse education, and family outreach to address the root causes of youth crime. This holistic approach recognises that knife crime is often linked to deeper issues such as poverty, social isolation, and lack of opportunity. By tackling these underlying factors, the Hub aims to create lasting change rather than short-term fixes.

Partnerships with schools and parents play a crucial role in this

strategy. By integrating preventative education into classrooms and homes, the Hub ensures that messages about safety and resilience reach young people in environments where they feel secure. Teachers and parents are equipped with practical tools to identify early warning signs and intervene before problems escalate.

The Hub's approach combines innovative solutions such as anonymous reporting systems with community cohesion projects that foster trust and collaboration. These initiatives give young people positive alternatives to risky behaviours and help them build strong support networks. Activities like leadership training, volunteering opportunities, and creative projects empower participants to see themselves as representatives of change within their communities. These efforts aim to steer children away from environments that expose them to violence and empower them to make safer choices for their future. The goal is not just to prevent crime but to raise confident, resilient individuals who can succeed in society. To truly increase these grassroots efforts, collaboration at a larger scale is essential. The following section highlights how united campaigns and partnerships across Sheffield are transforming individual actions into a powerful collective movement against knife crime.

#### Community-scale initiatives & collaboration

In January 2025, the *Knives Take Lives* campaign, launched by South Yorkshire Police in collaboration with The Sheffield College, used student-led creative media and real-life storytelling to correct knife carrying myths and

resonate with young audiences<sup>44</sup>. Using student-led creative media, the campaign featured short films and animations based on real-life stories, including a fatal stabbing case in Doncaster. Students helped script and voice the content, making it relatable for young audiences. This initiative also included talks from victims' families and officers, aiming to show that carrying a knife doesn't offer protection, it destroys lives. By combining powerful stories with practical advice, the initiative opened doors for honest conversations among young people, families and communities, fostering trust and awareness.

In May 2025, *Operation Sceptre* ran across Sheffield with community-focused actions such as amnesty bins, school workshops and patrols<sup>45</sup>. It engaged charities like *Always an Alternative* to bring knife awareness into neighbourhoods and schools. The initiative included amnesty bins placed in key locations to encourage safe disposal of knives, school-based workshops where officers and youth workers discussed the dangers of carrying weapons and high visibility patrols to reassure residents. These efforts aimed not only to reduce knife possession but also to build trust between young people and local authorities, creating safer spaces, and stronger community ties. Charities like *Always an Alternative* played a vital role in delivering these messages directly into neighbourhoods and schools, ensuring that prevention reached those most at risk.

These collaborative campaigns demonstrate that united action can make a real difference. They show how creative engagement, community

partnerships and practical measures can challenge harmful traditions and build trust. Yet, they also reveal that short-term efforts alone cannot solve a problem as complex as knife crime. To truly protect young lives and strengthen communities, these initiatives must be supported by consistent investment and long-term strategies that prioritise prevention and resilience. Achieving this requires consistent funding and long-term investment.

#### Funding: The key to sustaining progress

The long-term success of community-led initiatives is threatened by a persistent challenge: financial insecurity. Many grassroots organisations operate on limited budgets, relying heavily on short-term grants or donations to sustain their work. Without consistent funding, these vital programmes risk being reduced in size or disappearing altogether; undermining the progress they strive to achieve.

Stable investment allows communities to implement proven solutions. Measures such as improved street lighting, CCTV in public spaces, secure youth facilities, and anonymous reporting systems can significantly enhance safety. Beyond this, businesses can sponsor anti-violence projects and places of worship can strengthen outreach efforts<sup>46</sup>. Even simple actions such as uplifting neglected neighbourhoods or training volunteers for street patrols can make a tangible difference. However, none of these strategies are possible without adequate resources. Communities are ready to act, now they need the funding to match their determination.

As a registered charity, Firvale Community Hub depends on government grants and public donations to sustain its work. This financial support is critical to delivering youth engagement programmes, safe spaces and trauma-informed services that address the root causes of violence. Reliable funding enables the hub to plan long-term initiatives, maintain stability in support networks and respond effectively to emerging community needs, ensuring that progress against knife crime is not only achieved but preserved.

While funding provides the foundation, partnerships between local authorities, schools, and grassroots organisations increase impact. The following section explores how community-scale initiatives and joint campaigns are turning ideas into action across Sheffield.

#### Why prevention pays

Investing now, saves money in the long run. A single significant knife crime incident can cost more than £100,000, including police response, legal costs, and NHS treatment<sup>47</sup>. These costs do not even account for the emotional toll on families and communities or the long-term impact on public confidence and safety. In contrast, youth programs often cost less than £5,000 per participant, yet their benefits extend far beyond financial savings. These initiatives provide education, mentorship, and safe spaces that help young people build resilience and make positive choices. By addressing root causes such as peer pressure, lack of opportunities, and social isolation, these programs reduce the likelihood of future violence and create stronger, healthier communities.

Supporting these efforts today means reducing the burden on emergency services, protecting young lives and fostering environments where young people can thrive and achieve stability and long-term security. Ultimately, these savings reinforce the case for sustained investment and momentum. Prevention is not only a moral requirement, but it is a practical, cost-effective strategy that benefits society.

This economic and social rationale leads us to the next question; how can communities turn short-term progress into lasting change?

#### Turning momentum into lasting change

Sheffield's fight against knife crime shows what communities can achieve when they unite. From student-led campaigns and grassroots workshops to partnerships with local businesses and faith groups, these efforts have created hope and alternatives for young people who might otherwise be drawn to knife violence.

However, most initiatives rely on short-term grants, leaving them vulnerable to disruption. Stable, statutory funding is essential. It enables organisations to train volunteers, nurture youth leaderships, and maintain stability in support services. Every pound spent on prevention saves thousands in policing, legal costs, and NHS treatment, while protecting lives and strengthening communities<sup>48</sup>.

Knife crime is not just a policing issue it is a societal challenge. Businesses, local authorities, and residents must work together to secure long-term resources. By investing today, we build a future where young people thrive in

safe environments and communities stand united against violence.

#### Conclusion

Knife crime remains one of the most pressing challenges facing communities across the UK. Sheffield's example proves that grassroots action, collaboration and sustained investment can transform fear into hope and vulnerability into resilience. The fight against knife crime is not won by enforcement alone, it requires education, empowerment and unity. By committing to long-term solutions today, we can create a safer tomorrow for generations to come.



**Mohammed Wakeel Malik**

#### Further Reading

- [36] Ben Kinsella Trust, 'Knife Crime Statistics' <https://benkinsella.org.uk/knife-crime-statistics> accessed 12 November 2025
- [37] South Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit, 'South Yorkshire Knife Crime Approach' [https://southyorkshireviolencereductionunit.com/app/uploads/2025/02/South-Yorkshire-Knife-Crime-Approach\\_FINAL.pdf](https://southyorkshireviolencereductionunit.com/app/uploads/2025/02/South-Yorkshire-Knife-Crime-Approach_FINAL.pdf) accessed 29 November 2025.
- [38] Doncaster Free Press, 'This is How Much South Yorkshire Knife Robberies Have Fallen After Government Targets High-Risk Areas' <https://www.doncasterfreepress.co.uk/news/crime/this-is-how-much-south-yorkshire-knife-robberies-have-fallen-by-after-government-targets-high-risk-areas-5254565> accessed 22 October 2025.

[39] Youth Justice Resource Hub, 'Knife Crime Evidence and insights Pack (Feb 2025)' [https://yjrresourcehub.uk/ourwork/knifecrimeevidenceinsights\\_feb25/](https://yjrresourcehub.uk/ourwork/knifecrimeevidenceinsights_feb25/) accessed 22 October 2025

[40] Firvale Community Hub, 'One Knife, Many Lives: Empowering Sheffield Youth to Tackle Knife Crime' <https://firvalecommunityhub.org.uk/one-knife-many-lives-empowering-sheffield-youth-to-tackle-knife-crime/> accessed 15 October 2025.

[41] Always an Alternative, 'Always an Alternative' <https://alwaysanalternative.org.uk> accessed 10 December 2025.

[42] Jamia Al-Karam, 'Al-Karam' <https://www.alkaram.org> accessed 10 December 2025.

[43] Firvale Community Hub, 'One Knife, Many Lives: Empowering Sheffield Youth to Tackle Knife Crime' <https://firvalecommunityhub.org.uk/one-knife-many-lives-empowering-sheffield-youth-to-tackle-knife-crime/> accessed 15 October 2025.

[44] The Tab, 'South Yorkshire Police Launch Campaign to Combat Youth Knife Crime' <https://thetab.com/2025/01/31/south-yorkshire-police-launch-campaign-to-combat-youth-knife-crime> accessed 5 November 2025.

[45] ShefNews, 'South Yorkshire Police Start Action Week for Tackling Knife Crime' <https://shefnews.co.uk/index.php/2025/05/22/south-yorkshire-police-start-action-week-for-tackling-knife-crime/> accessed 19 November 2025.

[46] West Midlands Police & Crime Commissioner, "'Brilliant' My Community Fund Back for 2025 as PCC Gives Local Projects £330,000 to Help Reduce Crime" <https://www.westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk/brilliant-my-community-fund-back-for-2025-as-pcc-gives-community-groups-330000-to-help-reduce-crime/> accessed 5 November 2025.

[47] South Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit, 'South Yorkshire Knife Crime Approach' [https://southyorkshireviolencereductionunit.com/app/uploads/2025/02/South-Yorkshire-Knife-Crime-Approach\\_FINAL.pdf](https://southyorkshireviolencereductionunit.com/app/uploads/2025/02/South-Yorkshire-Knife-Crime-Approach_FINAL.pdf) accessed 29 October 2025.

[48] HM Treasury, Spending Review 2025 (CP 1336, 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html> accessed 22 October 2025.

# SPRING TOUR 2026

**SORREL NATION**  
with her band



#### GJ ARTIST SERVICES

"Stylish band panache adding folk rock aura to sultry layered songs"  
- Three Chords and the Truth

"there was a gorgeous, vibrant depth to the overall sound"  
- Nick Barber, Americana UK

"there are few singer-songwriters currently gracing the UK music scene creating as much of a buzz"  
- Graeme Tait, Americana UK

- 18/04 - QUAY ARTS, NEWPORT, IOW**
- 28/04 - UNICORN THEATRE, ABINGDON**
- 24/04 - THE ARTY BARN, NR BERKHAMSTED**
- 25/04 - SWISS COTTAGE, TWYFORD (HANTS)**
- 26/04 - OXTED SESSIONS, OXTED**
- 29/04 - KITCHEN GARDEN CAFE, BIRMINGHAM**
- 01/05 - THE LANTERN THEATRE, SHEFFIELD**
- 02/05 - BARNOLDSWICK MUSIC & ARTS CENTRE**
- 03/05 - KNUTSFORD LITTLE THEATRE, KNUTSFORD**
- 07/05 - THE HALF MOON PUTNEY, LONDON**
- 08/05 - THE BEAR CLUB, LUTON**
- 09/05 - VILLAGE HALL, GREAT EASTON (LEICS)**
- 10/05 - HARTA RETREAT, BARNSTAPLE**
- 16/05 - DART MUSIC FESTIVAL, DARTMOUTH**
- 17/05 - THE ACORN, PENZANCE**
- 23/05 - THE BIG RETREAT FESTIVAL, LAWRENNY**



The background of the entire image is a dark, abstract painting. It features a large, stylized knife with a purple handle and a blue blade, set against a dark, textured background. The knife is surrounded by various colors of paint splatters and brushstrokes. In the foreground, there is a bouquet of flowers, including purple and yellow ones, partially obscured by the knife. The overall mood is somber and dramatic.

## FIGHTING KNIFE CRIME

Connect With Us



[www.fightingknifecrime.london](http://www.fightingknifecrime.london)

Published By

**ICONIC**  
MEDIA SOLUTIONS