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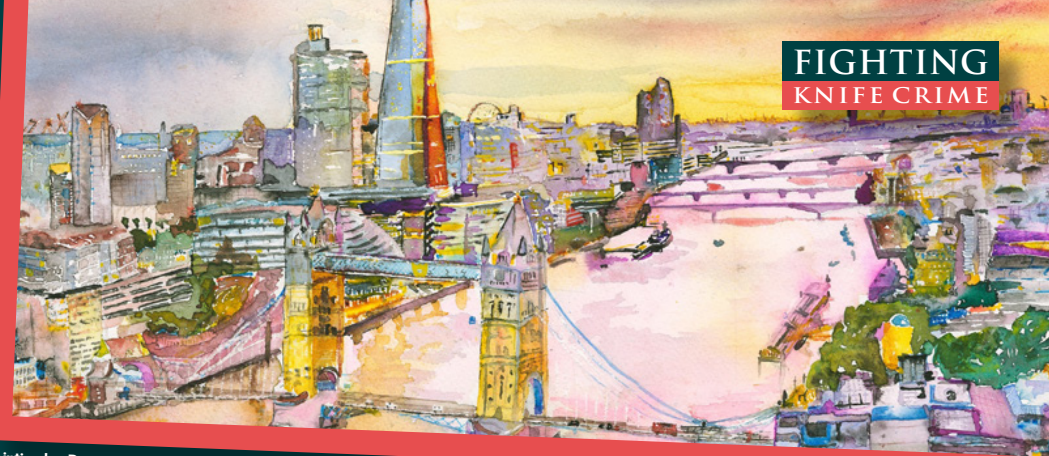


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Painting by: Bruce Houlder - based on an original drone photo by Chris Gorman of The Big Ladder Company www.bigladder.co.uk



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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.

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Foreword to our 20th Edition

By Bruce Houlder, Founder, Fighting Knife Crime London

Every discussion about knife crime, youth violence and offending eventually arrives at the same question: how do we create safer communities? It's a depressing challenge at first sight, but reading the contributions here has filled me with real optimism. The articles in this edition present an extremely powerful series of interconnected messages. They call us to think differently about violence, offending and rehabilitation. They challenge us to move beyond reaction towards prevention, beyond judgement towards understanding, and beyond pessimism towards possibility.

If there is one message that emerges from these pages, it is a hopeful one: every person carries the potential for change, and every community has a role to play in making that change possible. The background is well framed and evidenced

by academic studies. This research is beautifully drawn together by **Professor Ruwan Underage-Perera**. Reflecting on the recent news that Sir Kier Starmer is about to be replaced as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom the professor reminds us that the new administration would do well to waste no time in reaffirming the government's pledge to cut these offences of violence by 50% within the next 8 or so years, and further build on the more successful approach taken by Scotland to tackle the causes of knife crime.

Too often, public debate focuses on the moment of crisis — the arrest, the stabbing, the court appearance, the prison sentence. Yet the contributors to this edition challenge us to look much deeper. Together, they remind us that violence rarely begins with violence itself. It begins much earlier, in experiences of

trauma, exclusion, disconnection, unmet need and the search for belonging.

Chantell Hayles, Founder of Living Without Limits, writes about her own lived experience of surviving a stabbing that has fuelled her commitment to early intervention. Her article reminds us that young people often communicate distress through behaviour long before they reach crisis point, and that timely support can alter life trajectories before harm occurs.

Sheldon Thomas has a different perspective but comes to similar conclusions. He draws on more than three decades of frontline experience to explore the childhood experiences that often precede gang involvement and serious violence. His powerful contribution urges us to understand the child before judging the adult, arguing that if we are to reduce knife crime, we must first address the conditions that shape young lives long before a weapon is ever carried. Sheldon emphasises the importance of experienced and empathetic mentors.

The importance of authentic relationships is explored by **Elaine Isadora Thomas, Founder of The Mentoring Lab and Mentoring for Youth**. Her insightful examination of "performance mode" challenges mentors and practitioners to look beyond surface-level engagement and create environments where young people feel safe enough to be themselves. Real transformation, she argues, begins when young people no longer feel the need to perform for acceptance.

Trust and understanding are also at the heart of **Peter Burdin's account of the Ubuntu Round Tables**. His article demonstrates the value of bringing young people and police officers together as

equals, creating opportunities to break down stereotypes, build empathy and foster genuine dialogue. The experiences shared by participants show that trust can be rebuilt when people are willing to listen to one another's perspectives.

Collectively, these contributions remind us that prevention cannot be delivered by any single agency. Families, schools, youth workers, mentors, community organisations, faith groups and statutory services all have a role to play in creating the conditions in which young people can thrive.

Yet this edition is not only about prevention. It is also about what happens when people have made mistakes and seek an opportunity to rebuild.

Titi Solarin, Founder of Tailored Futures CIC, challenges us to see people as more than the worst decision they have ever made. Through stories of rehabilitation, resilience and renewed purpose, she demonstrates the transformative impact of believing in human potential and supporting individuals to rebuild their lives after involvement with the criminal justice system.

Rik Willis, writing on behalf of Offploy, examines the practical and economic case for employing people with convictions. His article shows how employers can balance opportunity with responsibility, while helping to create pathways away from reoffending and towards stable employment and social inclusion.

Megan Prendergast of Catch22 takes us inside the prison environment, exploring the relationship between purpose, belonging and violence reduction in custody. Her experiences illustrate how meaningful activity, positive relationships and opportunities for achievement can create safer

“Art washes away
from the soul the
dust of everyday life.”

— Pablo Picasso



environments while supporting long-term rehabilitation.

Running through every contribution is a common thread: people change when they experience connection, purpose, opportunity and hope. Whether we are supporting a child in school, mentoring a young person, building trust between communities and police, helping someone secure employment after conviction, or creating opportunities for growth within custody, the principle remains the same. Positive change is most likely when people feel seen, valued and believed in.

The organisations represented in these pages, and many others working across our communities demonstrate what can be achieved when lived experience, professional expertise and compassion come together.

The Art of Empowerment

In the last couple of months Fighting Knife Crime London has embarked on a new way of thanking our donors. We have been delighted by the scheme's initial success and hope that more of you will consider buying art works for charity and perhaps give one as a gift to another. Bruce Houlder, our founder, and others who have now contributed to the art works we offer, can gain nothing from this as all donations go directly in to Fighting Knife Crime London's account at the **Charities Aid Foundation Bank**

(Cafbank). All original paintings prints will be sent at the Bruce Houlder's expense by Royal Mail and, where they are reproductions, they will be quality Fine Art Giclée prints on German Hannemühle Etching paper. Many are original paintings. The gallery will be augmented with new pieces from time to time. Do take a look at the website, and explore the gallery on www.brucehoulder.art. Art like so much else can enrich and change our lives.

Bruce Houlder
Founder of Fighting Knife
Crime London (FKCL)



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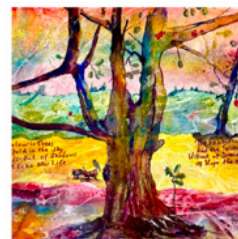
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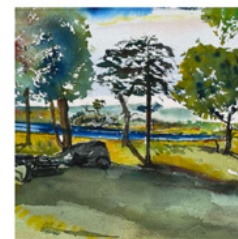
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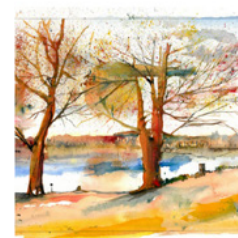
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Two Lives Lost: Why Preventing Violence is More Effective Than Responding to Its Consequences

By Ruwan Uduwera-Perera

In April 2026, with the publication of the latest United Kingdom Government report on knife crime, *'Protecting Lives, Building Hope: A Plan to Halve Knife Crime'*, The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer MP, Prime Minister, repeated a pledge, on behalf of the British Government, 'to halve knife crime within a decade' (Home Office, 2026).

This pledge is supported by the latest news that police-recorded crime for offences involving 'knife and sharp instruments' in England and Wales decreased by 10% on the previous year's figures to 49,151 (ONS, 2026). This downward trend is also reflected in knife-enabled homicides, which have fallen significantly by 21% (ONS, 2026). As of 22nd June, 2026,

Sir Kier Starmer has resigned as Prime Minister, so we will now wait and see whether a new Labour administration will be as committed (Crerar, 2026).

Knife crimes have, as Mason (2019) states, caused "media alarm", with news outlets feeding the public a diet of fear that has led to a *moral panic* (Cohen, 1972). In a possible desire for short-term answers, the media regularly frames, as Mason (2019) asserts, young Black men as latter-day *folk devils* (Cohen, 1972) and clumsily attempts to directly link their ethnicity with such crimes (Mason, 2019), for which there is no credible evidence.

Gayle and Young (2017) argue that irresponsible reporting on such crimes, which depicts ethnic minority young people as "inherently criminal"

(ibid), further demonises and alienates young people. Some populist media and political commentators continue to racialise such crimes, misrepresent crime statistics, and imply that young Black men are more likely, due to their 'race', to be involved in violent crimes. Yet a wealth of research corroborates the findings of Gwata et al. (2024), which show that young Black men are disproportionately affected by knife crime, both as victims and as offenders, as a result of structural inequalities, personal trauma, environmental factors, limited opportunities, and deprivation. These factors are over-represented in the areas where Black and other minority ethnic communities disproportionately live.

Brennan (2019), who undertook extensive research into young people carrying knives and other weapons, found that the ethnicity of the victim or offender was statistically insignificant as a cause. Rather, the criminogenic drivers were, but not exclusively, social exclusion, drug offending, delinquent peer networks, neighbourhood disorder, trauma, and a lack of trust and confidence in the police and other agencies (ibid).

Skarlatidou et al.'s (2021) research corroborates that of Brennan (2019) and, based on research undertaken in the East End of London, further highlights that an overwhelming majority of the young people interviewed were either "fairly worried" or "very worried" about becoming a victim of such a crime. As a result, they are very keen to engage in a discussion about how to seek solutions "if they feel included in the process and not targeted by it" (ibid.). Research undertaken in Scotland tends to also indicate that repeat violent victimisation (RVV) is prevalent, as well

as a genuine fear (Scottish Government, 2023).

At this point, it is useful to ask whether it is feasible to reduce the incidence of such crime in England and Wales, as the current government asserts it desires (Home Office, 2026). The answer is positive and comes from north of the border in Scotland, where such a significant reduction of similar crimes, as sought by Sir Kier Starmer (ibid.), has been achieved and sustained.

In sociology and criminology, it is well known that there is no single 'cause' of crime, especially violence, because the causes are highly complex. As a result, there is no single response, a challenge that policing has grappled with for many years. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 required collaboration between the public and voluntary sectors to work with communities to reduce crime, thereby establishing that policing is not the sole preserve of the police service (Crawford, 1998).

Between 2003 and 2005, Scotland saw a significant rise in violent crime, with Glasgow alone recording the highest murder rate of any European city. This prompted the World Health to dub the city the "Murder Capital of Europe" (Fraser, 2021).

The British government itself reported in 2018 that, within ten years, Scotland's homicide levels had dropped by 50% and hospital admissions following an assault with a bladed instrument had dropped by 62%, and that this was due to the public health well-being prevention strategy adopted by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU) (Evans, 2018). The SVRU further highlights that over the past two decades, knife-related homicides have dropped by 52% (SVRU, 2026).

The approach taken by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU), established in 2005, was visionary in reframing the tackling of knife and violent crime as a task beyond the police alone, who realised they could not tackle the problem in isolation. The SVRU was established by the then Strathclyde Police, which has now been absorbed into the wider and national Police Scotland family. From the outset, the SVRU adopted the World Health Organisation's (WHO) approach of treating violence as an infectious disease, rather than a traditional reactive policing approach that seeks to tackle the offender and seek punishment. At the time, Scotland did not have any legislation similar to the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998 (Crawford, 1998), that England and Wales benefited from, which mandated a collaborative approach between statutory and voluntary organisations to tackle crime. However, as such an approach made sense, they simply got on and did so.

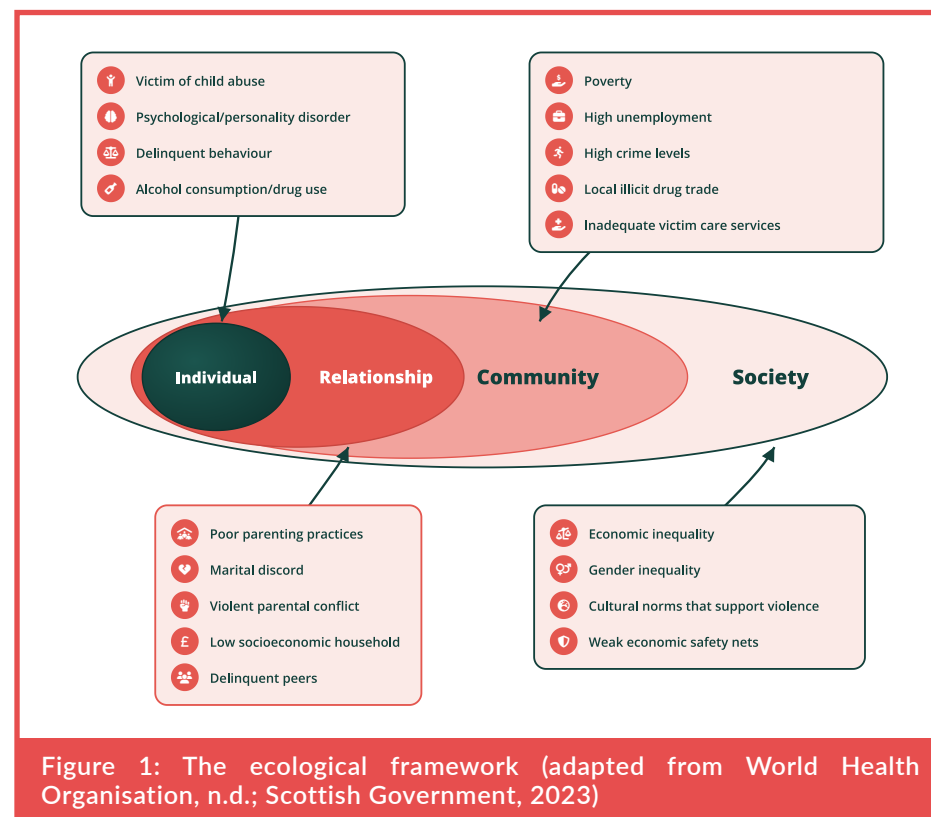
Pepin et al. (2018), in the House of Commons Library report 'Public Health Model to Reduce Youth Violence', highlighted that WHO identified, in 2002, a more effective way to tackle the causes of harm and crime as a public health and interdisciplinary approach drawing on the knowledge, understanding, skills and experience of medicine, epidemiology, sociology, psychology, criminology, education and economics (ibid.).

From the outset, the SVRU has established the WHO principles as central to its methodology and has subsequently sought to develop prevention strategies and tactics to reduce the impact of adverse childhood

experiences and other negative drivers (Pepin et al. 2018; SVRU, 2026). Further to this, consistent with the WHO principles, the SVRU treats violence as a disease or virus, in that the root causes need to be tackled and eradicated, rather than simply responding to the manifestation of the crime.

The SVRU's public health approach to tackling the causes of violence adopted the WHO's prosocial ecological model (Scottish Government, 2023), which highlights risk factors that may influence someone at four levels, namely:

1. The individual level includes personal characteristics and life experiences such as age, whether they have experienced trauma, whether they come from a marginalised family or community, or whether they have limited educational and employment opportunities. If any of these are negative, there is a belief that the likelihood of the individual becoming involved in violence as a victim or offender increases (ibid).
2. At the relationship level, the WHO suggests that an individual's close associations with family, friends and peers can shape their behaviour, for better or worse. If these relationships are 'delinquent' in any way, this could have a knock-on negative impact (ibid).
3. At the community level, the emphasis is on the individual's engagement in external settings, such as their school, employment, and the wider community, and on whether any of these settings are associated with the normalisation of violence (ibid).



4. At the societal level, the WHO suggests the need to assess how social policies in education, health, economics, and society contribute to social and cultural norms that support violence (ibid).

Since the establishment of the SVRU, and in line with a public health and well-being approach and the adoption of the ecological framework as a guide, the Scottish Government has undertaken further research into its practices and concluded that violence should be treated as preventable, as the causes are known and can therefore be tackled (Scottish Government, 2023).

The SVRU and the subsequent Scottish Government's (2023) report, 'Repeat violence in Scotland: a qualitative approach', identify that a collaborative, multi-agency approach works when it co-creates and co-designs outcomes with communities to establish 'what good looks like' to them. Such an approach is the basis of what is known as 'Solution-Oriented Practice' (Coxhead et al., 2025).

A 'Solution-Oriented Practice' (SOP) approach builds on the outstanding work of the SVRU and is based on working with communities and statutory agencies to establish

a positive vision of the future. Once such an aspirational vision has been agreed, reverse-engineering it makes it easy to identify the hurdles that can then be addressed. By utilising the SOP approach, the process keeps the community's involvement and ownership at the core and, through co-creation, fashions opportunities for greater success.

The partnership between the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit and the Scottish Government's solution-oriented practice approach can further help focus all concerned on the potential positive outcomes that can be achieved by tackling the causes of harm and crime, which they identify as including poverty and deprivation, trauma and adverse childhood experiences, delinquent peers, educational disadvantage, social exclusion, substance misuse, and factors such as poor housing and community disadvantage (SVRU, 2026; Scottish Government, 2023).

Reflecting on the most recent news that Sir Kier Starmer has resigned as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (Crerar, 2026), it is clear that the new administration could reaffirm the government's pledge and further build on the approach taken by Scotland to tackle the causes of knife crime, as previously highlighted, which is known to work.

Ultimately, every knife crime creates multiple victims and leaves a lasting impact on everyone affected by the victim's loss and the harm inflicted on the offender. Success will be difficult to measure in a world driven by retrospective 'key performance indicators' (KPIs), because metrics such as recorded acts of violence,

admissions to casualty, arrests, prosecutions, and sentences will not occur at the same rates as today. But success will be measured by the reduction in hospital admissions and deaths and by fewer families having to suffer the loss of their child or other loved one, as others no longer feel compelled to carry a knife because they do not live in fear.

This article has merely scratched the surface of a topic that requires not more research but rather more positive and preventative action. Now is the time for bold action, grounded in the implementation of practical, prosocial policies that tackle and redress inequality in society.

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Ruwan Uduwera-Perera



Reaching Young People Before It Is Too Late

by Chantell Hayles, Founder, Living Without Limits

Knife crime is often spoken about at the point of crisis. When a young person is arrested, when a life is lost, and when communities are left asking how it got this far. The reality is that by the time we are responding at that stage, we are already too late.

The conversation needs to shift. Not to reaction, but to early intervention. Not to punishment alone, but to understanding. Not to statistics, but to the real lives behind them. Because no young person wakes up one day and decides to carry a knife without a story behind it. There is always something underneath. Unmet needs, a lack of belonging, exposure to violence, influence from peers, a search for protection, or simply a need to be seen.

If we are serious about tackling knife crime, we have to become serious about reaching young people before those factors take hold.

Lived Experience

At the age of 16, I was stabbed in the back by another female after school. Swapping coats 20 minutes earlier, was what doctors said saved my life. The thickness of the coat stopped the knife from penetrating my heart. That moment could have been the end of my story. Instead, it became the beginning of a deeper understanding of how young people find themselves in situations that spiral beyond their control. What is important to understand is that my experience did not begin at 16. There were signs before that moment, gaps in

support, and experiences that were not fully understood or addressed.

Like many young people, I was navigating things that I did not have the language for at the time. That is why I am so passionate about early intervention. Because when I walk into a school now, I do not just see behaviour. I see what could happen next if no one steps in.

In my work across schools, alternative provisions, and local authorities, one thing is clear. There is a window of opportunity that we are consistently missing. Young people show us when they are struggling, but it does not always come in ways that are easy to understand. It might look like disruption in the classroom, poor attendance, withdrawal, aggression, or silence.

Recognising the moment

These behaviours are often labelled, managed, or sanctioned, but they are rarely explored deeply enough. Instead of asking what is wrong with this young person, we need to ask what has happened to them and what they need now. Early intervention is about recognising that moment and responding to it properly, not waiting until the behaviour escalates into something more serious.

At Living Without Limits, early intervention is not just a concept, it is the foundation of everything we do. Our work is rooted in lived experience and focused on creating spaces where young people feel safe enough to be honest. It is about having real conversations, not rehearsed ones, and challenging thinking while building trust.

How we work

We deliver workshops across the UK on knife crime awareness, exploitation, county lines, violence against women and



girls, behaviour, and mental health. These sessions are designed not just to inform, but to engage, challenge, and create space for reflection. Alongside this, we provide one to one mentoring for young people who need more targeted support, allowing us to build trust over time and work through deeper issues.

A key part of our approach is working with parents and carers. Too often, they are left out of the conversation, despite being a critical part of a young person's environment. Through parent workshops, we support them to understand the risks their children may be facing, recognise the signs of exploitation, and feel more confident in having difficult conversations at home. When schools, young people, and parents are aligned, the impact is far greater.

Our work has also extended into national spaces. I have contributed to discussions linked to the Home Office Safer Streets initiative and was key note speaker at a Serious Youth Violence Conference in Somerset, bringing frontline insight into conversations that shape policy and practice. These spaces matter because they bridge the gap between lived experience and professional understanding. If we want systems to change, they must be informed by reality.

The Reset Programme

One of the ways we are putting early intervention into practice is through The Reset Programme. This is a targeted approach delivered within schools, where different students are selected for each session based on what they need at that moment. It may be students struggling with behaviour, those who are regularly absent, or young people lacking confidence and direction.

The key is that the intervention is timely. Not after things have escalated, but while there is still an opportunity to reach them. Through honest conversations, reflection, and challenge, we begin to address what sits beneath the surface. There are no labels, no assumptions, and no one size fits all approach. We are already seeing change, because when you reach the right young person at the right time, things can turn.

There is a growing recognition that lived experience has a place in this work, but it is not just about telling a story. It is about how that story is used. When I speak to young people about knife crime, I am not speaking from theory. I am speaking from a place they recognise as real. That creates a different level of engagement and allows conversations to go deeper.

For many young people, it is the first time they feel truly understood, and that understanding is often the starting point for change.

Shared Commitment

Tackling knife crime cannot sit with one service alone. It is not just a policing issue, an education issue, or a community issue. It is all of these combined. Schools, families, youth services, police, and community organisations all have a role to play. For that to work, there has to be a shared commitment to early

intervention, not as an afterthought, but as a priority.

The work we are doing at Living Without Limits is built on a simple belief. That young people deserve to be reached before they reach crisis. That behaviour is a form of communication, and that with the right support at the right time, change is possible.

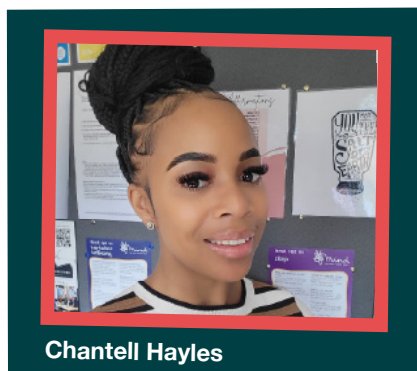
Knife crime is a complex issue, but part of the solution is clear. We need to stop waiting, start listening earlier, and act when it still matters. Because every young person we reach in time is a life that does not become another statistic.

Chantell Hayles

Founder, Living Without Limits



www.livingwithoutlimits.org.uk



Chantell Hayles

www.FightingKnifeCrime.London



RIPPLES

C.J. CARROLL

Abeo is fifteen, grieving the loss of his dad and stuck in a Pupil Referral Unit. He's funny, he's smart, his teachers like him; he knows he shouldn't be there. All he wants is a fresh start. A new school. A chance to make his family proud again. But in the weeks before his death, everything changes. The world seems to close in around him and Abeo clings desperately to the future he knows he deserves.

One year on from her brother's murder, Tiha cannot come to terms with what happened at the gates of the school, the one place where he was meant to be safe. As grief and anger consume her, she faces the unthinkable: whether she can ever forgive the boys who killed him.

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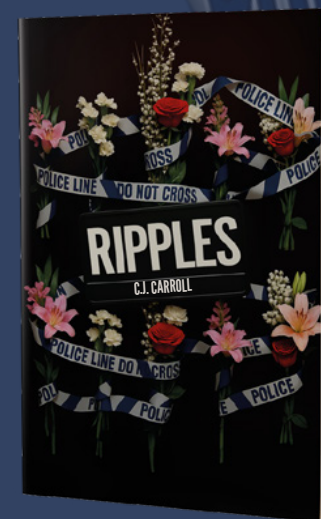
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– Tim Pritchard, author of *Street Boys*

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BEFORE THE KNIFE: The Story We Are Too Afraid To Tell

By Sheldon Thomas

Stood in a dancehall with a gun pointed towards me. I watched a young man die beside me.

I have attended more funerals than I care to remember.

I have sat in government offices discussing knife crime and stood on housing estates living the reality of it.

I have worked with gangs, prisons, schools, governments and communities for more than three decades.

But perhaps more importantly, I have spent much of that time asking a question many people never ask:

What happened to the child before he became the offender?

Because after studying thousands of young people involved in gangs, violence

and serious offending, I have come to one uncomfortable conclusion:

The knife is rarely the beginning of the story.

The crime is rarely the beginning of the story.

The gang is rarely the beginning of the story.

The real story often starts years earlier in childhood.

Long before the police become involved.

Long before a teacher raises concerns.

Long before a social worker opens a case file.

Long before a young person carries a knife.

My work has taught me that if we truly want to understand criminal behaviour, we must first understand trauma, attachment, abandonment, rejection, identity and belonging.

In other words, we must understand the child before we judge the adult.

The criminal mind does not develop in isolation.

It develops within families, communities, schools, friendships and environments.

That does not remove personal responsibility.

But it does help explain how some young people arrive at decisions that many of us struggle to understand.

The knife is often visible.

The trauma is not.

The violence is visible.

The abandonment is not.

The crime is visible.

The psychological wound beneath it often remains hidden.

Most public discussions focus on the act itself the stabbing, the arrest, the court case, the prison sentence.

My experience has led me to a different conclusion.

Knife crime is the visible outcome of a complex interaction between childhood trauma, attachment disruption, identity formation, fatherlessness, social influence, community breakdown and the search for belonging.

In other words, by the time a young person picks up a knife, the real damage has often already been done.

The Wound Before The Weapon

When a building collapses, investigators do not begin with the rubble.

They ask:

What weakened the foundations?

What warning signs were ignored?

What cracks appeared years before the collapse?

Knife crime is no different.

Many of the young people I have worked with over the years did not begin their journey carrying a knife. They began it carrying rejection, abandonment, fear, neglect, trauma and emotional wounds they did not have the language to describe.

Attachment Theory, developed by psychologist John Bowlby, teaches us that children need consistent love, protection, guidance and emotional security. These are not luxuries. They are necessities.

When those needs are repeatedly unmet, many children develop insecurity, mistrust, hyper-vigilance and emotional dysregulation.

In simple terms, they learn that the world is not safe.

A frightened child eventually becomes a frightened teenager.

And frightened teenagers often make dangerous decisions.

The Father and Parenting Factor

There is an elephant in the room that many people are reluctant to discuss.

Father absence.

This is not an attack on single mothers, many of whom perform heroic work raising children under incredibly difficult circumstances.

But we cannot ignore reality.

Research consistently shows that father absence is significantly overrepresented among young offenders and prison populations.

A father provides more than income. He provides identity.

He provides boundaries.

He provides affirmation.

He provides protection.

He provides an example of manhood.

Many simply said:

"My dad wasn't there."

The street is always willing to adopt abandoned boys.

It simply demands a terrible price in return.

Throughout my work in prisons, youth offending teams, schools and communities, I have met countless young men who could describe in detail the gang leader who influenced them but could not describe a meaningful relationship with their father.

Today many parents, particularly those raising children alone, describe feeling trapped between responsibility and authority.

They are held responsible for their child's behaviour, attendance, criminality and educational outcomes, yet many tell me they feel increasingly uncertain about how much authority they have to correct, discipline and guide their children.

Over several decades, successive governments have introduced important safeguarding measures designed to protect children from abuse. Few would argue against protecting vulnerable children. However, many parents believe an unintended consequence has been the gradual erosion of parental confidence and authority.

In communities across the country, I regularly hear parents say they are afraid that firm discipline could be misinterpreted, reported or challenged. Whether those fears are always justified is almost beside the point. The result is that many parents feel disempowered, unsupported and increasingly isolated in raising their children.

Children need love, but they also need boundaries.

They need affection, but they also need accountability.

They need freedom, but they also need guidance.

A society that undermines responsible parenting should not be surprised when some young people seek direction elsewhere.

When healthy authority retreats, unhealthy authority often steps forward.

The gang leader becomes the father figure.

The older criminal becomes the mentor. The street becomes the teacher.

And the lessons learned there are often devastating.

Why Belonging Matters More Than We Think

Abraham Maslow explained decades ago that human beings have fundamental needs.

Before achievement comes safety.

Before success comes belonging.

Before ambition comes security.

Yet society often expects children to achieve academically while living in emotional chaos.

How can a child focus on GCSEs when he feels unsafe?

How can he think about university when he fears walking home?

How can he concentrate in a classroom when there is conflict, instability or trauma waiting for him outside the school gates?

Schools matter enormously.

But schools cannot replace families.

Teachers cannot repair years of emotional damage in a fifty-minute lesson.

When Adults Stop Leading, Children Look Elsewhere

Many teachers today face challenges unimaginable to previous generations.

Across the country, teachers report increasing levels of disruption, aggression and disrespect in classrooms.

Many feel unsupported.

Many feel overwhelmed.

Many entered the profession to educate children but now find themselves acting as counsellors, social workers, mediators and surrogate parents.

The reality is simple.

Children need adults to lead.

Healthy societies rely on parents, teachers, coaches, faith leaders and community elders working together to provide guidance, boundaries and accountability.

When those influences weaken, children do not stop searching for direction.

They simply look elsewhere.

Sometimes they find it in sport.

Sometimes they find it in music.

Too often they find it in gangs, criminal networks and social media influencers.

Social Media Is Raising A Generation

Previous generations were largely raised by parents, grandparents, teachers, pastors, coaches and community leaders.

Increasingly, today's children are being raised by algorithms.

Many young people now receive their understanding of success, status, masculinity and identity from social media platforms.

The problem is that algorithms do not reward wisdom.

They reward attention.

They reward controversy.

They reward image.

They reward materialism.

They reward outrage.

The result is a distorted version of reality where respect is confused with fear, influence is confused with wisdom and money is confused with purpose.

For many vulnerable young people, crime can appear more attractive than employment because social media constantly displays rewards while hiding consequences.

The Loss Of Faith And Moral Anchors

As a Caribbean man who has also worked extensively within Irish communities, I have witnessed profound cultural changes.

There was a time when many of our families were held together by faith.

Churches were not simply places of worship.

They were places of accountability.

Places of belonging.

Places of guidance.

Places where values were reinforced.

No community was perfect.

But there was a shared moral framework.

Today many of those foundations have weakened.

As faith has declined, many communities have struggled to replace the sense of purpose, accountability and identity it once provided.

In that vacuum, social media, celebrity culture and street culture have often become the new teachers.

The consequences are visible in communities across the country.



What The United Nations Understands

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the family as the fundamental group unit of society and the natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of children. That principle should not be controversial. Children thrive when they experience love. Children thrive when they experience stability. Children thrive when they experience guidance. Children thrive when they experience belonging. If society wants safer streets, it must first build safer homes.

My Story

When I look back at my own journey, I realise something important. I was not fearless. I was wounded. I was not searching for violence. I was searching for belonging. Like many young men, I wanted identity. I wanted significance. I wanted purpose. The gang appeared to offer all three. What ultimately changed my life was not fear. It was not prison. It was not punishment. It was purpose. It was faith.

It was encountering Jesus Christ and discovering that my value did not come from the streets, my reputation or the opinions of others.

It came from God.

The Real Solution

There is no single solution to knife crime. Not more policing alone. Not more prisons alone. Not more legislation alone. We need stronger families. We need present fathers. We need better support for mothers. We need mentors. We need youth workers. We need coaches. We need churches, community groups and positive role models. We need earlier intervention. We need belonging before gangs provide it.

Every young person carrying a knife was once a child carrying a dream.

Somewhere between those two moments, something went wrong.

We also need to have an honest conversation about the role of schools.

Teachers cannot be expected to educate effectively while simultaneously managing persistent disruption, aggression and behaviour that would not have been tolerated in previous generations.

The overwhelming majority of teachers enter the profession because they care about children and want to help them succeed. Yet many report feeling unsupported when dealing with serious behavioural issues in the classroom.

Respect for teachers should not be optional. It should be a cultural expectation.

Teachers need the authority, support and resources to create safe learning

environments where the majority, of children who want to learn are not disadvantaged by the behaviour of a disruptive minority.

Discipline is not the enemy of young people. Properly applied, discipline is one of the greatest expressions of care. Boundaries create safety. Expectations create responsibility. Accountability helps prepare children for adulthood.

If we want safer streets tomorrow, we must ensure our classrooms are places of learning, respect and order today.

Rebuilding safer communities will require more than policing. It will require rebuilding the institutions that once helped shape character and create belonging: strong families, engaged fathers, supported mothers, respected teachers, community mentors, faith organisations and positive role models. When adults lead with love, boundaries and accountability, children flourish. When those structures weaken, gangs, criminal networks and social media influencers are often waiting to fill the vacuum.

"This is not another article about crime statistics. This is an article about understanding the psychological journey that takes a child from abandonment to violence."

If we continue to treat knife crime solely as a criminal justice problem, we will continue to miss the childhood experiences that often created the conditions for it to emerge.

Because the battle against knife crime does not begin on our streets.

It begins in our homes.

For more than three decades, Sheldon Thomas has worked with gang members, serious offenders, schools, prisons, governments and communities across the United Kingdom, the Caribbean, Africa and the United States.

Drawing on lived experience as a former gang leader, combined with extensive frontline practice, his work focuses on understanding the psychological, social, and environmental factors that contribute to criminal behaviour, gang involvement, and violence.

His approach examines the relationship between childhood trauma, attachment disruption, identity formation, family breakdown, belonging, adverse childhood experiences and offending behaviour.

He is also an AI Diagnostic Expert, specialising in identifying structural, governance and behavioural risks within organisations.

Sheldon Thomas

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Sheldon Thomas



Performance Mode: Are young people really connecting?

By Elaine Isadora Thomas, Founder, The Mentoring Lab and Mentoring For Youth

James walks into the community centre for his first mentoring session feeling nervous. His hands are shaking a little, so he makes a decision, he's going to ensure he comes across as confident, funny and accomplished.

He straightens his shoulders, extends his hand with an assured smile, and launches into his prepared introduction. Within five minutes, he's made a joke about the terrible instant coffee at work and later, the weekend's football match. His mentee, Leon, laughs.

James goes home feeling successful. He built rapport. He created a safe space. Leon engaged with him and even agreed to come back next week.

What James doesn't know is that Leon has been performing the entire time.

While James was managing his own nervousness through confidence-building tactics, Leon was doing his own assessment. Within seconds of walking through that door, he'd made calculations: *Is this mentor going to understand me?*

Will he judge me? Does he actually want to help or is this just his job? Can I trust him with what's really going on?

Leon's laugh at the coffee joke wasn't genuine relaxation; it was a signal. He'd decided that the performance mode that worked with his teachers would work here too. He answered questions carefully, selected information he knew would be received well. He presented himself as engaged and motivated. He performed the role of the "good mentee" because, in his experience, that's what gets adults to not dig too deep with questions, they stay on the surface, away from the truth about his life.

But here's the crucial bit: Leon's performance wasn't conscious deception. It was learned survival behaviour.

He'd watched his mum code-switch from Jamaican Patois at home to Standard English when speaking to teachers. He'd observed his uncle become suddenly formal and deferential when dealing with customer services. He'd absorbed family conversations about "how to act" in

institutional spaces, conversations that carry the weight of survival knowledge passed down through generations.

Your Blind Spot as a Mentor

Here's the problem: a young person performing safety cannot simultaneously explore

vulnerability. A young person managing how they present themselves cannot simultaneously develop authentic identity. The energy they're spending on performance is energy unavailable for genuine growth. At the same time, the mentor's blind spot isn't malicious. It's structural. Most mentor training

teaches you to build rapport, create engaging conversations, and demonstrate care.

These are important skills. But without understanding what a young person being in 'performance mode' looks like and how to interrupt it with real safety, mentors can spend the entire relationships in shallow waters, never realising the young person is hiding depths.

Why This Happens: The History You Need to Understand

When Leon watches his mother navigate the workplace, he's inheriting survival strategies refined through generations. His ancestors learned to perform compliance to stay safe. His parents taught him these patterns not to limit him, but because they kept families alive.

The intelligence behind it

The performance mode you see isn't personal. It's generational. It's a rational response to power structures that have historically punished authenticity from Black, Asian, and marginalised communities. When Leon walks into

any environment that is 'different' from what he is used to, his nervous system recognises institutional power dynamics and activates the very survival strategies that have protected his family.

Albert Bandura's research on social learning shows us that observation is one of the most powerful teachers (Bandura, 1977). But what's crucial is understanding 'what' young people are observing: they're watching their parents code-switch from authentic home language to 'professional talk'. They're seeing their relatives become suddenly formal around authority. They're absorbing the message that authenticity isn't safe in certain spaces. This isn't their fault. This is what happens when young people grow up navigating systems built on historical power imbalances.

Geneva Smitherman's research on code-switching shows us that this behaviour becomes so automatic that young people activate these patterns without conscious thought (Smitherman, 2000). They simply respond to environmental cues. When they walk into a room, their nervous system, trained by generations of family survival wisdom, recognises this as an institutional setting requiring performance.

What W.E.B. Du Bois called "double consciousness", the painful awareness of seeing oneself through others' eyes... isn't a personal problem (Du Bois, 1903). It's the psychological cost of navigating systems that have never been designed with young people like Leon in mind.

Here's why this matters to the role of a mentor.

Understanding the historical roots of performance doesn't mean mentors can fix history. It means they become one of the first adults in a young person's life who consciously interrupts those patterns by creating genuinely safe space. They

become the person who says: 'Your full self, your authentic self, is welcome here, without judgement. You don't need to put on a mask, you don't need to perform.'

What Mentors Can Do

Step 1

Reframe and Address the Elephant in the Room

Young people are often protecting themselves based on learned patterns. When mentors reframe 'performance mode' as intelligent adaptation rather than deception, they can respond with genuine compassion. But reframing alone isn't enough - you have to address it directly. Mentors should clearly state their intent and ground rules right at the beginning of the relationship. Don't assume the young person knows you won't judge them for their cultural background or any other characteristics. Say it out loud.

Here's something mentors can say to begin interrupting 'performance mode':

"I'm genuinely interested in who you are, your background, your culture, and what's important to you. Just be yourself, without judgement. I'll ask questions if I need to, is that okay?"

Research by Ginwright (2018) shows that explicit statements of cultural validation interrupt performance patterns more effectively than implied acceptance, but mentors have to have the courage to say it out loud.

Step 3

Be Vulnerable

One of the most powerful ways mentors interrupt 'performance mode' is demonstrating their own authenticity. When you acknowledge nervousness, admit uncertainty, or share genuine struggles, you signal that performance isn't required.

James could have said: *'I'm actually a bit nervous in new mentoring relationships, I want to make sure I'm helpful.'* That honest statement shifts the entire dynamic.

Step 4

Listen for What's Not Being Said

Instead of *'Tell me about your goals'*, try: *'What do the important people in your life want for you compared to what you actually want?'* Listen for when the young person's voice changes - more animated or withdrawn, this signal movement towards or away from authenticity.

Step 5

Gently Name What You're Observing

Mentors can point out 'performance mode' with curiosity, not accusation: "I notice you seem to shift when you talk about school...like you're choosing your words carefully. What's that about?"

This isn't confrontational. It's curious. It says: *"I'm paying attention to all of you, not just the words."* This gentle method of 'addressing the elephant in the room' is a skill and technique that most adults feel uncomfortable practicing, making your ability to do so stand out to the young person, even be respected.

Step 6

Understand That Performance Takes Energy

Being in 'performance mode' is exhausting. Young people only relax when they've tested whether you're consistently trustworthy. Expect to see performance in every relationship - it's the beginning of a journey towards authenticity.

Step 7

The 3 P's

You'll need to Persist, have Patience, and Preserve in supporting the young person, even when they seem to have

given up or are playing up. Maintain your position of learning and true support until they're ready to be fully open and committed to the mentoring journey.

Step 8

Address the Real Barriers

Sometimes young people perform because systems are genuinely hostile. Don't just ask them to adapt - advocate for structural change. Help them navigate racist environments and connect them with communities who understand complex barriers.

Why This Matters

The truth is, James went home feeling successful. He believed he'd built rapport and created a safe space. In one sense, he had, Leon may come back. But until James understands 'performance mode' and learns to interrupt it with genuine cultural safety and vulnerability, he's working with only part of who Leon is. The most powerful mentoring happens when young people can stop performing and start being. That requires mentors who understand that a young person's laughter might hide guardedness, that engagement might be a performance strategy, and that real connection requires naming and interrupting the very patterns that kept them safe before.

Mentors should remember that their role is not to accept the performance, it is to create the conditions where being in 'performance mode' is no longer necessary.

And don't forget, when colleagues challenge your commitment to these young people, remember, young people sense your true intent. Your responses in those moments show up in the mentoring sessions. By honouring your intent and ground rules, you demonstrate respect and good intentions.

In Conclusion

This understanding of performance mode isn't abstract theory. It's an important element of training that The Mentoring Lab provides to youth mentors working with young people across the UK. Using evidenced based practices, new and experienced mentors are trained to recognise performance patterns, understand their historical roots, and develop the skills to interrupt them with safety and authenticity.

Our training ensures that youth mentoring relationships move beyond surface-level rapport building towards authentic connection and genuine transformation. Because when young people can be themselves, fully, authentically, without performance, and the mentor is skilled to help them navigate structural and systemic barriers... that's when cool conversations turn into real change.

Elaine Isadora Thomas

Founder at The Mentoring Lab and
Mentoring For Youth



thementoringlab.co.uk



Elaine Isadora Thomas

MENTORING For Youth



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We have hand-picked the best youth mentors from around the world, enabling children and young people aged 12–25 to receive expert mentoring guidance and support as they navigate life's challenges and build a positive future.

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FIGHTING
KNIFE CRIME

The Ubuntu Round Tables are playing a vital role in building trust between young people and the Police

By Peter Burdin, Ubuntu Roundtables, Former Africa Bureau Chief at the BBC.

At the two Ubuntu Round Tables I attended the young people clearly enjoyed their Round Table experience:

“Fun, Interactive, Marvellous, Empowering, Amazing, Joyful, Magnificent” – these are just some of the words Year Nine students used to describe their encounters with the Police, while the Police also enjoyed the day and the opportunity to explain their work.

About sixty young people took part in the two sessions I attended at a school in north London, funded by the City Academy Trust. They were excited to see a dozen police officers at their school. In the spirit of the Round Tables the police don't wear their uniforms, so one potential

barrier between them and the young people was immediately broken down.

After a few group games to break the ice, discussions began in earnest. Both young people and the police discussed how they felt on the streets. One young boy told the story about how he was chased by a gang, so now he never feels safe. The police officers explained the pressures and fears they sometimes felt when they encountered groups of young people in the streets.

Chief Inspector Tom Beavon is leading the Metropolitan Police's engagement with the Ubuntu Round Tables. He feels that the Round Tables are a tremendous idea:

“When we talk to officers after they've taken part in the Round

Tables, they often say they found the experience eye-opening and rewarding. When they enter the Round Table, they see young people who are initially very apprehensive about being in the same room as a police officer, never mind talking to the police. Then they see them opening up and discussing things, and by the end, having very open conversations flowing in both directions. That's deeply satisfying."

One of the thorniest issues examined by both the students and the police was the controversial "stop and search" system where the police identify a young person and search them to check if they have anything illegal in their possession, such as drugs or knives. While the police see this as crime prevention, the young people often see it as a form of persecution, singling some people out and victimising them.

"We don't just pick a random person to search", explained one officer, "everything we do we have to justify and provide legitimate reasons why we decided to stop someone. If we find the person is carrying a knife, it's particularly scary."

They then took part in reconstructions of real life scenarios, only this time with the police playing the role of the young people in the street and the young people acting as the police officers. This enabled both police and young people to follow the Ubuntu principles of walking in each other's shoes. It proved an eye opener for many of the young people as they started to see the police in a new light:

"It has helped me get a better understanding of the police and to think of them as humans, to see them as normal people who live their lives and have families. They are different people without the uniform."

Another young person added: "They were willing to share stories about

their real lives. By the end of the day they were our friends, not just police officers. It was nice to speak with them about more than their day jobs."

One of the youths summed up what many in their group felt about the Round Table: "I learned that not all police are bad or against you. Police aren't as bad as people say, they help people. I learned how police are not always aggressive."

For their part, some of the police were concerned that the young people saw them as enforcers who go around arresting and handcuffing people rather than as people who are simply trying to help people:

"They are just young people trying to get their footing in the world. They are fascinated by the gadgets we police officers carry. I had to explain to them that policing isn't just about Tasers and Truncheons, we have to assess every situation and make decisions on how to respond to protect ourselves and the public."

"Communication is key. Our strongest weapon isn't a gun or a taser, it's our voice and the way we speak and the body language we use. I'm not trained to use a Taser, but I'm trained to speak, so communication is often the best weapon."

Overall, the police officers took away some positive reactions to the session:

"The Ubuntu project is a great idea, the idea of Round Table discussions where everyone is equal and everyone has a similar voice", said one officer, "I believe that idea eliminates the main concern that young people have about dealing with and talking to the police."

"Ubuntu aligns perfectly with our values 100%", her colleague added, "It has a big role in policing. I do my police job with kindness, that's my core value.

Compassion in this job is very important. I'd love to see more Ubuntu in my organisation."

Another officer felt she'd made a real difference to young people's lives during the Round Table:

"I felt very connected to some of the youth, and they shared with me some of the things that were bothering them at school or at home. I think we were able to show them the human side of being police officers."

One police officer said this had made the day worthwhile:

"What I've learned today is that the more they got to see us, the more they realised that police officers are just like them. Because we were honest and frank with each other, we were able to make massive breakthroughs. At the end of the session, most of them said they would trust the police. So for me, that was a breakthrough."

Chief Inspector Tom Beavon feels the Round Tables align well with the police's objectives for engaging with young people:

"In the Round Tables, there is always that moment when the magic happens and you see a bond forming between the young people and the police officers. And that usually comes when one of the officers reveals their vulnerability, and the young people realise that the police are only human and that they have their best interests at heart and are there to protect them and look after them. That really builds trust and a better understanding between the young people and the police."

"For their part, the police start to see things from a young person's perspective. They gain a better understanding of things they might do that can exacerbate a situation", as Chief Inspector Tom Beavon explained:

"For instance, police officers look around and make eye contact on a regular basis when out on patrol in order to take in their surroundings and work out what people are up to. But one young person informed us that in their culture, maintaining eye contact is seen as threatening. So there are things police do that can antagonise people without realising it. There are things young people can learn from the police's perspective and how the police can also be fearful in conflict situations. There are things to be learned on both sides".

According to Tom, these lessons are carried forward by the officers when they return to their day jobs:

"This greater level of trust is something we can build upon to create proper relationships and better understanding. That way, the young people are more likely to realise that we're on their side and to call on us to help them, whereas previously they may have shunned making contact, often trying to sort issues themselves, which can put them at much greater risk."

Round Tables have now been held in several London boroughs, with more planned in the months ahead. They have already engaged hundreds of police and young people. One core part of the Round Tables' success is that they are led by the youth. Twelve student facilitators from Year 9 were trained for this most recent Round Table. They have now gone on to lead their own Living Ubuntu projects at their schools.

Issy Crocker and her Youth Futures team design and deliver the Round Tables. Sarah Boulton is the project manager and lead:

"By bringing people together, we aim to foster understanding, dignity and shared responsibility, values that sit at the heart of our work...our approach remains rooted in Ubuntu, the understanding



that our humanity is bound up with one another."

Certainly, the students' teachers see the benefits. As one of the Year 9 course leaders explained:

"Living Ubuntu isn't just what happens on the day of the workshop, it's what happens afterwards, and many students want to keep the Ubuntu lessons going and work on the next steps. It's all about taking a few steps up the mountain. Some of our kids will never get another chance to interact with police officers like this, it removes their anxieties, and now they can start to build better relationships."

"Some of our students are from families whose interactions with the police haven't always been positive. This is an opportunity for them to see the police in a more positive light. We believe that a programme like this, where they get to interact with the police, is very rewarding to see, and very rewarding to see the positive impact it has on our students. I've seen the benefits of that, and I'm really proud of that."

My own impressions of the Round Tables were that it was an exhilarating experience to see both police and youth working together on common ground. One session can't resolve all the divisions, but projects like the Ubuntu Round Tables have to be a step forward in breaking down some of these barriers.

Peter Burdin

Ubuntu Roundtables, Former Africa
Bureau Chief at the BBC



Peter Burdin

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by Jennifer Fawcett



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People Are More Than Their Worst Mistake

By Titi Solarin, Founder, Tailored Futures CIC

I realised something was wrong when I found myself spending more time writing about young people than actually speaking to them.

Early in my career as a Youth Development Worker, I was employed to support young people facing a range of challenges. Like many frontline practitioners, I quickly discovered that much of my working week was spent completing paperwork, recording activities and meeting administrative requirements. In reality, only a fraction of my time was spent face-to-face with the young people themselves.

The paperwork had its place, but it was rarely the thing that made the difference. Young people needed trusted adults who would listen, challenge them when necessary,

encourage them and take an interest in their lives.

One experience from those years has stayed with me to this day.

I was working with a young person who regularly attended our youth club. We were discussing an upcoming residential trip, and I casually asked whether he would be joining the other young people. He quietly explained that he could not attend because he needed to care for his mother, who had mobility difficulties and did not speak English as a first language. If he left home for several days, there would be no one available to support his mother.

What struck me was that nobody knew. This young person had never presented himself as someone needing support. He simply carried the responsibility without complaint.

Without the relationship we had built, I may never have understood what was happening at home.

Following our conversation, he was introduced to the Young Carers team. He had no idea such support existed. After being assessed, he was found eligible for support, and his family was later connected with additional services that helped ease some of the pressure they had been carrying alone.

This young person's experience showed me why meaningful interaction matters. People are far more likely to engage with support when they feel seen and understood.

Years later, when I began working with people involved in the criminal justice system, I recognised many of the same challenges I had seen in youth work. The setting was different, but the themes were familiar. Many faced low confidence, limited opportunities, stigma, isolation and a lack of belief in their own potential.

What many people needed was someone who could see beyond their criminal history and recognise them as a whole person, with a story, responsibilities, ability and potential.

It was those experiences that eventually inspired me to establish Tailored Futures. I wanted it to be an organisation that placed people at the centre of its work, recognised potential, acknowledged barriers without defining people by them, and worked alongside individuals as they rebuilt their lives.

One of the biggest misconceptions I have encountered is the belief that people with convictions are all the same. That has never been my experience. I have sat across from former senior professionals, skilled tradespeople, business owners and individuals with

extraordinary talent and determination. Yet many are still judged by the worst decision they have ever made.

One individual I worked with had spent many years as a language teacher before his conviction. Teaching was not simply his profession; it was a major part of his identity. By the time we met, his marriage had broken down, he was anxious about the future, and he was deeply concerned about how he would support himself moving forward. More than anything, he felt he had lost the identity he had worked hard to build and was now being viewed through the stigma attached to his conviction.

The opportunities being presented to him bore little resemblance to his professional experience or aspirations. At that point, he could no longer see the value of the skills he still had. Yet those skills, along with his experience and potential, were exactly what stood out to me, rather than his conviction.

Through our conversations, we developed a plan for how he could begin rebuilding his life. The first step was supporting him to establish a remote language tuition business. Within months, he had built a client base strong enough to create a full-time income. More importantly, he began to regain confidence and a sense of purpose.

After settling into the community, he returned to volunteer at the Approved Premises where he had previously lived, providing English language support free of charge.

To me, that is what rehabilitation looks like: someone regaining purpose, stability and a sense of direction after being given the right support and the opportunity to rebuild.

I often say that I knew Tailored Futures was making a difference when

the conversations started to change. When people first come to us, they are often sceptical. Many have been referred from service to service and, understandably, see us as just another appointment.

Months later, the conversations are often completely different. Instead of talking solely about barriers, people begin to discuss work commitments, school runs, housing plans and family holidays. Those conversations matter because they often show that someone is beginning to think beyond immediate challenges and plan for the future.

We often hear that prison has a rehabilitative purpose, alongside its role in punishment and deterrence. If we genuinely believe that, we should also be willing to give people a realistic opportunity to rebuild their lives once they have served their sentence. Without that, rehabilitation becomes a hollow promise.

My vision for the future is simple. I want to see fewer people returning to prison because they receive the right support at the right time. I want to see more people accessing meaningful employment, rebuilding family relationships and finding their place in the community again.

Over the years, I have learned that hope is not passive. It grows when support is consistent, when opportunities are fair and realistic, and

when people are treated as capable of change rather than permanently defined by their past actions.

It also requires a willingness to see people beyond their past. People need to take responsibility for their actions, but that responsibility should not remove the possibility of rebuilding their lives.

That is why I continue to believe that people are more than their worst mistake.

Titi Solarin

Founder, Tailored Futures CIC



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The Power of Purpose in Reducing Violence in Custody

By Megan Prenderghast, Senior Operations Manager, Catch 22

Throughout my career working in prisons, I have met thousands of men from different backgrounds, serving different sentences, in a variety of establishments. Despite their differences, there has always been one overwhelming commonality: the immense need for purpose.

Most conversations about violence in custody focus on enforcement, control, and incident management. While security will always be essential, my experience has taught me that violence is rarely about isolated incidents. More often, it is rooted in something much deeper: disconnection, hopelessness, trauma, fractured relationships, and the loss of identity and purpose.

Many of the men I worked with arrived in prison carrying far more than their

sentence. They carried experiences of childhood trauma, exclusion from education, unstable family lives, substance misuse, and exposure to violence from a young age. For some, prison was not the beginning of disconnection; it was simply another chapter within it.

When people feel they have nothing to lose, violence can become a form of communication, protection, or control. This is why purposeful activity matters.

Purpose creates structure, responsibility, connection, and hope. It provides opportunities for people to reconnect with themselves, build healthier relationships, and begin to imagine a future beyond prison.

The consequences of getting this wrong are clear. In the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2024, Charlie Taylor observed:

"Many prisoners in these jails were trapped in a cycle of boredom, frustration and poor behaviour, which fuelled the demand for drugs and increased violence, debt and self-harm. This was often underpinned by poor relationships with staff, a failure to establish or reinforce the rules, and far too little purposeful activity" (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2024).

This finding reflects what we saw repeatedly through our own work.

Through one-to-one support, group interventions, and creative activities, we created spaces where individuals could explore who they were beyond custody. Alongside this, we focused on a range of topics including emotional regulation, healthy relationships, and identifying personal goals that could provide direction and motivation.

The impact of this work is perhaps best reflected in the words of the people themselves.

"There were numerous occasions where I was terrified of what may come tomorrow, but because of the support I was able to find calm in the madness." – Service User

For many of the men we worked with, the opportunity to pause, reflect, and develop a greater understanding of themselves was something they had rarely experienced before.

Among the most powerful aspects of the service were the events we organised inside the prisons.

These events brought together service users, prison staff, and, on occasion, family members to recognise

the progress individuals had made. They were designed not simply as events, but as goals to work towards. Participation was linked to positive behaviour, creating meaningful incentives while reinforcing personal responsibility.

The events themselves varied to appeal to a wide range of interests. We delivered sports days, music events, celebration days, and showcases for podcasts created by the men themselves, exploring subjects such as gang culture, knife crime, violence, and life after prison.

One particularly memorable event was a prison sports day delivered in partnership with the prison gym department. Prisoners from different wings competed in a range of activities, with the highest-scoring wing earning the opportunity to play a football match against prison staff.

What stood out wasn't the competition itself, but the atmosphere it created which had a lasting impact.

For a few hours, the usual barriers seemed to fade. There was teamwork, encouragement, laughter, and genuine camaraderie between prisoners and staff. One participant later told us that he had forgotten he was in prison for a few hours.

Moments like this matter more than they may initially appear.

They create opportunities for positive social interaction, strengthen relationships amongst peers and staff, and remind people that they can engage differently with those around them.

The celebration days were equally impactful.

Family members were invited into the prison to see the work their loved ones had completed, whether that was



behavioural interventions, creative projects, music production, or the creation of a podcast.

I remember watching family members seeing this work for the first time. The pride on their faces was unmistakable. Equally powerful was the pride shown by the men presenting it. For a few hours, they were no longer defined by their offence or their reputation on the wing. They were being recognised for growth, effort, creativity, and achievement.

Many family members thanked us for creating a space that felt different from a traditional prison visit as it was a space where they could spend

meaningful time together and celebrate positive change.

These events were sometimes viewed as rewards or "nice extras". In reality, they are powerful rehabilitative interventions.

They provide opportunities for reflection, emotional connection, and accountability. They strengthen family relationships and give people something positive to work towards. The planning process itself often takes months, creating structure, motivation, and a clear incentive for positive engagement.

Importantly, access to these opportunities is earned through positive engagement and conduct. Individuals understand that participation depends on their behaviour and commitment. In

this way, purposeful activity becomes directly linked to violence reduction.

When people have something to lose, something to work towards, and people who believe in them, the dynamics begin to change.

Reflecting on his experience of the service, one participant wrote:

"Thank you for everything you have done for us. I hope one day you understand how much you have helped everyone here."

Many of the men participating in these activities had histories connected to serious violence, gang involvement, and knife crime. Yet some of the factors that appeared to support positive change were often not as complicated as we imagined. They were purpose, connection, belonging, and hope.

Reducing violence is not only about responding when harm occurs. It is about creating environments where violence becomes less likely in the first place.

Purpose gives people a reason to engage. It strengthens relationships. It encourages responsibility. It helps individuals see a future beyond custody.

Looking back, I do not believe the success of these events came from the activities themselves. It came from what they represented.

They gave people something to work towards. They strengthened family relationships. They created opportunities for accountability, reflection, and hope.

The evidence from both inspection findings and frontline practice is clear: prisons that prioritise purposeful activity, positive relationships, and opportunities for personal growth are creating conditions that support both rehabilitation and safety.

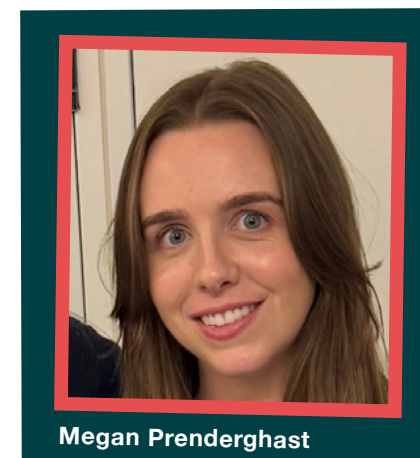
Ultimately, the most effective violence reduction strategies are often those that help people remember who they are, who they want to become, and what they still have to lose.

That is the power of purpose.

Megan Prenderghast
Senior Operations Manager,
Catch 22

catch
22

catch-22.org.uk



Megan Prenderghast

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HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales. (2024). *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2023-24*. Crown Copyright 2024.

(Catch 22 have been partnered with Fighting Knife Crime London since 2021)



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Why Hiring People with Convictions Makes Business Sense and How Employers Can Manage the Risk

By Rik Willis, Training & Advocacy Manager, Offplay CIC

Across the UK, employers are facing many challenges: labour shortages, rising recruitment costs, and increasing pressure to demonstrate meaningful social value. Yet, one talent pool continues to be largely overlooked, namely people with convictions.

For many businesses, the idea of hiring someone with a criminal record still raises concerns. Questions around reputational impact, safeguarding, customer confidence, insurance, compliance, and operational risk often dominate the conversation long before skills, experience, retention or potential are considered.

Businesses have a duty to protect customers, colleagues, contracts, and brand reputation but what many employers are now recognising is that

the answer is not avoiding the issue altogether, it is managing risk properly and consistently.

That is where structured support, education, and practical tools become critical.

The Untapped Workforce Sitting in Plain Sight

13 million people in the UK have a police criminal record; that is about 1 in 4 of the working age population. Every year, thousands of individuals experience the criminal justice system and come through determined to rebuild their lives through stable employment, yet many struggle even to secure an interview.

This creates a significant disconnect. Employers report persistent recruitment

gaps in operational, logistics, facilities management, construction, warehousing, hospitality, and support services roles, sectors where motivation, reliability, and retention are often more important than perfect CVs.

Research consistently shows that stable employment is one of the strongest factors in reducing reoffending. For employers, that translates into access to a motivated workforce that is often highly committed to proving themselves and very grateful and loyal to an employer who gives them another chance.

Businesses that have embraced second-chance hiring report strong retention rates, improved loyalty, and a positive workforce culture. Many also find that employees who have been given another opportunity bring resilience, determination, and perspectives that strengthen teams overall.

The Reality of Employer Concerns

Barriers are rarely rooted in unwillingness alone. More often, employers simply do not feel equipped to assess risk confidently.

Hiring managers and HR teams ask:

- What if something goes wrong?
- How do we assess whether a conviction is relevant to the role?
- What are our safeguarding responsibilities?
- Could this impact customer trust or contractual obligations?
- Are we exposing the business to legal or reputational harm?
- What if line managers feel uncomfortable making the decision?

The problem is that many organisations currently approach these decisions inconsistently. One manager may be supportive, another risk-averse. Some businesses rely on blanket exclusions,

while others make subjective decisions without clear frameworks or governance.

Without structure, employers can unintentionally discriminate, lose strong candidates unnecessarily, or expose themselves to poor decision-making processes that are difficult to defend internally or externally.

The solution is not removing caution. It is replacing uncertainty with informed, structured, risk-managed decision-making.

Moving from Fear-Based Decisions to Risk-Based Decisions

Forward-thinking employers are shifting towards structured approaches that balance opportunity with operational protection. This means recognising that not every conviction creates the same level of risk, and not every role carries the same exposure.

A decades-old non-violent offence may have little relevance to an operational warehouse role, while other offences may require additional controls, restricted duties, or enhanced supervision depending on the environment.

Businesses need practical ways to assess risk:

- The relevance of the conviction to the role
- The time elapsed since the offence and the age at the time of the offence
- Evidence of rehabilitation and motivations to not reoffend
- Safeguarding and compliance considerations
- Potential mitigation measures

This is where specialist guidance becomes essential.

How Offploy Supports Employers

At Offploy, we work with major employers to help them navigate the

realities of hiring people with convictions safely, confidently, and effectively.

We understand that employers do not need lectures or idealism, they need practical tools that help their managers make informed decisions whilst protecting the business.

That support is delivered through three key methods: Consult, Train and Support.

1. The Offploy Toolkit:

The Offploy Toolkit has been designed to help organisations build practical, scalable approaches to inclusive recruitment and risk management.

Rather than encouraging businesses to “take a chance,” the toolkit supports employers in implementing clear processes and governance frameworks that enable informed hiring decisions.

This includes guidance around:

- Role risk assessment
- Recruitment policy development
- Candidate assessment frameworks
- Escalation routes for higher-risk decisions
- Hiring manager confidence and training
- Safeguarding considerations
- Communication and onboarding approaches

The toolkit helps organisations move away from inconsistent, manager-by-manager decision-making towards structured and defensible processes that align with operational realities.

For larger employers and supply chains, this is particularly important. A centralised approach creates consistency across multiple sites, contracts, and business units while reducing uncertainty for frontline hiring managers.

Have a look at our full Employers' Toolkit here:

www.offploy.org/employers-toolkit

2. Getting Started Employing With Conviction Webinar:

Many hiring managers have never received formal guidance on how to assess criminal record disclosures appropriately. As a result, fear often fills the information gap.

Offploy's free 45 minute GSEWC webinar helps address this by giving employers practical insight into the realities of recruitment, risk, rehabilitation, and operational decision-making.

The sessions are designed to move the conversation away from assumptions and towards evidence-based understanding.

Using our “ICEBERG” methodology it typically includes:

- Understanding the importance of an inclusive culture
- Getting a robust ex-offender policy in place that covers new hires AND existing employees
- Managing reputational and other risk types
- Building safer recruitment pathways
- Practical case studies and examples
- Ensuring a realistic and supportive onboarding process
- Calculating and measuring social value and social impact

Importantly, the webinars provide employers with a safe environment to ask difficult questions openly, something that is often missing from broader inclusion conversations.

That honesty matters. Businesses cannot build confidence if they feel unable to discuss risk transparently.

Book yourself onto a free webinar here: www.offploy.org/webinar

3. Using ScoreApp to Identify Organisational Readiness

Some businesses may already have supportive leadership but lack operational frameworks. Others may

have policies in place but low confidence among managers. Some may have significant supply chain exposure but no consistent governance process.

Offploy's ScoreApp helps organisations assess their readiness and maturity when it comes to hiring people with convictions.

The assessment process helps employers identify:

- Existing strengths and gaps
- Recruitment process risks
- Policy inconsistencies
- Training requirements
- Governance weaknesses
- Opportunities for improvement

Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution, the ScoreApp provides employers with a clearer understanding of where support is needed and what practical next steps could look like.

This is particularly valuable for organisations looking to embed social value commitments into procurement and workforce strategies while maintaining robust operational controls.

Take our ScoreApp to see where you are doing well and where you might need some help: offploy.scoreapp.com

Why This Matters Now

Increasingly, businesses are recognising that exclusion alone does not reduce risk. In many cases, it simply removes opportunity without improving outcomes for employers, communities, or society.

At the same time, organisations are under growing pressure to demonstrate measurable social impact, improve workforce resilience, and broaden access to employment.

Done properly, hiring people with convictions can support all three objectives. But equally importantly it changes lives, not just of the individual but their family and wider circle as well.

This is proven to reduce the likelihood of that individual reoffending and therefore makes all of us safer.

We are helping employers to have the confidence to open up more roles to people with convictions. This is making society a better place as well as helping the employer to broaden their talent base, improve their retention rates, and help their business to succeed.

That is why the future of this agenda will not be driven by businesses trying to do the "right thing" but by the fact that this is "good for business".

For employers prepared to build this into business as usual, the opportunity is significant: access to motivated talent, stronger workforce resilience, improved social value delivery, and a more inclusive labour market that benefits everyone.

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The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a book cover, with graffiti in orange, purple, and blue. A bouquet of flowers with purple and yellow blooms is visible on the left side.

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