

**Nacro**  
WE **CHANGE** LIVES

Lives  
Not Knives

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES  
ON KNIFE CRIME



Lives  
Not Knives

## **YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES ON KNIFE CRIME**

### **About Nacro**

We are a national social justice charity with more than 50 years' experience of changing lives, building stronger communities and reducing crime. We house, we educate, we support, we advise, and we speak out for and with disadvantaged young people and adults. We are passionate about changing lives. We never give up.

### **SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS**

There has been much written and said about knife crime in recent months. Lots of people – politicians, the police, journalists – have a view about the causes of the increase in knife crime and what to do about it. We have been concerned that young people, who might be most at risk, have not had a voice in the debate. It is important that their views are known and listened to.

This briefing was driven by the experiences and voices of the young people that we support. It is built from local knowledge to help inform Commissioners and agencies working with young people on a local level. We spoke to 42 learners in our Education and Skills Centres, aged 15 to 19. This report sets out what they told us.

It is clear that young people across the country are at risk of getting caught up in a cycle of violence and fear where the current interventions are failing. There needs to be a new, co-ordinated, locally focused, evidence-based approach to tackling this issue. Set out overleaf is how this could be done.

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS: IN BRIEF

The young people we spoke to told us:

- Most knew of at least one person in their family, friendship group or local community who had been a victim of knife crime, some had been victims themselves
- Young people carry knives for a number of reasons: fear is the major driving factor, but people also carry knives to gain/maintain status, as a consequence of drug dealing and involvement in gangs
- Harsher penalties would not stop people carrying knives. There was little knowledge about the level of punishment for knife crimes, and fear and self-preservation were seen as more important
- They felt that the police did not protect them
- Knife crime is a problem that cannot be solved in isolation, action needs to focus on poverty and lack of opportunity too
- There were mixed views as to the effectiveness of increased stop and search
- All of the groups reported that it was very easy to buy knives and that more action should be taken to prevent knife sales to children

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## WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

The young people told us that much knife-carrying is driven by fear, and everyone we spoke to knew someone that had been the victim of knife crime, or carried a knife. They feel unprotected by the police, and do not believe that harsher penalties would deter people who carry knives out of fear. They told us they have very little to do in their spare time and few positive role models, and feel that the issue is inextricably linked to poverty and lack of opportunity/aspiration.

At Nacro, we provide education and awareness programmes for young people that have personal safety at their core and are delivered by people who have the skills and knowledge to engage with young people, build trust with those young people, and are knowledgeable about local issues regarding knife crime.

All agencies at all levels have a role to play, and Local Commissioners have a particularly important role in funding and commissioning services that will benefit the most vulnerable young people. There should be a particular focus on children who have been, or are at risk of being, excluded from school as they are at higher risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of crime<sup>1</sup> and so additional resources should be devoted to do everything possible to keep this group safe.

We believe that we can only make a difference when we work together. We want to work with Local Commissioners to deliver safer communities, and we therefore make the following recommendations.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy>



## RECOMMENDATIONS

There needs to be a fundamental shift in the way we think about the solutions to knife crime. The emphasis should be on early intervention and support for young people involved in, and at risk of being involved in, knife crime. We should not focus on the false belief that harsher penalties are the solution.

### Local Authorities/Commissioners should:

- Fund education interventions outside mainstream education in order to ensure that the most vulnerable are being reached. Programmes should be evidence-based and have personal safety at their core: recognition of fear as a chief motivator for carrying knives, and the provision of reassurance.
- Provide additional support for:
  - **Looked after children and children excluded from school**, including mentoring and structured support around the building of resilience and life skills.
  - Young people who are either already involved or at risk of becoming involved in **county lines** activity.
- Prioritise investment in the provision of suitable venues and extra curricular activities of interest to young people.
- Create a **'Second Chance' fund**: A ring-fenced annual fund equal to the amount of the pupil premium (currently £935 for children in secondary education) for each child between the ages of 11 and 18 years who has been permanently excluded from school at any point during their education, to fund the required education programmes and wraparound support that these children need.

### Policing:

- The police, voluntary and community organisations, local authorities and education providers should work together to improve relationships between police and young people and overcome negative perceptions.
- The police should not increase their use of stop and search as this is likely to be ineffective and lead to further erosion in the relationship between the police and the communities that they serve.
- The police should more effectively tackle the illegal sale of offensive weapons to children, including awareness-raising of the harm that is potentially caused.

### For National Government:

We welcome the Government's commitment to a **Public Health Approach**<sup>2</sup> to preventing serious violence. However, to be truly effective, the focus needs to shift towards prevention and away from punishment. A Public Health Approach should:

- take a population approach, not one which just focuses on high risk individuals
- be **preventive**: by tackling risk factors, consequences can be lessened. This requires a conviction that violent behaviour and its consequences can be prevented
- take a system-wide **multi-agency approach** including involving businesses and volunteers that provide young people-led solutions
- take brave decisions that require a **long-term commitment**
- recognise the **complexity of the issue** and seeks to build an evidence base that reflects that.

In delivering a Public Health Approach, the Government should:

- Establish a Cross Government Committee which drives the urgently-needed shift towards prevention
- **Avoid short custodial sentences** and increasing the severity of penalties as these are proven to be ineffective in reducing reoffending.
- Stop the roll out the new Knife Crime Prevention Orders as they will be **ineffective at tackling harmful behaviour** and will not address the root causes of knife carrying. These orders are likely to be net-widening, labelling and will disproportionately impact on BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities.
- A national commitment to early interventions which provide the opportunity to address the issues that have led to knife carrying, at the earliest possible moment. This would include investment in:
  - **Targeted Education and Skills Providers and wider community groups**, who work with disadvantaged children who may be at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity. They should provide safety education programmes to young people at risk
  - High quality, smaller, bridging **Alternative Provision units** to take young people from aged 14 to 16, and through to 19, on to the world of work, academic careers or further education/apprenticeships
  - **Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)** to enable them to provide for the social welfare needs of children rather than adopting a solely punitive approach
- Ensure that any knife crime campaigns or education is **evidence-based and involves young people** in their development in order to be credible and effective.
- Focus interventions on tackling the **underlying causes of violence**, fear and insecurity.
- Increase their focus on tackling reoffending as the increasing rate suggests current approaches are not working.

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2. A public health approach to violence was described in the World Health Organisation's World Report On Violence and Health (2002), and was inspired by Operation Ceasefire implemented in Boston, US, in 1995. The definition we have used is adapted from Tackling Crime Together by Catch22.

## STATISTICS AND WHAT THEY TELL US

Since 2014, a rise in knife offending has been seen across England and Wales, and sentencing statistics for knife and weapon offences for the year ending March 2019<sup>3</sup> show that the number of these types of offences being formally dealt with by the criminal justice system continues to rise (22,041 offences, an increase of 34% since the year ending March 2015).

**“This government is committed to doing everything in its power to stop knife crime and its devastating consequences on lives and communities.”**

Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC, Justice Secretary, June 2019

### Prominent trends:

1. The number of young people (under 18) convicted or cautioned for possession of, or threats using a knife or offensive weapon has increased by almost half (48%) between March 2015 and March 2019. The increase in adult offences over the same period was smaller at 31%, but it is worth noting that adults account for 74% of the total increase in cautions and convictions in that period.
2. The offences tend to be concentrated in metropolitan areas. In the year ending December 2018, 33% of all crime involving a knife or sharp instrument happened in London<sup>4</sup>. However, it is important to note that knife crime is rising at a much steeper rate outside London.<sup>5</sup>

These statistics suggest that there is a need to refocus the debate, both in terms of the cohorts committing offences and in terms of geographical location. The impression given can be that it is a problem solely or largely related to young people, but most people recorded as committing knife offences are over the age of 18. The rhetoric around ‘out of control’ youths and gangs is inaccurate. As a result, young people can feel marginalised and discriminated against and so may become more likely to actualise the negative identities that adults assign to them. We therefore recommend that careful consideration is given to the focus of the debate. With regard to geography, it is important to recognise that knife crime is a growing issue outside London, and so resources need to be appropriately distributed to respond to this.

In the year ending March 2019 37% of knife and offensive weapon offences resulted in an immediate custodial sentence compared with 22% in the year ending March 2009.<sup>6</sup>

3. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/808496/Knife\\_and\\_Offensive\\_Weapon\\_Sentencing\\_Pub\\_Q1\\_2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/808496/Knife_and_Offensive_Weapon_Sentencing_Pub_Q1_2019.pdf)

4. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingdecember2018>

5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-49923129>

6. Knife and Offensive Weapon Sentencing Statistics, England and Wales – Year ending March 2019, Ministry of Justice [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/808496/Knife\\_and\\_Offensive\\_Weapon\\_Sentencing\\_Pub\\_Q1\\_2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/808496/Knife_and_Offensive_Weapon_Sentencing_Pub_Q1_2019.pdf)



The average length of the custodial sentences received also increased over this period, from 5.5 months to 8.1 months. We would therefore question whether the increased likelihood of a custodial sentence and the length of sentence has had the hoped for deterrent effect, as despite increasing sentences the number of offences being committed continues to rise. In our focus groups, it was clear that there was very little knowledge among those young people of what the current penalties for weapon offences actually are, with some participants having no knowledge at all. There were mixed views about increasing sentences for knife crime with some supporting but others feeling strongly that this would not make any difference. When presented with the choice of carrying a knife/committing a crime or being stabbed themselves the participants said that the length of sentence was not a consideration.

Ministry of Justice statistics<sup>7</sup> show that there has been an increase in the number of people committing multiple offences, with the proportion of people with a previous knife or offensive weapon offence now standing at 28%, a rise of 8% since 2009. This suggests that there is a need to increase the focus on preventing reoffending.

7. Ibid.

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS: IN DETAIL

### What experience of knife crime do the young people we spoke to have?

All of the participants in our focus groups were clear that the amount of knife crime in their local area had significantly increased in the last few years. They were also clear that young people were more likely to carry knives and commit knife crime than previously, but that it was not just young people that were involved.

**“Loads are carrying, and not just teenagers.”**

Nacro learner

It was felt that it was mainly men and boys that carry knives, but not exclusively so, and that women and girls may be asked to carry weapons on behalf of others, as they are less likely to be stopped or searched by the police. All of the focus groups voiced their concern that violent crime in general had increased, not just knife crime. It was felt that people were increasingly using other weapons, such as bottles, and this also included guns.

Many of the participants in all of the focus groups knew of at least one person in their family, friendship group or local community who had been a victim of knife crime. The victims were generally of a similar age to the participants, but some also knew of older victims. Young victims of crime felt they were often treated with suspicion by the police.



### Why do young people carry knives?

The views as to why young people were carrying knives varied to some extent from Centre to Centre:

- ‘Eat or be eaten’: All of the focus groups said that fear was a motivating factor, but to different extents. Fear was the first response to the question as to why people were carrying knives from one group. They said that if people were carrying knives out of fear then the risks of being caught with a knife by the police, or the threat of harsher punishments would not work to discourage them from carrying knives.
- ‘They think they’re the big man’: One group felt that the primary motive was to gain status among friends and rivals.
- They also believed that it was related to gangs, and that in recent years there had been a migration of gang members from London and other cities.
- County lines drug trafficking was also said to be a cause in two of the groups, but views on this were more mixed elsewhere. Some told us that younger children are asked to commit crime (such as selling drugs) in return for payment. They felt that this was particularly the case for vulnerable children who were isolated or had no positive role models, who are then targeted with promises of love and friendship. The ‘elders’ in gangs protect themselves from getting arrested by getting the ‘youngsters’ to do their dirty work. They told us that lots of people carry knives to protect themselves when they are carrying or dealing drugs.
- Postcode rivalry was no longer seen to be a motivating factor in one group, but this was still thought to be a significant factor in other locations.

An essential part of establishing ‘what works’ in terms of reducing knife crime involves understanding why people are carrying knives in the first place. Educational interventions should take into account one of the main reasons for carrying a knife: fear and the belief that carrying a knife provides protection. However, the effectiveness of education will be undermined if it is not supported by a much wider effort to enhance safety and reduce the vulnerability of young people in their communities. Criminal justice approaches, such as harsher penalties, concentrate on discouraging knife carrying by those people who carry in order to establish or maintain status, but this does not address fear as a driver of knife-carrying. Harsher penalties are unlikely to be effective with young people whose fear is not overridden by their knowledge and understanding of the potential consequences.<sup>8</sup>

8. Pritchard, T (2009): Why carry a weapon? Howard League research into teenage knife crime The Howard 2:2

## Young people's attitudes towards the police

'If the police don't protect you then you have to protect yourself': at one group we discussed the role that the police could play in reducing fear among young people. Their perception was that the police can be heavy-handed with young people (for example showing up when they were just being a bit loud) and had negative and stereotyped views, but were then slow to react when there was a serious threat of violence against young people. We talked about when the learners might call the police if they were the victim of crime or threatened with violence, but they could not see any situation when they would do so. At another group, all participants were in agreement that the police were not interested when a young person was stabbed and would take more of an interest if an older person was stabbed, because if a young person was stabbed, they believed the police would assume that the victim was not entirely blameless. None of the focus groups said they would ever report an incident to the police.

### "Snitches get stitches."

Nacro learner

Some thought that if people felt under threat they would be likely to carry a knife in order to protect themselves. They felt that they would rather 'do time' than be injured or killed. Only one of the male participants in one group said he would not carry a knife if he were under threat, and he was clear that he knew the risks involved in carrying a knife and would not be willing to take those risks.

Whilst we know there are good examples of work done to build positive relationships between the police, young people and their local communities, we would suggest that in some areas there is much more work needed. We are concerned that increased use of stop and search has the potential to create further tension between the police, young people and the most vulnerable people that they serve.

## What we do

We proactively engage with local police and other agencies, and have a role to play within Nacro Education Centres in facilitating dialogue and building relationships between our learners and the local police. Education Centre staff liaise with their local police on local issues, and facilitate sessions for our learners run by the police on a variety of issues, such as knife crime and county lines.

## What is the role (and responsibility) of the media?

One group talked about Grand Theft Auto and how in that game you can stab people or hit them with baseball bats. They were unsure as to whether this would make some people more likely to stab someone themselves and did not think it made them act differently. We also talked about drill rappers and their lyrics. Some thought they rapped about criminal things that they had already done, but some thought that this was 'all talk'. They said this would not make them act differently but thought it could influence others to copy the behaviour. Some thought it was a good idea that drill rappers were being banned from YouTube, both because it removed the content but also because it made drill rappers clean up their act and behave more responsibly in order to be able to continue to promote themselves.

'It's not America': one group discussed how celebrities use social media to promote themselves, and post images of themselves with knives or guns. Some said these celebrities were American and young people did not copy that behaviour as our society was totally different, whereas others felt that young people in this country follow and try to emulate the culture that they see in America.

One participant said that there is a lot in the news about knife crime now. He said that 'white people are getting hurt and so it is seen as more relevant' and that is why it is in the news. He said people were not as interested when it was 'just' people from a BAME background. He said that news reporting 'advertises' knife crime and so it is part of the reason why people are more likely to carry knives. A participant in a different group described press reporting on the issue as 'propaganda'.

All of the groups that we spoke to are based outside London. They feel that the media is London-biased and that London news is broadcast across the country, and so people from all over the country think that knife crime is a problem in all areas. Conversely, it was felt that what is going on in places outside London does not get mentioned, which means that other areas of the country where it is an issue are being ignored.

We know that the evidence of a link between media violence and crime is weak<sup>9</sup>, but it is important to note that the way people access violence in the media is constantly changing and so we would welcome ongoing evaluation of the potential link. In addition, research suggests that mass media can be used to reinforce the messages from school and community-based programmes on knife crime.<sup>10</sup>

9. Coyne, S (2007) 'Does Media Violence Cause Violent Crime?' European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research Volume 13 Issue 3-4 pp205-211 <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/publications/abstract.aspx?ID=242644>

10. Swaim, RC and Kelly, K (2008) Efficacy of a randomised trial of a community and school based anti-violence media intervention among small town middle school youth

**“Targeting musicians is a distraction. The cuts that affect schools, youth clubs, social housing, benefits, are making life harder for the average person living on or below the poverty line in this city. There are people doing mad things, not because they want to, but because the situation has forced them to.”**

Abra Cadabra, rapper and songwriter<sup>11</sup>

### **What are the solutions?**

There was little optimism in any of the groups that much could be done to improve the current situation. One participant said that once one person carries a knife it escalates from there, as more and more people will then carry a knife in response. Once this has happened she thought it was impossible to de-escalate and stop people from carrying knives, as they know that others are still carrying. Another participant said ‘it’s not like we’re going extinct, so it’s just going to happen’.

One participant said that action had not been taken early enough to tackle the issue. He felt that the government and police should act when they see smaller trends in terms of the increase in weapons offences to deal with issues before they escalate, but they react when it is already too late.

**“Knife crime has now rocketed so why didn’t people take action when they saw a slight increase.”**

Nacro learner

### **What the young people said about the following possible solutions:**

#### **A. Stop and search**

Views were very mixed on this. Some thought the police should stop and search everyone and that the current operation of stop and search meant that it was used in a discriminatory fashion, based on stereotypes. Others thought that stop and search caused antagonism between young people and the police, and that stop and search would not stop people from carrying knives. Some saw no positive benefit from stop and search. They felt that if your face was known to the police then you would be more likely to be stopped and they believed that stops were being done without good reason.

In view of the fact that increased use of stop and search does not lead to a drop in violent crime,<sup>12</sup> Nacro remains concerned that increased use by the police of the

power to stop and search noticeably damages community relations,<sup>13</sup> and will exacerbate racial discrimination within the criminal justice system. This results in further damage to public confidence in the police, particularly amongst young people. Section 60 is not a solution to serious violence. Both the arrest rate, and the statistics on disproportionality support this.<sup>14</sup> Targeted, intelligence-led policing is more effective (although disproportionality remains a significant issue).

#### **B. Police presence**

In one group the participants felt that the police were present on the streets in their local area, so they did not think the answer was more police on the streets, but they felt they needed to respond faster to issues. They did not see any value in police community support officers who were described as ‘plastic police’. None of the focus groups said they would ever report an incident to the police.

There is a clear need for a focus on improving relationships between police and young people in some areas.

#### **C. Sentencing**

Most participants knew very little about what the penalties were for weapon offences, although one participant was clear that in their area if the police caught someone with a knife they would simply take it off them and not take it any further (not even a caution).

The vast majority of young people felt that harsher sentences would not deter people from carrying and using knives and, when discussing carrying a knife for personal safety, all were clear that harsher penalties would not make a difference. One participant said that longer prison sentences would not act as a deterrent when ‘the choice is between jail and death’. He also said that if someone is sent to prison for longer they may become a more hardened criminal as after 10 years inside you cannot get a job and become institutionalised.

Some thought that it is only once someone is arrested that they think about the consequences, and so did not think that harsher sentences would act as a deterrent.

The evidence from our focus group discussions suggests that harsher sentences would not act as a deterrent, as there was a lack of knowledge as to sentence levels, people do not think through the consequences until it is too late, and the threat of longer sentences is unlikely to deter those that carry knives out of fear. There is a substantial risk that harsher sentences will disproportionately impact on the most vulnerable in our society who carry weapons out of fear. It is also important to recognise that short custodial sentences of 12 months or less have higher reconviction rates than similar offenders serving a community sentence.<sup>15</sup>

11. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/apr/09/uk-drill-music-london-wave-violent-crime>

12. Bradford, B and Tiratelli, M (2019) Does stop and search reduce crime? Centre for Crime and Justice Studies <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Does%20stop%20and%20search%20reduce%20crime.pdf>

13. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/14/stop-and-search-metropolitan-police-sajid-javid>

14. <http://www.stop-watch.org/get-informed/factsheet/section-60>

15. Ibid.



Overcrowded prisons and stretched prison and probation resources are just some of the factors that have left the current quality of supervision inadequate to support people to stop reoffending and move forward with their lives.

Many of the young people we spoke to had very little knowledge of what the current penalties are, and they did not consider that the severity of the sentence would deter people from committing offences. We would therefore recommend that harsher penalties should not be introduced when there is no evidence that they are effective.

Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs) are described by Government as an additional tool that the police will be able to use to work with young people and adults to help steer them away from knife crime and serious violence.<sup>16</sup> It is our view that there is no evidence that KCPOs will be effective at tackling harmful behaviour, or that they will address the root causes of knife carrying. We are extremely concerned that KCPOs can be imposed on children as young as 12, on a civil rather than criminal standard of proof. These orders are likely to be net-widening, labelling and disproportionately impact on BAME communities. Where a child is carrying a knife out of fear for their own safety, punitive orders and the threat of custody will not discourage them for carrying a knife.

**“Young people have told us that access to education in a safe place and learning to stay safe is a large part of the solution - more supervisory orders are not.”**

Lisa Capper, Director of Education and Skills, Nacro<sup>17</sup>

#### D. Changing patterns of behaviour

Some of the participants in the focus groups said that the increase in knife and other violent crime has not changed their behaviour. They said they will not be scared into acting differently, but did think that others might start carrying knives because they were scared. One participant spoke about how it made him feel uncomfortable when incidents happened in his area, but he said it would not make him stay at home. However, others reported avoiding certain areas because of the growth in knife crime. They felt that people carrying knives was becoming ‘the norm’, and one participant talked about how her mum now got a taxi home from her job as a support worker when she was working late at night because of concerns.

16. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/knife-crime-prevention-orders-kcpos-guidance>

17. <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/2007185/knife-orders-will-lead-to-unnecessary-criminalisation-of-young-people>

#### E. Sales of knives

There were differences across the focus groups as to where they thought people were getting knives from. One group immediately said ‘from home’ but others said people get them from shops or online. All groups said it was easy to buy knives. They knew that legally you have to be 18 to buy a knife, but said that many shopkeepers do not worry about checking ID if someone ‘looks old enough’. They thought that it should be made more difficult to buy knives, and the law should ensure that shopkeepers are effectively prevented from selling knives to children.

#### F. Parenting

In all of the focus groups it was clear that our learners felt that parents had an important role to play in keeping their children safe. This included having open discussions and setting boundaries.

**“If any of my children picked up a knife or a gun, I would be horrified. I would feel I had failed. But you know, I’ve got resources and means to pay for stuff when my wife and I are at work, and to keep my kids busy. The middle classes use boarding schools and all sorts of clubs, and can bus their kids from X to Y. They have got cars. Their children aren’t having to navigate spaces on their own. So I’m just saying, of course it comes back to parents and moral choices. Of course it takes Mum and Dad, but it also takes a village. And it has to take you paying your taxes to pay for youth services, to pay for support for the more vulnerable in society. There is no way you can expect that single mother to do it all on her own.”**

Rt Hon David Lammy, MP for Tottenham

#### G. Knife bins/knife amnesties

Some thought these were of limited value because knives were so easy to get hold of that people could just get another knife. One group discussed a scheme in London run by a father<sup>18</sup> who swapped knives for JD Sports vouchers and thought this was a really good idea that might be successful. They said the man doing this could talk to the young people about his personal experiences, and they thought this could be very powerful for young people.

18. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/03/10/father-31-encourages-teens-swap-knives-jd-sports-vouchers-8880014/>

## H. Education

Some thought that education in schools, showing the impact on friends and family of knife crime, was really important. Others thought that those involved in knife crime would be unaffected by this, and that those involved in knife crime were not going to school. Some thought that just 'general education about knife crime' would not work as it would only reach those who would not do it anyway. Some believed that listening to lived experience of knife crime from family members would not work and were of the view that showing shocking pictures of knife wounds (particularly zombie knife wounds) would be the only thing that might work. They said 'guts hanging out' images would have impact.

However, others believed that hearing from victims' families could be effective. One example which was highlighted from the focus groups were the visits they have had from Alison Cope, who is the mother of Joshua Ribera who was murdered in 2013. She has shared her son's story to educate young people about the real consequences of youth violence.<sup>19</sup> The young people who had experienced it felt that this had a significant impact, and made them really think about the consequences of knife crime for all involved. It made it 'real' in a way that press reporting of stabbings or murders did not.

One participant spoke about what they saw as the courage that someone had to have to carry a knife, use a knife and then get away from the scene. He asked whether we thought that someone with so much courage would be persuaded by being told not to carry knives and was clear that they would not listen.

We talked about what age people should be talked to about knife crime and it was agreed that it should be from around the age of 14.

One group felt that having focus groups like the one we were running was a really good idea as it made them think about things, and they really appreciated having the opportunity to discuss their views rather than just being lectured to about what they should and should not do. They thought that groups talking about things like knife crime or other issues such as drugs would be really helpful.

## I. Security and searches at schools

There were mixed views about increased security in schools. In one of Nacro's Education Centres, people did not think searches in schools were needed. They said no-one carries a knife to the Centre, as if they did it would soon be found (they thought others in the Centre would 'snitch' and so searches were not necessary). They also said that part of the reason why no-one carries a knife in the Centre could be that the learners feel safe. They did think that airport security might be necessary in schools which were in knife crime hotspots although others thought that increased school security would mean that the problem would simply be pushed outside the school gates.

19. <http://alisoncope.com/>

In a second group, they were against security around schools such as knife arches saying 'it is not America', and that schools should be building trust and teaching children from a young age what was acceptable rather than policing them in such a heavy handed way which would create a breakdown in trust. In contrast, another group felt that searches at the Education Centre, if done to everyone and not in a discriminatory way, could make everyone feel safe. They did, however, think that people could devise ways to avoid any security measures.

## J. Things for young people to do/positive role models

We know from our experience of working with young people, that having access to a range of activities of interest to young people can play a significant role in providing a positive focus, with some structure and the opportunity for interaction with positive role models. Some participants told us that the traditional image of 'youth clubs' would be off-putting, but there was wide support for a range of activities including boxing clubs and others sports activities. One person mentioned a bike scheme as being a good idea.<sup>20</sup>

Some participants felt that youth workers and facilities for young people could be an important avenue for them to have contact with positive role models. In one group, the participants said that these services for young people no longer existed.

**“Yeah, I think, the knife crime conversation is a very, very, very, a very big conversation ... I grew up in the hood, but growing up where we grew up, you understand that it's a bigger problem than like a big rapper saying, oh kids put the knives down.”**

Stormzy, speaking on Kiss Radio, 26th April 2019

## K. Tackling poverty

One group had a clear view that poverty was a significant cause of crime, including knife crime. A lack of legitimate opportunities together with drugs providing an avenue to quick money was an issue, and this lifestyle can be addictive. They believe knife crime is a problem that cannot be solved by itself, and that action to improve the issue needs to focus around poverty and lack of opportunity rather than focusing just on knife crime. They also made the point that 'normal' crime is linked to poverty and there is no need to make a distinction between 'normal' crime and knife crime. They felt it is important to look beyond the crime, to look at the person's whole history and what may have led them to behave in the way that they did.

20. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45157728>

**“These deaths occur at a moment when the country has made a conscious decision to defund and under-resource its young. When you slash youth services, underfund child mental health services and make swingeing cuts to education and policing, there will be an effect. The most vulnerable will suffer. Austerity didn’t invent knife crime, but it is certainly contributing to the conditions in which it can thrive”**

Gary Younge, Journalist, Broadcaster and Author<sup>21</sup>

#### L. First aid training

The participants thought that training in first aid and what to do if someone was stabbed would be helpful. They also thought ‘bleeding control kits’ were a good idea, such as those supplied by the Daniel Baird Foundation.<sup>22</sup>

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21. Younge, G, (2019). Beyond the blade: the truth about knife crime in Britain. <https://www.theguardian.com/uknews/2017/mar/28/beyond-the-blade-the-truth-about-knife-in-britain>

22. <https://controlthebleed.org.uk/index.html>

## SPECIFIC GROUPS

### Women and girls

The participants in our focus groups felt that some young women also carried knives, but not as commonly as men. They felt that young women were more likely to carry weapons to protect themselves from assault, particularly sexual assault, and that they might be more likely to carry pepper spray. They also carried personal alarms, although they doubted that anyone would come to their assistance. They said that women also worried more about acid attacks, and that this was more likely amongst older people.

**“In 2017 there were around 19,000 knife possession offences which resulted in a caution or a court sentence, of which 8% were committed by females. The proportion of females sentenced for indictable offences was 15% but the proportion of females sentenced for a knife possession offence was only 7%.”**

Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2017, Ministry of Justice <sup>23</sup>

### Looked after children

At one of the focus groups, the conversation led into a discussion about the care system, as a number of our learners in this group were currently in care. Lots of participants felt very let down by the care system, and this linked to the wider debate about tackling the causes of deprivation rather than simply trying to deal with knife crime as a discrete issue. The young people repeatedly highlighted a lack of support and continuity in their experiences of the care system with one learner sharing that they had had 9 social workers in 2 years, and one had had 6 social workers in 2 years. They spoke about being repeatedly moved from placement to placement (being moved from town to town) and that their social workers were often uncontactable by phone. They also spoke about feeling abandoned when they turned 18, being left in a flat with everything to deal with and nothing in the way of meaningful support. There was a clear feeling in the discussion that tackling issues around deprivation, the care system, and ensuring young people had support and opportunities should be a priority.

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23. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/759770/women-criminal-justice-system-2017..pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/759770/women-criminal-justice-system-2017..pdf)

## COMMENTARY

### Our vision

A socially just country where people feel safe, are supported to reach their aspirations and communities are crime free.

### The root social causes

While we live in a society in which many people thrive, this is not the case for everyone. Too many people still fall through the gaps and don't have access to the same opportunities. When people experience poor mental health, inadequate education, drug and alcohol addiction, a low income, and a lack of affordable housing, they can be swept into a current they can feel powerless to escape. To tackle knife crime we need to tackle the root social causes.

In one of our focus groups it was strongly felt that knife crime was linked to poverty. People are poor, have no opportunities, and people do bad things driven by the fact that they are poor. They felt the police, social services, schools are all part of the problem and do not care. This group felt that the issue of knife crime needed to be looked at differently. They felt that you solve or improve things by not concentrating on 'the problem of knife crime' but looking at wider societal issues.

Some of the most vulnerable members of our society are not getting the help they need. At Nacro we do everything we can to offer support, stability and guidance, enabling people to open doors that were previously closed to them. We know that most people who come to us for help face a range of challenges, not just one. By removing the barriers and giving the right support, we can give people the chance they need to create a better life for themselves and their families, and contribute to our communities. At Nacro we believe everyone should have the best chance at a second chance. That's why we combine practical support with emotional support - helping give people somewhere to live, skills, a job and connections as well as someone to turn to when life gets tough.

The key to a solution lies in the root social causes of the issue, particularly poverty, but also inadequate education, drug and alcohol addiction, and a lack of affordable housing. It is important not to oversimplify the complex nature of knife-related youth violence and responses should be young person focused rather than offence focused. Effective responses will only be achieved by dealing with the underlying causes of violence, fear and insecurity, and should therefore look at both the lack of safety felt by young people and the desire to attain status amongst their peers.

### A Public Health Approach

Nacro supports a Public Health Approach to tackling serious violence which seeks to address its root causes and welcome the government's acknowledgement of the need to shift focus from a punitive response towards a multi-agency, more preventative approach. We welcome the intention to encourage organisations to share information, data and intelligence, and work in partnership rather than in isolation to identify children at risk as early as possible. However, the Serious Violence Strategy should be a holistic approach to protecting children from harm, which can consider the full range of partners and interventions needed, as well as the structural, political and economic factors that contribute. A broader strategy is needed which equips the safeguarding system, statutory and voluntary services to protect children from harm outside the home, with resources and guidance to do so. This should embed a response that takes account of the context in which children are at risk and is trauma-informed.

### School exclusion

Too many young people are being let down by the mainstream education system, which can often fail to meet their specific needs. There is growing evidence that there is a link between school exclusion and knife crime. Research commissioned by the Home Office found that children in pupil referral units were being targeted by drug gangs. Children excluded from school are often amongst the most vulnerable, and this can be exacerbated when they are excluded as they miss out on the available support and advice available within schools, lose the structure of attending school and can become detached from their support networks.<sup>24</sup>

Permanent exclusions from school have been rising since 2012/13, with 7,900 children being permanently excluded from school in 2017/18. In addition, the number of fixed period exclusions across all state-funded primary, secondary and special schools has increased by 8 per cent from 381,900 in 2016/17 to 410,800 in 2017/18.<sup>25</sup> Children who have been excluded are at higher risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of crime<sup>26</sup> and so additional resources must be devoted to do everything possible to keep this group safe. We are not suggesting that all children excluded from school are on a fixed path towards criminality or victimhood, but we do believe that the vulnerabilities of this group mean that they should receive a specific focus.

The education a child receives following exclusion is critical in efforts to prevent and tackle violence, both as victims and perpetrators. Knife crime is a complex issue, and we believe that the root causes lie firmly in poverty and lack of opportunity and aspiration. The issue will therefore not be solved by education alone, but the following are vital first steps:

24. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2019/03/27/excluded-teens-are-often-the-most-vulnerable-and-theyre-falling-through-the-gap/>

25. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/820773/Permanent\\_and\\_fixed\\_period\\_exclusions\\_2017\\_to\\_2018\\_-\\_main\\_text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820773/Permanent_and_fixed_period_exclusions_2017_to_2018_-_main_text.pdf)

26. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy>

- Funding education interventions outside mainstream education in order to ensure that the most vulnerable are being reached. Programmes should be evidence-based and have personal safety at their core: recognition of fear as a chief motivator for carrying knives, and the provision of reassurance.
- In addition to educational programmes, funding must be provided to ensure that children excluded from school (and other vulnerable groups such as looked after children and those involved in, or at risk of involvement in, county lines activity) receive the wraparound support required to guide them in the journey to adulthood, including mentoring and structured support around the building of resilience and life skills. It should focus on raising aspirations and providing positive role models. We must not underestimate the level of trauma and chaos in many young people's lives, and the time that is needed to support them.

We therefore seek a pledge from all Local Authority Commissioners that a sum of money equal to the pupil premium (currently £935<sup>27</sup> for children in secondary education) is set aside for each child between the ages of 11 and 18 years who has been permanently excluded from school at any point during their education, and this should be applied to fund the education programmes and wraparound that these children need. The funding should be made available for every subsequent year that the child remains out of mainstream education, and should continue up until the age of 19. The cost of doing so is small compared with the potential benefit, and this benefit will not only be felt by those children, but also their families, their communities and the agencies that will benefit from cost savings in respect of future interventions which will no longer be required. For the 7,900 children permanently excluded in 2017/2018 the cost would be less than £7,400,000 nationally.

Nacro would also like to see high quality, smaller, bridging Alternative Provision units to take young people from aged 14 or 16, and through to 19, the world of work, academic careers or further education/apprenticeships. Although there are now more Alternative Provision Units for ages 11 to 16, there is often poor progression for these pupils at age 16 into appropriate further education which can continue to support them with appropriate pathways. Centres like Nacro Education Centres provide added value in terms of outcomes and progression. Such units should take children from the age of 14, in order to provide seamless support and education when mainstream schools cannot provide the right level of support, and to continue post 16 to create a genuine bridge to further education, technical training, apprenticeships or employment. The emphasis of these units would be to manage barriers to learning so that young people can quickly catch up and progress, and to enable them to re-engage through having exposure to a more vocational environment and a range of careers-based experiences, such as a supported work-placement or technical provision.

27. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings>

## WHAT WE DO

### About Nacro

Nacro is passionate about giving people second chances.

We all have different paths through life, some harder than others. We all make mistakes, some much worse than others. But the sad truth is that when people become homeless, face drug addiction or go into prison they are swept into a current they can feel powerless to escape.

This isn't inevitable. By removing the barriers and giving the right support, we can give people the chance they need to create a better life for themselves, their families and contribute to our communities.

At Nacro we believe everyone should have the best chance at a second chance. That's why we combine practical support with emotional support – helping to give people somewhere to live, skills, a job and connections as well as someone to turn to when life gets tough. And it's why we use our expertise to speak out and campaign to break down the barriers holding so many people back.

We want everyone to have the best chance at a second chance.

### Nacro Education and Skills Centres

Nacro is the largest independent not for profit training provider. We provide further education and skills to around 3,500 young people and adults each year, the majority of whom have experienced severe disadvantage and interrupted education. Two out of three of our learners progress on to a positive destination in further education, training and/or employment. We are rated Good by Ofsted and are a DFE and ESFA registered provider.

At Nacro we have experience of reaching and working with people often disengaged from mainstream services. We know that this group can get overlooked because of the very nature of their disengagement and the fact that more mainstream services are not always able to reach them.

We deliver across 16 Education and Skills Centres across the country including Totton College in Southampton. Nacro delivers education in the secure estate including for the NHS in forensic mental health units and is successful in getting young people out on licence to develop their skills and knowledge in the real world. Nacro works in partnership with schools to provide educational support to children aged 14 to 16 who are at risk of exclusion from mainstream education.

Nacro provides education by a variety of methods on issues around knife crime, including lived experience, factual teaching, courses and group discussion. The education that we deliver is learner-led and takes into account local issues. Our

overarching approach in all areas relating to safeguarding is to promote a multi-agency and joint approach. All Nacro Education Centres have regular engagement with the local police, which includes local knife crime officers, and involves both learners and staff. Nacro Education Centres have been involved in local initiatives, such as local knife amnesty weeks as part of knife crime awareness week, and we supplement such initiatives with additional material and information for our learners. Session plans and course materials on the issue of knife crime are created locally, in order to ensure that they deal with the issues that are relevant to their learners. We use feedback from our learners to further inform our practice and encourage our learner voice and lived experience to form an integral part of what we deliver.

We take a trauma-informed approach when dealing with safeguarding issues. Knife crime and other safeguarding issues are embedded within lessons, and an important part of the induction for all learners is 'keeping yourself safe'. Safeguarding is locally driven, taking account of the issues which arise in the Nacro Education Centres' local areas.

### **Knife crime interventions**

We believe that it is critical that educational interventions aimed at young people are also focused outside mainstream education in order to ensure that the most vulnerable are being reached. Programmes should be provided that have personal safety at their core: a recognition of fear as a chief motivator for carrying knives, and providing reassurance. The fear shared by young people should be acknowledged as legitimate, and provide reassurance in looking at the work the police and other agencies do to keep young people safe. This should form part of a sustained approach aimed at reducing fear, and reducing vulnerability to victimisation.

Such interventions should be delivered by people who have the skills and knowledge to engage with young people, and are knowledgeable about local issues regarding knife crime. Building trust is important, as this helps to ensure that young people accept and believe the information given to them, as does involving young people in the design of programmes.

### **Nacro Education: key statistics**

- Our Education and Skills Centres across England provide learning opportunities for young people and adults aged 14 upwards
- In 2018/19 we worked with 3,500 learners on our Study Programmes and adult education courses
- 92% would recommend Nacro Education to friends or family
- Two-thirds of our students immediately progress to a positive destination such as further training or work
- In 2018/19 97% of learners completed a work placement



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Back cover image: Casper Thomason-Morris, Nacro learner, Sandwell

# Nacro

WE CHANGE LIVES

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