



# briefing no 18

## London's gun, gang and knife culture: a young people's issue

March 2007

# policy briefing

### INTRODUCTION

Adam Regis – 15, Kodjo Yenga – 16, Billy Cox -15, Dean Miles – 19 , Michael Dosunmu -15 and James Andre Smartt-Ford – 16 are some of the latest victims of knife and gun crime in London. The list is endless. The latest British Crime Survey (BCS) showed that in England and Wales in 2005-6 there were 766 deaths; the most common method of killing, at 28%, involved a sharp instrument. To put it in context, the London bombings accounted 7% of the killings during that year. If we combine statistics on killings with a sharp instrument, a blunt instrument, a gun, and hitting and kicking, then the statistics go up to 65% for male homicide and 43% for women homicide (BCS, 2007).

Crimes involving guns and knives do not always result in deaths or physical injury. Guns and knives are also used to threaten and damage property. Examples include: criminal damage, violence against the person, robbery, burglary and possession. In the three months to September 2005, 53% of those legally proceeded against for a gun or knife enabled crime were male aged 18-25. 47% were Black while 28% of those accused were aged 10-17 (MPS recorded crime).

Following the media frenzy, gun and knife is again at the top of the political agenda. This policy briefing is timely as it outlines the current legislative, policy and institutional framework, identifying key gaps and barriers that are yet to be addressed. The briefing concludes that the heart of the problem lies in a culture that is deep-rooted in the capital. Young people, particularly from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities are blamed for this culture. However, the truth is that we are collectively failing to provide them with the necessary emotional and cognitive prerequisites so that they can make informed choices. Our work with young people should be about empowering them to develop the necessary self-awareness, actions and decisions, which lead to their betterment and not to their detriment. We need to urgently review the style and quality of input being provided to our children and young people in the name of statutory provision.

## **THE LEGISLATIVE, POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

The most recent piece of legislation dealing with gun and knife crime is the Violent and Crime Reduction Act 2006. The new powers will see the maximum penalty for possession of a knife increase from two to four years, a ban on the manufacture of imitation firearms, and will enable school staff to search pupils for weapons. Recent legislation has also (a) introduced a minimum five-year sentence for people convicted of possessing an illegal firearm (b) made it an offence to possess an air weapon or imitation firearm in public without legal authority or reasonable excuse (c) increased the age limit for possession of air rifles to 17 and (d) prohibited certain air weapons that are easily converted to fire live ammunition.

In addition, special initiatives have been introduced to fight gun and knife crime in London. The following projects are currently run by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS): Operations Trident-Trafalgar, Operation Blunt, Operation Cruise and Trident Independent Advisory Trust while the Home Office runs the Connected Fund which provides financial support for small community groups to carry out projects intended to reduce gun, knife and gang crime. In addition, Borough-based projects such as Not Another Drop and a number of community-based projects are run in the capital. Examples include: Crime Reduction in Schools (CRIS), Game over 4 Knives, the Supported Training and Education Pathway (STEP), Streetwise, the Arc Theatre for Change, Calling the shots, the Sub-Saharan Agenda (TESSA) and the Yes Entertainment Studios.

Prime Minister, Tony Blair, recently pledged tougher sentences to help tackle violent crime. However, he said: "I do think we need specific measures directed at gangs, guns and knives". On the other hand, Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell called for a mandatory five-year sentence for carrying a knife. The shadow home affairs minister Edward Garnier stressed the need to "inculcate into [youngsters] the culture that carrying a knife can be fatal". Last week, the Home Secretary, John Reid, told the Commons: "We need to take action before, as well after, the awful headlines we have seen ... "I don't think I have pretended today to be offering a solution because I don't think it is within the power of government alone to offer such a solution". He concluded by saying: "I think it has to involve personal and parental responsibility as well as the local community".

### **IT IS A CULTURE ISSUE: BUILDING BRIDGES**

While the government appears to be listening, we still have a long way to go particularly in terms of preventative action. The knife and gun culture that is rooted in the capital is the result of complex sociological, economical, and psychological factors mostly associated with an increasing lack of respect for other people's rights and indeed lives. Awareness, education, information and advice are the key areas that need to be looked at along with a more trustworthy, effective criminal justice system.

Criminal justice officials need to acknowledge that BAME young people are at the heart of this culture of violence which is not singular. It encompasses a lot of aspects explaining varying contexts of usage and profile of offenders/ victims.

BAME communities are disproportionately represented in this area of crime, but so are particular age groups and certain geographical locations. However, this has nothing to do with race or cultural background. BAME young people are particularly vulnerable because they suffer most as a result of societal racism from poor self-esteem, poor self-worth and lack of a positive identity. This minority of young people who are otherwise unable to cope have very few positive role models in schools and for them all the evidence points to a future devoid of opportunity and hope. Their survival is thus on the streets, on our estates and neighbourhoods as glorified “urban soldiers” (Claudia Webbe, 2007). Any distinction between “offender” and “victim” should, therefore, be approached with caution as the majority of “offenders” have been previous “victims” themselves.

There needs to be a shift from ‘get tough’, ‘quick fix’ policies to long-term, meaningful solutions. Youth leadership, community cohesion and education are the areas we should be focusing on. These ideas may sound abstract, but through dialogue and engagement we can make them concrete. ROTA has been involved in work that aims to explore these potentials further. In June 2006, we started the Building Bridges Project (BBP), which gives the opportunity to young Londoners to take leadership and ownership over the gun and knife problem and work with their peers to address it. A group of young people, supported by Big Boost, are running the project which will conclude with a report, a film and a conference. Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is also supporting this project.

The project brings together young people from different backgrounds and cultures in order to create a forum for discussion on the issue of gun, gang and knife culture. Therefore the focus is just as much about generating research as it is about ‘building bridges’ across communities and individuals in the search for universal values that unite, rather than separate us as fellow Londoners. It also aims to build bridges between those who make the policy and those who are the receiving end of it.

In particular, the objective of the project is twofold. Firstly, it will produce evidence about young people’s opinions on knife and gun crime and the extent to which they may be involved. Secondly, it will act as an example of positive youth work and the practical application of human rights values. Human rights will configure in three-dimensions, the learning about human rights (history, legality, origins etc), but also will employ a skills-based approach for and through human rights. This will involve the development of personal and social skills; such as self-knowledge and self-awareness, realising one’s own prejudices and re-evaluating one’s own motives with regards to others; and interactive skills, such as assertiveness, resisting group pressure and so on. Human rights values will also operate in the structures, methods and relationships throughout the project via problem-solving, decision-making and conflict resolution.

Initial findings from the project suggest that by equipping young people with the skills to initiate change, i.e. by enabling them to lead and not merely consulting them in decision-making processes, they can assume responsibility for what happens in their local neighbourhood. Furthermore, examples of good practice

demonstrate that when young people are given the freedom to run projects they revel in the responsibility. It can promote self-esteem and create positive role models for other young people to venerate. "89% of young people feel more comfortable talking to peers about their problems" (Prince's Trust Report 'It's Like That' 2001). In addition, recent work undertaken for the Youth Justice Board also indicates that for those young people who are perceived to be at risk from gun and knife crime, the influence of peers and older siblings can be a significant factor (Arnull *et al*, 2004). A report by the Borough of Brent also notes that the disapproval of parents and partners does not influence the behaviour of "offenders", whereas attitudes of friends and associates are a lot more influential (Gavin Hales, 2005). This places young people in a unique position to contribute to solutions, influence their peers and help shape the positive development of their schools, groups and communities.

It is easy to blame others such as parents, rap music and television. It is also easy to increase penalties, lock people up for a few months or years and hope that they will not do it again. The truth is that in the vicious circle of street violence and gun/ knife crime quick-fix solutions are bound to fail. Our interim BBP report shows that innovative approaches that encourage collaboration between the community and the criminal justice system can help address the issue. In particular, greater emphasis will need to be put on the multi-agency approach of tackling the problem. Strategies will need to be set up to encourage preventive support for young people in new forms of street style youth work and promote greater respect for community, voluntary and community sector organisations, which have provided in the absence of statutory support and resources the desperately needed out-of-school and after school provisions.

## **WHAT NOW?**

On 27<sup>th</sup> March, the Home Affairs Select Committee on Knife Crime will take oral evidence on knife crime from Mr Vernon Coaker MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Home Office. It is important that messages such as the ones included in this briefing are communicated to the Committee. The Home Office has been in touch with us and will be presenting findings from our project.

In addition, we will continue to work closely with the Greater London Authority which has been a pioneer in bringing together community-based organisations to fight gun and knife crime collaboratively. On 31<sup>st</sup> May, the Gangs, Guns and Weapons Forum will be holding an event to engage practitioners from the statutory and the voluntary and community sectors. ROTA has been an active member of the Forum and will work with its members to share best practice in preventing gun/ knife crime and gang conflict, learn and develop innovative ways to prevent conflict and tension in communities, improve understanding of tensions in London and help develop cross-borough partnerships and understanding to tackle the gun and knife culture.

ROTA will also continue its policy and awareness raising work with key stakeholders. We will continue to work closely with Safer London Foundation and the 'Fear and Fashion' working group and provide our members and friends with the latest statistics and evidence-based policy recommendations that we generate through our research programme including but not limited to the BBP.

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