

Teenagers at risk

The safeguarding needs of young people in gangs and violent peer groups

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Contents

Introduction	2
1 Policy context	3
2 The “gang” phenomenon in the UK	5
3 The prevalence of gun and knife possession	7
4 Risk factors linked to crime and anti-social behaviour	10
4.1 Environmental level risk factors and impact on young people	10
4.2 Family-level risk factors	15
4.3 Individual risk factors	17
4.4 Demographic factors	22
Conclusion	25
Recommendations	26
References	30

Introduction

Following a recent spate of reported knife-and gun-related deaths, the NSPCC has identified an urgent need to better understand the dynamics that underpin youth offending, “gang” membership and violence.

Media coverage of these phenomena tends to focus on the dramatic consequences of violent attacks but rarely explores the underlying reasons for young people’s involvement in group-based offending and violence.

This briefing aims to open a more balanced debate on “gang culture”, explores the true prevalence of gun and knife possession, and examines the risk factors that can underpin group-based offending behaviour, and how these affect the safeguarding needs of the children and young people involved.

The government’s response to the problem has often centred on punitive action. However, while tougher sanctions may answer the public’s need for reassurance, a more holistic approach will be needed to reduce these problems in the longer term. This approach should focus on greater investment in young people, including access to structured activities, additional support for problems at school and therapeutic help following cases of abuse and neglect.

The information and statistics presented in this briefing are drawn from – mainly UK based - academic research¹, government statistics and media reports, as well as discussions with practitioners from the NSPCC Peckham Schools Team.

¹ The majority of available research deals with gangs in the United States; limited information is available specifically on the situation in the United Kingdom. Differences in welfare policy between the two countries make it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons, which is one of the reasons why US-based research is less relevant in a UK context.

1 Policy context

In July 2008, the Government published the *Youth Crime Action Plan* (YCAP) for England and Wales for consultation (HM Government, 2008a). This document details the government's key policy initiatives for reducing anti-social and offending behaviour among young people. The YCAP builds on the triple-track approach set out in the *Youth Taskforce Action Plan* (DCSF, 2008). Strategies include greater emphasis on early intervention, with tough measures of enforcement and sanctions where problems arise. This is combined with "non-negotiable" support for families.

The YCAP is committed to a whole-family approach to family support and identifies additional resources for families through increasing Family Intervention Projects and rolling out Family Nurse Partnerships. There are also plans for additional targeting and investment in youth services, via the Positive Activities for Young People grants in targeted high crime areas, the Youth Opportunities Fund, and the transformation of youth facilities through the My Place programme.

Other policy developments that will have an impact on young people include the 10-year drug strategy, *Drugs: Protecting Families and Communities* (Home Office, 2008). This will integrate substance misuse services into mainstream children's services as well as strengthening the role of schools in identifying problems and improving drugs education. The *Youth Alcohol Action Plan* (DCSF et al, 2008) identifies the government's response to problem drinking and aims to influence young people's attitudes to alcohol and patterns of drinking behaviour.

In addition, the Government has published the cross-government Tackling Violence Action Plan (*Saving Lives. Reducing Harm. Protecting the Public. An Action Plan for Tackling Violence 2008-11*, HM Government, 2008b), which outlined key measures for tackling violent crime. Specific initiatives to tackle guns, gangs and knives include increased sentences for those caught carrying weapons, a campaign to raise awareness and challenge knife carrying, and increased funding for targeted programmes in high-risk areas.

While the NSPCC welcomes the increased emphasis on early intervention and prevention, many of these initiatives concentrate on the risk that young people *pose* rather than on the risks young people *face*. They are also characterised by a strong punitive approach. While many of the recommendations made in this briefing paper are addressed in these new

initiatives, it is essential that progress is closely monitored to assess their impact on teenagers at risk.

Why is this issue relevant for the NSPCC?

1 Links to prior abuse and neglect

Research suggests that young people who perpetrate group-based offending and violent behaviour will often have been the victims of abuse or neglect (Young et al, 2007). For example, where violence is a common occurrence in the home or wider community, such behaviour becomes normalised and this will have an impact on the likelihood that young people will perpetrate this behaviour (Day et al, 2007).

Young people who perpetrate crime and acquire weapons may also have been subject to other risk factors such as poverty, inconsistent parenting and reduced educational and life chances (Duffy et al, 2004; Farrington, 1995; Margo, 2008). The NSPCC has some practice experience of working with families who face these challenges and is keen to ensure that young people receive help to recover from their experiences without long-term detrimental effects on their safety and future life chances.

2 Keeping young people safe

In the last year, there has been a sharp increase in the number of knife-related killings of young people. Although it is not currently clear to what extent this is a long-term trend, the NSPCC believes that all children and young people should be able to feel and stay safe within their homes and communities without fear of death or serious injury.

As this review shows, when young people who share a range of social and economic problems form groups, they become more likely to take part in risky behaviours, such as sex, drugs and alcohol abuse. The NSPCC is concerned to ensure that young people are able to stay safe and avoid harmful risk-taking behaviour.

3 Impact on future life chances

Young people who are involved in group-based crime are more likely to truant persistently, or to be excluded from mainstream education. Involvement with the criminal justice system and school exclusion will have a detrimental impact on the ability of young people to achieve

economic and social success through legitimate means. The NSPCC is keen that all children and young people should be able to fulfil their potential within mainstream society.

4 Children's rights

The government has a clear responsibility to safeguard children from violence under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 19 of the Convention states that children should be protected from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury, abuse and neglect, while Article 6 states that every child has an inherent right to life. In addition to this, under the Every Child Matters agenda, the government is committed to ensuring that children and young people are able to stay safe. Lastly, under the *Working Together to Safeguard Children* guidance (DCSF, 2006), local agencies have the responsibility to provide timely interventions when young people are at risk.

2 The “gang” phenomenon in the UK

Previously in the UK, the characteristics of “gangs” were defined and understood with reference to gang culture in the United States. Gangs in the US are usually segregated along racial lines, use strict rules or “honour codes”, deploy coercion to recruit and retain members and engage in high levels of violence and criminality (Young et al, 2007). Although academics have in the past disputed the idea that similar gangs exist here, some argue that in areas of concentrated social and economic deprivation, the conditions are now present to make this a possibility in the future (Hallsworth, 2007a).

In recent times, members of the media, politicians and policy makers have applied the term “gang” broadly, to describe the activities of many groups, ranging from informal groups of young people who spend their leisure time assembled in the street (Aldridge et al, 2008), to members of organised criminal units (Smith and Bradshaw, 2005). The loose application of the term reflects the fact that there is currently no commonly held definition of what constitutes a gang. This lack of consensus is reflected throughout academic research, as several competing typologies have been developed in recent years (Duffy et al, 2004).² These centre on a number of criteria that distinguish a “gang” from a relatively harmless

² Despite definitional differences, several studies have been conducted to establish the prevalence of gangs in the UK. In 2004, the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) in 2004, reported that an estimated six per cent of young people aged 10 to 19 were classified as belonging to delinquent groups.

“group.” In general, studies disagree about the main characteristics of gangs, including the level of coercion required to recruit and retain members, whether the group needs to use a distinctive name or sign, which membership rules exist or the level of crime and violence perpetrated.³

In general, the common perception of the gang is a street-based group of young people who engage in crime and anti-social behaviour. Although the gang label may not be appropriate in this context, it is the case that young people are more likely to commit crimes as part of a group. For example, the 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (Sharp et al, 2006) recorded that 63 per cent of children in “teenage gangs” have committed at least one “core offence” in the last year⁴ compared to 26 per cent of non-gang members.⁵

Young et al outline the main reasons why the group dynamic is crucial to increasing the likelihood of crime and anti-social behaviour in young people. They claim: “a combination of their collective risk factors, a mutual need for acceptance by their peers and the opportunities available to them (or the lack of acceptable alternatives), mean that norms within the group may tend generally to be anti- rather than pro- social, and the activities they engage in together can easily cross the threshold into minor offending.” (Young et al, 2007). Young people who become involved in group-based crime and anti-social behaviour are likely to do so, therefore, as a result of a complex set of personal circumstances and risk factors, which are further discussed in chapter four.

Problems caused by the gang label

It has been suggested that labelling peer groups as gangs can in itself have a negative impact on the behaviour of the young people involved. A recent study by the Youth Justice Board claimed that the wide application of the term gang, “may lend a spurious glamour to the minor forms of delinquency committed by groups and actively encourage them to become involved in more serious offending” (Young et al, 2007). In this way, young people who are

³ In addition to this lack of consensus, studies are often limited due to their reliance upon self-selection and self-reporting from the young people involved. If young people seek to conceal or exaggerate the extent of their gang involvement, in order to enhance their status or to gain protection from harm, this can have an effect upon the reliability of studies (Smith and Bradshaw, 2005).

⁴ Teenage gangs were defined as: being a group of three or more, spending a lot of time in public places, existing for three months or more, having 12 months of delinquent behaviour together and at least one structural factor i.e. a name, a leader or rules. The ‘core’ criminal offences covered by the survey include burglary (commercial and personal), violent offences (with and without injury), and selling drugs (Class A and other).

⁵ Nearly one third of all crimes are committed by 13-19 year olds, and 1 in 4 10-25 year olds reported having offended in the last 12 months, and there is often a group-based dimension to this (OCJS, 2005). This is also reflected in research reports from the US which have found that being part of a gang means that young people are more likely to take part in offending behaviour (Gatti et al, 2005).

involved in low-level anti-social behaviour, may seek to take part in more serious offending in order to fulfil the role of the “gangster” (Hallsworth, 2005a).

The most problematic aspect of the indiscriminate use of the term, however, is the fact that it can distract policy makers from the real problems young people face in their lives (Young et al, 2007). Understanding the factors that may influence them can be difficult, and many people are unwilling to consider the underlying reasons, such as abuse, that may have led to a young person causing harm or annoyance. For this reason, members of the public and the media often label young people “gang members”, “hoodies” and/or “yobs.”⁶ They may also lend their support to government legislation which prescribes punitive measures to limit the problem in the short term.⁷

3 The prevalence of gun and knife possession

There a lack of reliable, longitudinal data on the prevalence of weapon possession and use among young people.⁸ This is due to several practical challenges, one of which is that there is no common definition of knife- or gun crime, so that results from surveys vary depending on how the term ‘weapon’ is defined. Knife crime, for example, can range from simple possession to actual use of a bladed weapon during a violent incident (Eades et al, 2007). In the self-selecting and self-reporting surveys that are often used, the definition of the term “weapon” can vary, or even be left open to interpretation.⁹ In addition, changes in crime classification and recording practices make it difficult to identify longer-term trends, even in

⁶ Analysis of media reports between January and September 2007 reveals that there is a tendency in the media to sensationalise cases of group-related offending. Young people involved in crime are usually described as ‘hoodies’ or belonging to a gang, even where this is not appropriate. Articles featuring young people are disproportionately negative.

⁷ Examples of measures introduced by government include Anti-social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs); curfews and dispersal zones, and tagging of young people who have offended. The Violent Crime Reduction Act (2006) increased the age at which a knife can be purchased to 18. It also gave school staff and Police additional rights to search for weapons in schools and created a new offence of using another person to mind a weapon (with more serious consequences if the person is under the age of 18 years). The government has also decided not to ban private companies from making use of “mosquito devices”, which are increasingly being used to disperse groups of teenagers.

⁸ NCH have recently announced a large consultation on youth gun and knife crime. This will include a full nationwide online survey, which explores gun and knife crime and its impact on young people and local communities.

⁹ In 2000, McKeganey and Norrie, found that among 3,121 children aged between 11 and 16, 12 per cent claimed to have carried a “sharp instrument” as a weapon at some stage in their lives (McKeganey and Norrie, 2000). This could include screwdrivers, glass or other similar implements. In addition to using a broad definition of weapons, the study did not ask questions about the frequency of weapon carrying. The MORI youth survey in 2003 stated that 29 per cent of students in mainstream education admitted to carrying a weapon (MORI, 2003).

official police-recorded crime statistics¹⁰ and survey results can vary depending on whether the focus is on incidence or prevalence, and on how the sample of young people is obtained.

Most surveys do not include questions about leisure time and peer relationships. This means that even though it is widely speculated that gangs and weapons are linked, there is no hard evidence that being a “gang member” (whatever the term implies) actually increases the likelihood of carrying and using weapons. Despite this, it is likely that young people who choose to possess weapons will face a range of similar risk factors to young people who offend in groups.

The British Crime Survey and the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey suggest that knife possession and use is relatively low and has remained static over the last few years. According to the 2006 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJ), three per cent of young people surveyed claimed to have carried a knife in the past year – compared to four per cent recorded in the 2005 survey.¹¹ Of those who had, 54 per cent said they had carried it only “once or twice” in the preceding twelve months; four per cent admitted to using the knife as a threat (compared to seven per cent in 2005); while only one per cent had actually used the knife to injure someone: down on the two per cent recorded in 2005 (Roe and Ashe, 2008). The 2005 MORI Youth Survey, however, found a much higher prevalence of knife possession among children: 32 per cent of children claimed to have carried a flick, kitchen or penknife in the past year¹² – an increase on the 2004 survey findings of 30 per cent.¹³

In terms of gun ownership, most of the research suggests that few young people carry firearms in spite of official statistics showing a rise in the overall level of gun-related crime.¹⁴ The OCJ Survey shows that over the last three years, less than one per cent of young people

¹⁰ Also initiatives such as the National Crime Reporting Standard, which was introduced in 2002, brought about a ten per cent increase in the amount of recorded crime, predominantly as a result of a change in recording practices (Eades et al, 2007).

¹¹ Among the three per cent of young people that had carried a knife, the most commonly carried knife was a penknife (46 per cent). The carrying of flick knives (20 per cent) and kitchen knives (12 per cent) was less common.

¹² As the law now stands, it is an offence to carry an object with a blade or point although an exception is made for folding pocket knives with a blade of less than three inches. An offender may be sentenced to two years imprisonment for carrying a knife in public or four years for carrying a knife in a school. It is illegal to sell a knife to young people under the age of 16 years. This may be increased to 18 years of age through the Violent Crime Reduction Bill. This may also include a provision to allow school staff to conduct searches on pupils in order to look for a knife or other weapon.

¹³ Of these 30 per cent, nine per cent of children in school and 30 per cent of excluded pupils claimed to have carried a flick knife; five per cent of children in mainstream education and 16 per cent of excluded young people claimed to have carried a kitchen knife, and 25 per cent of school children and 46 per cent of excluded children had carried a penknife (figures outlined in Eades et al, 2007). Penknives are currently legal and can be used for legitimate reasons.

¹⁴ Recent Home Office figures showed a four per cent increase in the overall level of gun crime during the third quarter of 2007 compared with the same period in 2006 (The Home Office, 2008). These figures should be treated with caution as few incidents of weapon carrying will come to the attention of the Police and will not be included in reported and recorded crime figures.

carried a gun. (Sharp et al, 2006; Wilson et al, 2007; Roe and Ashe, 2008).¹⁵ When young people do carry guns, it appears that in the vast majority of cases, most are replica or ball-bearing ‘BB’ guns¹⁶ (MORI, 2004; Young et al, 2007): bullet-firing weapons are still almost exclusively carried and used by members of adult criminal gangs (Hallsworth, 2007a). It has also been suggested that those young people who carry dangerous weapons are likely to have obtained them through contact with these adult groups (Young et al, 2007).

Victimisation levels

Five young people under the age of 16 were killed as a result of fatal shootings in 2006/2007 by perpetrators other than their parents.¹⁷ This is compared to zero fatalities involving firearms for the same age group in 2005/2006 (Povey et al, 2008).¹⁸ Four young people under the age of 16 were killed through the use of a sharp instrument in 2006/2007 and this was the same number as the previous year (Povey et al, 2008).

In the past two years, there have been a large number of young people killed as a result of knife and gun-related attacks. In 2007 for example, 26 teenagers aged between 14 and 19 years were killed by other young people in London alone. This figure included 17 stabbings, eight shootings and one fatal assault.¹⁹ The trend continued into 2008 with 32 London teenage deaths, 25 through stabbings.²⁰ Despite the high number of murders perpetrated in 2007 and 2008, there is still insufficient evidence to judge whether this is a “spike” or a long-term trend. This is due to the fact that as figures showing the ages of victims were only collected since 2004/05 and made available from 2006/07, meaningful trend analysis is not yet possible.

The true level of non-fatal wounding is currently also unclear, but recent figures from the Department for Health have shown that admissions to hospital Accident and Emergency departments for stab wounds have increased by 19 per cent in the last five years (Owen, 2008), and there are indications that the true number of incidents is understated in official statistics (Rowe and Ashe, 2008; Golding et al, 2008).

¹⁵ The OCJS first began to study young people aged 10-15 years in 2004.

¹⁶ The MORI Youth Survey found that 21 per cent of children in mainstream education and 47 per cent of young people attending excluded projects have carried BB guns (MORI, 2004).

¹⁷ Figures for knife and gun deaths can be reported in the media as being much higher as these often include cases where children and young people were murdered by their parents.

¹⁸ These figures exclude young people who were killed by their parents. Young people aged 16-20 were the victims in 15 per cent of all deaths involving firearms. Overall in 2005 to 2006 there were 212 sharp instrument homicides, a drop from 243 in 1995.

¹⁹ Many of these will be included in the Home Office statistics for 2007/2008.

²⁰ Reported in the Guardian, 18 November 2008.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/interactive/2008/jul/14/knifecrime.ukcrime>

4 Risk factors linked to crime and anti-social behaviour

As explained above, it is likely that when young people choose to offend in groups or carry offensive weapons, they will be influenced by a complex range of factors. The factors outlined below are separated into influences which are related to the environment, the family, and the individual. Although the issues are set out separately, they are often interconnected. Not every young person who engages in this behaviour will be affected by every issue outlined, though it is likely that they will be affected by some of these to varying degrees.

4.1 Environmental level risk factors and impact on young people

Peer pressure

Peer influence is a major factor in the decisions made by young people to join groups or to offend (Young et al, 2007; Smith et al, 2001; Duffy et al, 2004). Many young people in offending groups feel a profound need to develop secure relationships with peers. For this reason, in much of the research conducted, young people spoke of the desire to impress and to gain the respect of friends, and in some cases, this can serve as a catalyst for offending behaviour and the acquisition of weapons (NCH, 2008).

Young people are also more likely to offend if their peers have offended on previous occasions: The Youth Lifestyles Survey²¹ in 1999 found that young men with friends who had previously been in trouble with the Police, were more than three times as likely to be involved with criminal offending. Young women with delinquent friends were six times more likely to perpetrate crimes themselves (Flood-Page et al, 2000). Young people living in densely populated urban areas are also less likely to avoid both positive and negative associations with neighbours and peers so this effect will be increased (Smith and Bradshaw, 2005).

²¹ The Youth Lifestyles Survey was commissioned by the Home Office to identify the relationship between offending with lifestyle and demographic factors. It has been conducted twice in 1992/1993 & 1998/1999. The 1999 sweep comprised a representative sample of 4,848 12-30 year olds.

Fear of crime

The most common reason offered throughout the literature to explain the formation of street-based groups, was the fact that many young people feel unsafe (e.g. NCH, 2008).²² This is partly due to the fact that in most of the research, the young people involved came from deprived inner-city areas, where both the fear felt by young people and the incidence of crime against young people are high. In this context, teenage gangs form as young people group together for protection. Turner et al (2006) found that “respondents explained [that] gangs were less likely to attack someone who was in a group, and that friends could offer support or run for help if something happened.”

Fear also has an impact on the likelihood that young people will choose to carry weapons (Lemos, 2004; NCH, 2008). Eighty-five per cent of young people who claimed to carry knives in the 2006 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, claimed that they did so for personal protection. Eight per cent carried a knife in case they got into a fight (Roe and Ashe, 2008). In addition to increasing the likelihood of offending, a recent NCH survey also recently claimed that fear can have a negative impact on the emotional well-being of children and young people (NCH, 2008).

Experiences of crime

The likelihood that young people will join groups or carry weapons is heightened if they have been the victims of crime. In 2004, the Youth Justice Board MORI youth poll found that among children attending school, 36 per cent who claimed to have been the victims of crime carried a knife, compared to 18 per cent of children who had not experienced victimisation (MORI, 2004). Among excluded pupils, the figures were much higher, at 62 per cent and 51 per cent, respectively.

The link between being a victim and offending is a cause for concern due to the high levels of crime experienced by young people. The 2005 OCJS estimated that 27 per cent of children had been victims of crime in the past year, but the 2004 MORI poll put it at almost twice that level (49 per cent).²³ Although Nicholas et al (2007) estimate that the risk of being a victim of violent crime for the general population is only 3.6 per cent, they note that for young men

²² In 2002, the Crimestoppers organisation found that 42 per cent of 10-15 year olds are very or fairly worried about crime (35 per cent of boys and 48 per cent of girls).

²³ The survey also found that 10-15 year olds were more likely to be the victims of crime than 16-25 year olds (Wilson, 2006).

aged 16 to 24 it is much higher (13.8 per cent). Also, those who live in deprived areas are more likely to be the victims of crime than those in more affluent areas (ibid, 2007).²⁴

Although many young people who form groups for protection will not commit crime and engage in anti-social behaviour, research suggests that for some groups, the collective risk of offending is heightened where individual members have been experienced risk factors associated with poverty and social exclusion (Young et al, 2007).

Poverty and social exclusion

Economic deprivation affects young people in several ways and these can have a direct or indirect impact on peer relationships and offending. For example, young people who experience poverty are more likely to live in deprived areas and in poor quality housing. In these areas, crime levels and the fear of victimisation are high, and young people may seek to protect themselves by carrying weapons or forming groups. In addition, there may be greater exposure to anti-social attitudes and behaviours which means that young people are more likely to offend, as crime has become normalised (Campbell, 2000; Young et al, 2007).

Poverty can have an impact on family relationships due to an increased level of stress, and the negative impact on parenting can have a psychological effect on children and on the likelihood of future offending. Lastly, many children living in poverty may have experienced family breakdown, and live within a single parent family. Although the absence of one parent is not in itself an indication that parental support may be lacking, some hold the view that a shortage of positive male role models for young boys increases the likelihood of crime and anti-social behaviour (House of Commons, 2007).²⁵

Young people who grow up in deprived communities have limited opportunities to achieve educational and economic success (Duffy et al, 2004). This is coupled with increased opportunities to become involved in crime. For this reason, young people sometimes engage in criminal activity to fulfil their aspirations for material wealth and social status where this is not available through legitimate routes.²⁶ If young people become involved with the drugs trade, this can often explain their access to and use of weapons.

²⁴ Young people who have been consulted by the NSPCC on this issue, stressed the need to provide support to young victims to help them overcome their experiences, without recourse to violence (Based on consultation sessions with 18 young people from diverse backgrounds aged between 13 and 19 years old).

²⁵ This is seen to be a particular problem in the African-Caribbean community where six in ten young people live in mother-led single parent families (House of Commons, 2007).

²⁶ View expressed by a representative of Operation Trident in a report from the APPG on gun crime (2003). Current youth culture attaches high importance and equates success to acquiring consumer goods and designer brand clothes, which is partly influenced by American gang culture and commercialism (Hallsworth, 2005a).

Children who live in poverty often feel powerless, and the possession of weapons or group-based offending may help to ameliorate these feelings. Many young people seek to achieve “respect” and power, and one way of gaining notoriety in the wider community is through crime. The following quote from a 17-year-old girl who was interviewed by the NSPCC illustrates this attitude:

“...if I feel belittled, and don't feel confident in myself, I need to make myself feel better about myself, and make a name for myself and get respect, once you feel like that, you make someone else feel little, and continuing and continuing and there should be way to get into that circle and try and break it up, I don't know how but there must be a way, but otherwise it will keep on going.”²⁷

Local presence of organised crime

At present, the distinction between individual crime, gang crime and organised crime is not clear (Duffy et al, 2004). Young people are sometimes recruited by older gangs to help with the supply of drugs, and may access firearms through these associations (Young et al, 2007).²⁸ The presence of adult gangs can also be influential in more indirect ways, through increasing crime levels and fear of crime throughout the community, and normalising illegal practices. More research is needed to identify the probable links between teenage group-based offending and organised criminal structures.²⁹

Lack of diversionary activities

Young people may seek excitement and companionship from peer groups as a result of boredom (Margo, 2008). Without access to affordable youth facilities, they may choose to spend time together on the streets due to a lack of alternatives, and also to stay away from home, where they may feel unwelcome or unsafe. The provision of positive, diversionary activities has successfully been used in the past to limit the amount of offending by children

²⁷ Views gathered as part of a series of consultations with young people as part of the recent UN violence study.

²⁸ Research has shown that adult gangs (often involved in the drug trade) are structured, with certain tasks assigned to individuals in a certain tier of the hierarchy. If young people are recruited to these gangs to help hide weapons or transport drugs, it is unlikely that gangs will be recruited as this would normally be individuals. Young people are just as likely to be approached as a result of their social network rather than because they spent time in a gang (Young et al & practitioner discussion).

²⁹ The link between organised crime and youth gangs will be explored in a forthcoming book by Professor John Pitts *Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing face of youth crime* which will be available from September 2008.

and young people.³⁰ Such activities provide an alternative to offending and anti-social behaviour and can improve self-confidence and communication skills. In addition, community facilities also provide a safe space for young people in which to socialise. However, as the quote below demonstrates, there can be practical challenges to delivering services in different postcode areas:

“The government or the parents should provide more activities. There should be places where young people can go to instead of being on the streets...In each postcode area are different gangs. You can't “cross” the postcodes, it's not safe enough. That's why each postcode area should have at least one centre or make sure that you can go to another postcode area safely.”

(NSPCC consultation with young people aged 13-19, 2008)

Glamorisation of gang culture and violence

There is widespread speculation that violent imagery in music, films, television, the internet and computer games may have an impact on offending and the use of weapons by young people. Anecdotal evidence suggests that young people's offending behaviour can be inspired by the desire to emulate the lifestyles of American hip-hop musicians, the so-called “gangsta rappers”, who are known for their material wealth and are often associated with weapons. They are also often accused of glamorising ghetto violence. Consequently, a recent report from the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) recommends that work is urgently needed to challenge the current glamorisation of gangs and drugs through education and youth diversionary schemes (Broadhurst et al, 2008).

However, academics disagree about whether media violence is significant in this regard (Lemos, 2004; Freedman, 2002). Several theories attempt to explain the supposed link between media violence and offending, some claiming that young people who watch simulated violence become desensitised to real world violence and so are more likely to perpetrate violent crime (Molitor and Hirsch, 1994). Others have suggested that children who watch more violence on television can develop “mean world syndrome” (a

³⁰ This problem has been recognised in September 2007 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families which committed an additional £60 million for youth provision in deprived communities. The Government's 10 year youth strategy aims to extend the provision of youth facilities for young people. The government plans to fund the additional provision in part, through the use of unclaimed assets in dormant bank accounts across the UK.

disproportionate fear of crime),³¹ which may induce them to acquire weapons or form peer groups for protection (Gerbner et al, 2002). Both responses arguably contribute to a greater likelihood of gang-related behaviour and/or violence.

The Government-commissioned “Byron Review” recently recommended several measures to minimise the potential harm to young people who access digital technology, including a review of age classification system for computer games, and better enforcement of this system to ensure that children only have access to material which is age-appropriate (Byron, 2008).³² The review also called for a national strategy for child internet safety, and greater parental supervision of technology use. These are sensible recommendations given the potential impact of media violence on the behaviour of children and young people.

4.2 Family-level risk factors

Lack of attachment to parents or carers

Inconsistent parenting and poor parental supervision are identified throughout the literature as key risk factors contributing to possible violence or involvement in crime by young people. The most common explanation is known as “attachment theory,” based on the idea that the growing child is affected by the nature of their relationship with their primary caregivers (Howe et al, 1999). If children fail to form a secure attachment to an adult carer, this will affect their social and emotional development. Disorganised attachment most commonly occurs in cases of abuse, neglect or abrupt separation, and can be caused by parental mental health problems or alcohol and drug use (Home Office, 2003).³³

Proponents of attachment theory claim that most people are born with a tendency towards violence, but learn to master these instincts through a secure attachment with a primary carer: They claim, “violence is unlearned, not learned” (Fonagy, 2003), as consistent and non-violent parenting helps children to develop non-aggressive behaviours³⁴ and reduces the possibility that they will get involved in crime or violence. However, young people raised

³¹ Gerbner founded the cultural indicators project in the 1960s to assess the social impact of media violence. The project has claimed that the average American child will have watched at least 8,000 murders on television before they reach the age of 12.

³² This review was conducted by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and headed by Dr Tanya Byron.

³³ The Hidden Harm enquiry estimated that there are between 250,000 and 350,000 children of problem drug users in the United Kingdom (The Home Office, 2003).

³⁴ Research has indicated that certain parenting practices, such as monitoring and supervision, parental warmth, reduced household conflict and consistent discipline, can moderate the relationship between gang membership and problem behaviour (Walker-Barnes et al, 2004).

within a hostile or violent environment are less likely to learn alternatives to aggression, and violence within families can be perpetuated from one generation to the next (Utting et al, 2006; Bowlby, 1984).

Harsh parenting and neglect

Young people who lack support and approval from their families will try to gain a sense of structure, belonging, commitment and recognition from their peers, to compensate for the lack of these in their home environment. The need for acceptance within the peer group may lead them to take part in offending, which might have been prevented if they had had a significant, respected adult to turn to. (Young et al, 2007).³⁵

Harsh parenting can have a psychological impact on young people, and this can indirectly affect the likelihood of future offending or aggression. For example, children can react to parental rejection by developing low self-esteem, or alternatively they may develop an inflated sense of self or ‘narcissism.’ In both cases, such children are particularly susceptible to interpersonal rejections or threats, and these may trigger aggressive behaviour (Bushman et al, 1998). This is particularly significant, as much group-based offending involves violent crime or aggression.

Domestic abuse

Recent studies suggest that if children witness or suffer domestic violence, physical punishment or family conflict, they may be more likely to perpetrate violence themselves during their youth and into adulthood (Bentovim, 2002, cited in Day et al, 2007; Margo, 2008). For many young people who have witnessed violence in the family and the wider environment, violent behaviour becomes normalised and regarded as a part of everyday life: “Resorting to violence...was not unusual since it was often the norm in the contexts they had grown up in” (Young et al, 2007; Bellis et al, 2008).³⁶

Research has shown that children who have been victims of physical abuse are more sensitive to the detection of emotional cues in facial expressions (Bunn, 2006). Such children are more likely to have a “hostile attribution bias”, tending to infer greater hostility in other people’s

³⁵ During NSPCC consultation work in 2008 young people expressed concerns that parents were often unaware that their children were involved in group-based offending and anti-social behaviour.

³⁶ This is expressed through Social Learning Theory which suggests that young people mimic resolutions to disputes witnessed in the home (Akers, 1994). As Bradshaw argues, “Exposure to violence can desensitise youth to the impact of violence and increase their own use of violence or aggression to resolve problems or express emotions” (Bradshaw et al, 2004).

behaviour, and to more readily resort to violence (Crick et al, 1994; Bradshaw and Garbarino, 2004). Such a cognitive impairment may also prevent children from foreseeing the consequences of offending or from empathising with the feelings of others (Utting et al, 2006).

Familial offending and attitudes to crime

In many cases, young people who take part in group-based offending may have lived in households where family members are involved in criminal activity. Through family involvement, the idea of crime and anti-social behaviour becomes normalised (Utting et al, 2006). There is also an inter-generational aspect to crime that may at least in part be due to the fact that family members face the same risk factors - poverty, abuse and poor educational opportunity - which place them at higher risk of committing crime overall (Farrington et al, 2001). Recent research also points to the fact that some young people join local groups where there is a strong family or neighbourhood tradition of doing so (Broadhurst et al, 2008).

4.3 Individual risk factors

Experience of abuse and maltreatment

In some cases, children who have been abused or maltreated can develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their experiences (Tyler, 2002). This means they can experience physiological effects which affect their behaviour, such as an exaggerated startle response, anxiety and emotional detachment³⁷ (Van Der Kolk, 1996; Bradshaw and Garbarino, 2004). This means children may respond in an exaggerated or aggressive manner to sensory cues of real or perceived danger (such as loud noises) or social emotional cues of threat from others (such as ambiguous facial expressions). Young people with PTSD may be more likely to respond aggressively due to their limited ability to interpret and cope with conflict.

Abuse can also have a neurobiological impact on young people. Bradshaw and Garbarino describe how specific neurological pathways can form as a result of maltreatment experiences and these “Are easily activated and reinforced by information that may be reminiscent of the early maltreatment, such as cues of danger or rejection” (Bradshaw and Garbarino, 2004).

³⁷ Symptoms can also include depression, anxiety and flashbacks.

This then creates a reinforcing process as young people often behave adversely due to a sensitivity to rejection (based on experiences of parental neglect), which in turn makes rejection from peers and authority figures, such as teachers, more likely. This will reinforce their negative views of others and a tendency to be violent (Dodge, 1982). Other scientists confirm that the brains of young people who have been abused can develop differently, leading to “emotional dysregulation” (displaying emotional reactions to certain situations which would be considered more extreme than usually expected), a lack of empathy and increased aggression. In cases of physical violence, there may also be some damage to the brain which can affect cognitive processing (Bunn, 2006).

Research has been conducted which reveals that young people who have experienced abuse and neglect can develop personality disorder traits in adulthood. In young people, the onset of a personality disorder can be shown through behavioural problems, including aggression. A recent study by Cohen et al matched retrospective reports of abuse with a clinical population that had demonstrated psychopathology from childhood to adulthood. They found a link between the onset of personality disorders and childhood maltreatment. There was a particularly high rate of psychopathology in young people who had been sexually abused.³⁸ Physical abuse as a child also had a strong impact on the development of anti-social and impulsive behavior (Cohen et al, 2001).

Due to a combination of the outcomes outlined above, abused children may struggle with general interaction and social skills with peers, and as a result peer rejection is more likely.³⁹ This will also have a negative impact on young people’s self-esteem, which may already be low due to their experiences of abuse. Also, if young people lack the skills and abilities to communicate, then they are more likely to respond violently when conflict occurs (Budd et al, 2005).

Alcohol and drug abuse

Alcohol leads to higher levels of offending and high-risk behaviours (HM Government, 2007). Home Office figures show that frequency of drinking is strongly linked to the volume of offending by young people. Young people who drink alcohol at least once a month are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime in the 10 to 17 age group (Matthews et al,

³⁸ Wright et al also found a much higher level of aggression in young people had been sexually abused (Wright et al, 2004). Several studies in the US and the UK have found that a large percentage of women in custody have been the victims of sexual and physical abuse (Home Office, 2003).

³⁹ Peer rejection is also a strong predictor of truancy, school drop-out and delinquency (Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998).

2006). Drinking on a regular basis is likely to have an adverse effect on school attendance and performance and may increase the likelihood of permanent exclusion (HM Government, 2007), which in turn increases other risk factors. Recent studies reveal that young drinkers are also more likely to admit to being involved in violent incidents (Richardson et al, 2003).

Other research claims that boys who take drugs are five times as likely to commit criminal offences and that the use of drugs is the strongest predictor of serious and/or persistent offending (Flood-Page et al, 2000). This is supported by the 2004 OCJS survey which found that just over half of young (52 per cent) who had taken a drug in the last year had committed an offence, compared with 19 per cent who had not taken a drug (Budd et al, 2005).⁴⁰

However, it can be difficult to separate the causes and effects of drug and alcohol use from the broader issues of economic deprivation and social exclusion (Eades, 2006). It is not clear whether the link between the use of alcohol, drugs and offending is due to the exacerbation of pre-existing risk factors or whether, independent of this, they give young people the confidence to “do things you wouldn’t normally have the guts to” (Young et al, 2007). Utting et al (2006) suggest that drugs are more easily available in deprived, urban areas due to the presence of adult criminal structures involved in the supply chain, and that this may have an impact on the level of offending by young people in these communities.

The impact of drug and alcohol consumption is particularly relevant when considering group-based offending, as consumption is more likely to occur in groups. A Home Office study in 2003 found that 91 per cent of young people who drank did so to be sociable with friends (Richardson et al, 2003). Many young people who took part in this survey also claimed that they combined alcohol with drugs “quite often”. As well as increasing the risk of group offending, this is also an issue of concern as young people are more likely to engage in risky behaviours after consuming both alcohol and drugs.

Problematic behaviour from an early age

Many children who later become involved with group offending exhibit behavioural problems from an early age (Farrington, 1995; Young et al, 2007; Olweus, 1979). The period of transition from primary to secondary school was cited by practitioners as a crucial point in this process, when younger children come under the influence of older peers. Research has also found that children who exhibit early behavioural problems tend to come from families

⁴⁰ A Scottish study suggests a strong link between drug abuse and the possession of weapons, putting the figure at 63 per cent among male drug users. (McKeganey & Norrie, 2000).

with risk factors in multiple domains, such as parental mental health problems, parental criminality and marital discord (Rutland in Campbell, 2000).

In addition to this, early behaviour problems may result in the rejection of the child by a pro-social peer group and acceptance by a “deviant” peer group, which can reinforce the negative behaviour (Craig et al, 2002). As mentioned earlier, young people who have been maltreated or neglected are particularly sensitive to being rejected by other people, which often reinforces their perceptions of other people as hostile. This can increase the likelihood of violent behaviour and affect their ability to form secure attachments. Also, if young people lack the skills and abilities to communicate, then they are more likely to respond violently when conflict occurs (Budd et al, 2005).

School exclusion

Poor attendance or exclusion from school, or attendance at a Pupil Referral Unit,⁴¹ have been cited as key risk factors in the development of offending behaviour for young people (Farrington, 1995; Young et al, 2007). Young people who have been excluded from school or who “self-exclude” by refusing to attend, are at high risk of becoming involved with crime and anti-social behaviour. This is especially likely because these young people are rarely referred for alternative programmes or engaged in any form of positive activity (Margo, 2008).⁴² Young people with a good attachment to school, positive relationships with teachers and an awareness of the benefits of educational achievement are less likely to exhibit deviant behaviour (Smith, 2006b; Utting et al, 2006).⁴³ Parental support for education is also an important factor in preventing misbehaviour and exclusion.

Children and young people who are excluded from school are more likely to carry a weapon: the MORI Youth Survey (2003) found that 62 per cent of excluded young people admitted to carrying a weapon, compared to 29 per cent of students in mainstream education,⁴⁴ although a year later, the gap had narrowed to 47 and 21 per cent, respectively (MORI, 2004).⁴⁵

⁴¹ Pupil referral units are a type of school set up and run by local authorities to provide education for children who cannot attend mainstream school. Local authorities have a duty under section 19 of the Education Act 1996 to provide suitable education for children of compulsory school age who cannot attend school.

⁴² It has been suggested that as educational establishments are target-led they may be somehow collusive in this process as children with problem behaviour can affect league table position, which can affect funding (Young et al, 2007).

⁴³ The government recently published non-compulsory guidance for schools to help them spot the warning signs that young people may be getting involved with gangs.

⁴⁴ This survey compared findings from two separate surveys of 4,963 11-16 year olds in mainstream education and 586 excluded pupils who were attending a special project.

⁴⁵ This survey compared findings from two separate surveys of 4,715 11-16 year olds in mainstream education and 687 excluded pupils who were attending a special project.

Young et al (2007) nevertheless found that the majority of young people excluded from school claimed to have carried a knife within the last year.

There are specific behavioural issues associated with economically disadvantaged children, and with children who have been the victims of abuse and neglect. This may make educational success less likely and increase the chances of school exclusion. For example, children living in poor families often have learning and behavioural difficulties such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These conditions can be genetically inherited (Utting et al, 2006). These children may find learning more of a challenge and may not be given the additional help they need, either because of a lack of parental interest or awareness, or lack of identification of these difficulties and/or limited resources to respond to them within local schools (Campbell, 2000). Children who have experienced abuse can develop a range of emotional and behavioural disorders which can have an impact on their ability to perform well at school (Bunn, 2006). For other children, attendance at a “high delinquency” school in a deprived area is a risk factor, as these schools admit a high number of pupils with behavioural issues (Utting et al, 2006).

Poor school performance and attendance are often linked to other risk factors, such as inconsistent or erratic parenting. As one practitioner stated, “For some the problem lay in the chaotic family lives of young children which itself produced chaotic behaviour in the classroom” (Young et al, 2007). There are clear links between the experiences children have at home and their ability to function when at school (Mills, 2004).⁴⁶

Personal resilience

In the face of similar risk factors, whether or not young people get involved in crime and anti-social behaviour will depend on their personal resilience, and much of this will depend on their aspirations and chances of success in life. Young people who choose not to offend tend to have much higher aspirations than children who commit crime and are less likely to turn to crime if they feel that they can have a positive and successful future. Children with a higher academic ability are also less likely to get involved with group-based crime. This could be related to the fact that they are more able to access conventional success through the

⁴⁶ Children’s education may also be affected as a result of bereavement, parental relationship breakdown or experiences of domestic abuse.

education system. They may also have better communication and conflict resolution skills, and a more developed understanding of the consequences of criminal behaviour.⁴⁷

The use of mentoring and role models from within the community have had proven success in preventing offending in young people. This can help young people to avoid trouble and maintain personal focus, even where there is significant peer pressure to do otherwise. Supportive social bonds can also help young people (Smith, 2006a; Utting et al, 2006).⁴⁸ If a child has the opportunity to find long-lasting secure relationships with teachers, parents, adult role models or pro-social peers, then they are less likely to become involved in crime.⁴⁹ In addition, outlook and personality can have a large impact, as “children who are temperamentally outgoing and friendly will tend to form positive social relationships at home and at school more easily than others, increasing their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy” (Utting et al, 2006).

4.4 Demographic factors

Gender

Young people who take part in group offending tend to be male rather than female (Bennett & Holloway, 2004).⁵⁰ Although both boys and girls carry knives and other weapons, boys are three times as likely to do so. (Lemos, 2004; Beinart, 2002).^{51 52} Nevertheless, Youth Justice Board (2008) figures show that the amount of offences committed by young girls has increased by a quarter within the last three years, although boys still account for 80 per cent of offences committed by young people.⁵³ There is limited research about female gang

⁴⁷ There is anecdotal evidence that young people who decide not to become involved in group-based offending and who seek success through the education system, can be singled out by other young people who commit crime and anti-social behaviour. This was seen in the case of 15-year-old Jessie James in Manchester, who suffered a fatal shooting after refusing to become the member of a local criminal group.

⁴⁸ Other key factors mentioned are birth order, intelligence, family size, a high level of caretaker attention and maternal health (McGuire, 1997).

⁴⁹ Some young people who have been abused can find it difficult to form attachments with others, partly due to mistrust.

⁵⁰ The NEW-ADAM research project identified that only five per cent of all gang members and 4 per cent of current gang members were female (Holloway & Bennett, 2004). Other research suggests that at age 13, girls were just as likely as boys to claim to be gang members, but that after this age girls levels of membership fell much more rapidly than the boys (Smith and Bradshaw, 2005). The role of females in group-based offending should not be ignored however, as there are growing concerns that this may be on the increase.

⁵¹ The OCJS survey found that males were more likely to carry knives than females: five per cent versus two per cent, respectively (OCJS, 2004).

⁵² It is not clear why boys are often overrepresented, but various opinions are presented throughout the literature. For example, some suggest this is due to a lack of male role models in communities which have a high number of mother-led single parent families. Others claim it is more connected to the fact that conduct disorders, such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) occur more commonly in boys (Utting et al, 2006). Boys may also suffer from higher levels of fear and victimisation.

⁵³ Research by Elaine Arnell, South Bank University (on behalf of the YJB) examining increases in offending by girls is due to be published shortly.

membership, but concerns exist that girls may be act as peripheral members of groups, within which they may be asked to transport weapons⁵⁴ and may be at risk of sexual exploitation (Young et al, 2007).

Age

According to Smith (2006a), young offenders in teenage groups often move away from crime as they grow older, typically as they reach the age of 14 or 15.⁵⁵ However, others believe that members of teenage groups progress to become members of organised adult criminal gangs. It is not clear which of these is most commonly the case. As mentioned earlier, the relationship between teenage and adult gangs is unclear, although in media reports they are often presented as one and the same.

Similarly, the “peak age” for carrying knives or guns seems to be around age 14 to 15 according to some research (Beinart et al, 2002 & MORI, 2003). Beinart et al (2002) found that the proportion of boys who admitted to carrying a knife or weapon was higher among 16-year-olds (24 per cent) than among younger children (10 per cent of boys aged 10 to 11).⁵⁶ However, the 2005 OCJS found that knife carrying was most common among 16 and 17 year olds (Budd et al, 2005).

Ethnicity

Young people from African-Caribbean backgrounds are disproportionately affected by knife and gun crime (Eades et al, 2007). The reasons for this are complex but they are related to the fact that these young people are often subject to risk factors associated with high levels of poverty and social exclusion. For example, members of the African-Caribbean community are more likely to live in deprived areas and face high levels of victimisation levels and fear of crime (Eades, 2006). Boys from the African-Caribbean community are also more likely to be excluded from mainstream education (Bull, 2007). Whether or not young black people are more likely to be involved in group-based offending remains a matter of debate. Recent research from the University of Manchester disputes the idea that gang involvement is an

⁵⁴ It is claimed that girls are asked to fulfil this role as they are less likely to become subject to stop and search procedures than young men.

⁵⁵ The 2005 Edinburgh study of youth transitions and crime report found that about 20 per cent of young people surveyed claimed to be the member of a gang by age 13, falling to around 5 per cent by the age of 17 (Smith and Bradshaw, 2005).

⁵⁶ The Beinart study was conducted in 2002 and was based upon a survey conducted with 14,000 secondary school students. Interestingly, this survey did not include young people who are excluded from mainstream education, whom we know to be more likely to claim that they carry weapons.

exclusively “black” issue, arguing instead that gangs reflect the ethnic make up of the local community (Aldridge et al, 2007).

Groups of young people from the African-Caribbean community are nevertheless more likely to be labelled as “gangs” or perceived to be criminal suspects than their white counterparts (House of Commons, 2007; Young et al, 2007; Phillips et al, 2006), although at the same time, working-class young people from certain “problem” areas are also more likely to be regarded as such, regardless of ethnic background. Young people also face prejudice on the grounds of age, and may be made subject to dispersal orders, curfews and stop and search initiatives.⁵⁷

In general, the personal and institutional discrimination faced by children on the basis of their ethnicity, age or postcode may have an unintended impact on offending behaviour (Young et al, 2007). Rather than reducing the motivation of young people to engage in group-related disorder, they may reinforce this behaviour due to a collective sense of injustice (Young et al, 2007). There are also concerns that the negative labelling of young people may create a self-fulfilling prophecy that inspires greater levels of anti-social behaviour.

⁵⁷ An examination of media reports between January 2007 and September 2007 shows that young people are often vilified in the press.

Conclusion

There is currently no consensus on the definition of a “gang.” Despite this, the term is applied widely to describe the activities of peer groups, ranging from young people who spend time assembled on the street, to members of organised criminal structures. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the over-use of the term can have detrimental effects on young people who are involved in group-based offending. This is due to the fact that the gang label may reinforce and glamorise anti-social behaviour and can detract attention from the underlying problems faced by the young people involved.

Aside from the ongoing debate about the true nature and prevalence of gangs, it is accepted that young people are more likely to perpetrate crime and anti-social behaviour as part of a group. A significant minority of young people also carry knives on a regular basis. Gun possession by young people is extremely rare and is mainly limited to imitation or ‘BB’ guns.

There are many reasons that individual young people take part in group-based offending or use weapons. This behaviour often results from a set of complex and interrelating risk factors connected to the social and economic environment, the family and a range of other factors experienced by the individual. For this reason, it is unlikely that a “one size fits all” solution can be identified to ameliorate the problems outlined above. Interventions should be designed to fit both the local circumstances and the particular needs of the children and young people involved.

Recommendations

Provision for young people:

1. More access to structured activities and supervised youth facilities would give young people a safe alternative to spending time on the streets. It could also mediate boredom, provide adventure and help to build confidence and self-esteem. Positive contact with peers may also improve communication skills and help young people to resolve conflict without recourse to aggression. The NSPCC is keen to see what impact the implementation of targeted youth support will have on young people's access to youth provision. It is essential that this support is universally available, resourced appropriately and its impact assessed.
2. Young people who do not have an adult to rely on for advice and support could benefit from access to mentoring schemes, either by peers or adults from the wider community. These schemes can provide support and heighten the aspirations of young people, and should be available in schools, the Connexions service, youth centres and the youth detention estate. Support figures can also condemn criminal, anti-social and risk-taking behaviours, where neutral or positive attitudes to these behaviours are expressed within the family.
3. Young people who are experiencing or have experienced abuse should have somebody to turn to for help. Therapeutic services should be made available for young people who have been sexually, physically or emotionally abused, or who have experienced neglect. Youth Offending Teams (YOT) need to be able to broker access to such services for young offenders, particularly at the early stages of contact with the YOT.
4. Young people at risk of permanent exclusion from the education system should have access to specialist support, especially if they exhibit behavioural and learning difficulties, or need help to deal with experiences of abuse. This could be achieved through increased access to therapeutic interventions, including family support workers and appropriate help for children with low attainment levels. The Government's proposals for personal tutors to be included in all schools, particularly

where liaising with behaviour and crime prevention services, are to be welcomed. We would be keen to see the details of these proposals to determine the responsibilities of the various agencies in carrying out these functions included in the forthcoming guidance on the entitlement of excluded children and young people to a full assessment under the Common Assessment Framework.

5. Young people who have been excluded or who exclude themselves from the education system should be better supported through referrals to education re-engagement programmes and diversionary activity schemes, with support of crime reduction partnerships and other youth crime services. We welcome the government's commitment in the Youth Crime Action Plan to improve the quality of education provided by pupil referral units. This improvement must be rigorously evaluated to ensure that it impacts positively on both individual pupil's educational attainment and opportunity to reintegrate into mainstream provision.
6. Support services should be available for young people who misuse alcohol and drugs. Drug and alcohol education in schools should be increased and drug and alcohol counselling delivered through schools, young people's centres and YOTs should be more widely available. We welcome the commitment in the 10 year strategy, *Drugs: protecting Families and Communities* (Home Office, 2008), to improve drugs education in schools and to ensure that drug and alcohol services are brought into mainstream Children's Services. It is essential that in the delivery of this strategy children and young people get access to more information but also to increased support.
7. Evidence suggests that there is a link between experiences of victimisation and becoming a perpetrator of violent crime. An effective preventative response should therefore include work with young people who have been the victims of violence to help them overcome the experience without recourse to violence.

Provision for parents and carers:

8. Support and guidance for parents should be made available through the provision of parenting programmes and multi-systemic therapy, provided to all those with direct contact to the young person, where appropriate. Parents should also be able to access specialist support for mental health and substance misuse problems. Such measures should be available through extended schools, primary health care centres and other

settings where services are co-located. The NSPCC welcome the government's commitments to extending the provision of targeted parental support and the increased emphasis on a "think family" approach. However, this provision needs to be universally available rather than in specific geographical locations and should be readily available to all families experiencing difficulty.

Wider measures:

9. The renewed emphasis on policies to alleviate child poverty, as outlined in the 2008 Budget are welcome, and should be pursued as a matter of priority by future political administrations. Government should continue to invest the resources needed to meet the 2020 target of ending child poverty. As well as reducing income poverty, measures are needed to reduce poor educational outcomes, enable employment, reduce health inequalities and provide affordable housing.
10. Additional funding is needed for "high delinquency" schools, to support behavioural management and pupil engagement programmes. Interventions to help manage the crucial transition between primary and secondary schools, to ensure that good attendance and pupil engagement is maintained, must be further developed.
11. Responses to young people who become involved in group-based offending and weapons use, should be planned on a multi-agency basis and include provision from schools, youth offending teams, social care, police and youth and leisure services. In particular, young people in contact with the youth justice system should receive welfare-based services from social care agencies, in line with Section 9 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act.
12. The term "gang" should be used with caution by the media, government policy makers and commentators. Labelling young people as gang members can have a negative effect as it may increase the likelihood of young people taking part in more serious forms of offending, encouraging them to join up with and be active members of gangs. The blanket use of the term also adds to a broader negative stereotyping of young people, as typified through recent media reports. Lastly, over-use of the term "gang" arguably serves to distract the public and politicians from the real problems faced by children and young people who take part in crime and anti-social behaviour. The NSPCC recommends that policy makers and members of the media are more careful in the terms they use to describe the current situation. More balanced

language and responsible reporting would better enable debate and improve the public's perception of young people.

Additional research needs:

13. More research is needed to establish why Black African-Caribbean young people have an increased chance of being victims as well as perpetrators of gun and knife crime and group based offending. More evidence is needed before appropriate policy and practice responses can be tailored to find effective ways to better protect and safeguard this vulnerable group. Local government, central government and all large child-focused agencies have a significant role to play in ensuring that Black and Minority Ethnic organisations have adequate capacity and resources to safeguard the children and young people using their services.
14. More research is needed into the nature of gangs in the UK. Further investigation is also needed to establish the relationship between teenage violence and organised criminal groups and between screen-based violence, violence in computer games and violent lyrics in popular music and aggressive behaviour by children and young people.
15. The NSPCC supports government plans to extend the British Crime Survey (BCS) to cover young people under the age of 16; in particular the BCS should include a focus on maltreatment, bullying, violence between children (including children who sexually harm others) and other criminal and anti-social behaviours. The government should also consider establishing a new longitudinal study, with a similar focus to the Youth Lifestyles Survey, which has been discontinued.

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