

Youth Knife Crime in London and Croydon: A Data and Literary Analysis

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Abstract:

Rising rates of youth-involved knife crime in London and Croydon have created a culture of fear, drawing criticism of criminal justice practices which aim to tackle this issue. Research shows there is no one core motivator for knife crime among juveniles, but instead an array of possibilities for why young people engage in knife crime. Ranging from lack of community and youth centres to gangs preying on vulnerable young people, different reasons for involvement means creating a layered solution that is not one-size-fits-all. Opposing political approaches from the Conservative and Labour parties demonstrate how policy and political agendas play a role in juvenile crime, as well as present potential strategies for combating youth crime. The fallout of austerity measures and financial cuts to community and social services has been cited as a major factor in the rise of juvenile knife crime. This report seeks to demonstrate the aspects and potential causes of juvenile knife crime and criminality, and present possible solutions. Ultimately, a public health approach shows the potential to be effective, as noted by both researchers and young people at risk. Methods used to aid juveniles at risk of engaging in knife crime should account for the intersections of vulnerability. Resources including youth centres, mental health services, and a collaboration of social services would be beneficial in reducing levels of youth-involved knife crime.

Introduction:

The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime defines knife crime as a criminal offense with attempt to cause harm where a sharp object or knife has been used to threaten or injure the victim, or the offender was found with a knife or sharp object on their person.¹ An offense involving a sharp object is recorded as such when one is present during the offense, or a threat made by the perpetrator with the sharp object is perceived to be real by the victim or authorities.² The use of the weapon itself is not necessary to constitute an offense involving a sharp object or knife.³

As they are easily accessible as everyday household objects, knives

¹The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime. 2017. "The London Knife Crime Strategy." London, UK: Greater London Authority

²*ibid*

³*ibid*

have frequently been used in Britain as weapons, leading to what the public has viewed as an “epidemic”.⁴ This fear is especially projected onto juveniles, who are becoming increasingly at risk of involvement with violent crimes and gang. Organizations such as Barnardos, Ofsted, and the College of Policing cite vulnerabilities and social factors which increase the potential of a young person to become involved in knife crime. In densely populated areas such as Croydon, where young people make up a quarter of the population, it is important to try and understand the data associated with juvenile knife crime and potential causal factors.⁵

That is the purpose of this report: to analyse both the data associated with violent crimes involving knives or sharp objects used as weapons and the data showing juveniles’ involvement in said violent crime. By doing so, a picture of the state of youth violence in London and Croydon can emerge, allowing for further examination of possible causal factors and vulnerabilities that can lead to involvement in knife crime, gangs, and other related forms of deviance. A comparison of approaches by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party will be presented to demonstrate the effects various policy approaches have on juvenile knife crime. Finally, there will be a discussion on the most beneficial approach to preventing knife crime involvement amongst young people.

Why Knives?

There are four main identified reasons why a juvenile may choose to carry a knife on their person: to help facilitate robbery, for intent to cause harm, for feelings of safety to their own self, or to establish *machismo* or for self-image purposes.⁶ Similarly, the College of Policing note three main motivators for carrying a sharp object: self-protection and fear, self-presentation, and utility.⁷

According to a report released by the All-Parliamentary Party Group (APPG) on Knife Crime (2019), young people noted that knives were an easily accessible form of protection.⁸ Due to an increase in the number of their peers carrying knives, many young people felt compelled to do so as well, viewing this as the ‘norm’.⁹

⁴Muncie, John. 2015. *Youth and crime: 4th edition*. London, UK: SAGE Publications; Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. “Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions.” *UK Justice Policy Review*, 3: 1-31.

⁵Safer Croydon Partnership. 2017. “Safer Croydon Community Safety Strategy 2017/2020.” Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership.

⁶The Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime. 2017. “The London Knife Crime Strategy.” London, UK: Greater London Authority; Sethi et al., 2010. “European Report on Preventing Violence and Knife Crime Among Young People.” Copenhagen, DK: World Health Organization; Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. “Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions.” *UK Justice Policy Review*, 3: 1-31.

⁷McNeill, Abigail and Levin Wheller. 2019. “Knife Crime Evidence Briefing.” Coventry, UK: College of Policing Limited.

⁸Smith, Nicola and Thomas Hughes. 2019. “‘There is No Protection on the Streets, None’: Young People’s Perspective on Knife Crime”. London, UK: All-Party Parliament Group on Knife Crime.

⁹*ibid*

Furthermore, the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime visited incarcerated juveniles who were considered high risk offenders in order to discuss other possible motivators for knife crime.¹⁰ The young offenders stated that many of them had been exposed to knife crime and other forms of violence at a young age, resulting in a perception of increased danger in their communities, thus motivating them to carry knives or other sharp objects on their person for defence should the situation call for it.

Data:

Datasets for violent crime with a weapon in 2019, show that a 7 percent increase in violent offenses involving a sharp object or knife has been reported by police, reaching 44,076 reported offenses.¹¹ Notably, however, the rise in recorded offenses with a sharp object or knife has decreased from the previous year: in 2018, there was a 14 percent rise in knife crime, compared to the aforementioned 7 percent increase in 2019.¹² From 2011 to 2019, the number of recorded offenses involving a sharp object or knife has risen from 30,620 to 44,074: a 44% increase.¹³ This is the highest recorded number by the Office of National Statistics since March of 2010.¹⁴ The Office of National Statistics has also noted that recorded knife crimes are more concentrated in urban areas: in 2019, 32 percent of all offenses involving a sharp object or knife occurred in London.¹⁵ Police have reported a 22 percent increase in knife possession, reaching 22,962 recorded offenses.¹⁶ This is the highest recorded increase since March 2009 and is possibly motivated by targeted police action such as stop and search procedures.¹⁷

An increase in juvenile offenders has been reported as well: between 2015 and 2019 there was a rise of 48 percent in the number of young people convicted or cautioned for offenses involving a knife or sharp object.¹⁸ This is higher than the increase in adult offenders, which rose 31 percent from 2015 to 2019.¹⁹ In the Crime Survey for England and Wales in 2016, young people aged 10 to 15 were asked about experiences with knives and sharp objects.²⁰ The survey showed an increase in the

¹⁰The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime. 2017. "The London Knife Crime Strategy." London, UK: Greater London Authority.

¹¹Elkin, Meghan. 2019. "Offenses Involving the Use of Weapons: Data Tables." Newport, Wales: Office for National Statistics; Elkin, Meghan. 2019. "Crime in England and Wales: Year Ending June 2019." Newport, Wales: Office for National Statistics; Ministry of Justice. 2019. "Knife and Offensive Weapons Sentencing Statistics: January to March 2019." London, UK: Ministry of Justice.

¹²*ibid*

¹³Elkin, Meghan. 2019. "Crime in England and Wales: Year Ending June 2019." Newport, Wales: Office for National Statistics

¹⁴*ibid*

¹⁵*ibid*

¹⁶Metropolitan Police. 2019. "Stats and Data." London, UK: Metropolitan Police

¹⁷*ibid*

¹⁸Elkin, Meghan. 2019. "Crime in England and Wales: Year Ending June 2019." Newport, Wales: Office for National Statistics.

¹⁹*ibid*

²⁰*ibid*

amount of young people who personally know of someone who carried a knife, with a slight decrease in young people reporting carrying a knife themselves.²¹ The APPG on Knife Crime's report (2019) focusing on young people's perspective on knife crime showed that it is necessary for young people to feel safe in their own communities in order to see a decrease in possession of a knife or sharp object as a weapon.²² In 2017, Croydon ranked 6th (1 being the highest) in volume for violent crimes and 16th by rate per 1,000 offenses.²³ Crime rates are higher in the north of Croydon, this may be due to a higher population density and higher levels of inequalities and deprivation.²⁴ Findings from the 2016 Fear of Crime Survey found that 23 percent of Croydon residents feel unsafe, and that residents felt that more crime occurred than what was actually reported to police.²⁵

Croydon has one of the highest populations of young people in London, making up 24.05 percent of the population of 390,800 in 2022.²⁶ Children in Croydon were found to be more in need than those living in other London boroughs, and these figures were well above the national average.²⁷ As of March 2020, 563 per 10,000 children in Croydon were in need.²⁸ The most vulnerable age group for victimization of knife crime in Croydon was reported to be between 15 and 34.²⁹ Additionally, an approximate 20% of victims of crime harm are aged between 10 and 17 years old.³⁰ Offenders most likely to commit violent offenses were found to be between the ages of 15 and 29, and offenders aged 15 to 19 were most likely to commit an offense involving a knife or a sharp object as a weapon.³¹ Data provided by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies indicate that individuals aged 10 to 29 are more likely to be both the victims and perpetrators of knife crime.³² The 2017-2020 Croydon Safety Strategy reported that youth crime overall is one of the biggest fears of Croydon residents, while the updated 2022-2024 Croydon Safety Strategy

²¹Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. "Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions." *UK Justice Policy Review*, 3: 1-31.

²²Smith, Nicola and Thomas Hughes. 2019. "There is No Protection on the Streets, None': Young People's Perspective on Knife Crime". London, UK: All-Party Parliament Group on Knife Crime.

²³Safer Croydon Partnership. 2017. "Safer Croydon Community Safety Strategy 2017/2020." Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership.

²⁴*ibid*

²⁵*ibid*

²⁶Roskams, Michael. 2022. "Population and Household Estimates, England and Wales: Census 2021." London, UK: Office of National Statistics.

²⁷Safer Croydon Partnership. 2022. "Community Safety Strategy: 2022 to 2024." Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership.

²⁸*ibid*

²⁹Safer Croydon Partnership. 2017. "Safer Croydon Community Safety Strategy 2017/2020." Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership

³⁰Safer Croydon Partnership. 2022. "Community Safety Strategy: 2022 to 2024." Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership.

³¹Safer Croydon Partnership. 2017. "Safer Croydon Community Safety Strategy 2017/2020." Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership

³²Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. "Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions." *UK Justice Policy Review*, 3: 1-31.

reported one sixth of residents under 25 felt unsafe in their neighbourhoods due to knife crime.³³

An article from the Croydon Advertiser gives a more local account of knife crime in Croydon.³⁴ According to the cited report from the House of Commons Library, there was an increase of knife crime from 337 offenses involving a knife or sharp object in the 2015/2016 financial year to 683 offenses in the 2016/2017 financial year: a 103 percent increase.³⁵ This was reported as the highest increase for a violent crime with a knife or sharp object throughout London. The article includes a statement from Raymond Robb, the co-founder of the LIONS Society which aims to deter young men from becoming involved in knife crime.³⁶ Robbs states the increase may be due to a lack of intervention and support for at-risk youth. This article suggests one of the best ways to tackle youth knife crime in Croydon is to work with juveniles to identify direct causes of the problem and to help intervene.³⁷ As is suggested in the Safer Community Strategy report, constituents in Croydon believe that knife crime is higher than it actually is.³⁸ The report notes that knife crime over a six-month period had decreased from 60 reported offenses in the same time frame the previous financial year, to 30 reported offenses during the six-month period in the 2016/2017 financial year. The report suggests that these decreases may be caused by increased communication with community-based outreach groups by the police in order to work with at-risk juveniles to help deter them from crime.³⁹

Motivations and Relevant Factors:

It is important to examine the driving factors of knife crime in communities because it helps to examine fluctuations in violent crime over time. The relationships between groups of people and the societies in which they live, the resources available to them, and the characteristics of a community all have an effect on overall crime trends and behaviours.⁴⁰ By understanding influencing factors in youth knife crime, more thorough and accurate approaches to combating this issue can be enacted; this is further discussed in the section *Possible Solutions*. Contributing factors are

³³ Safer Croydon Partnership. 2017. "Safer Croydon Community Safety Strategy 2017/2020." Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership; Safer Croydon Partnership. 2022. "Community Safety Strategy: 2022 to 2024." Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership

³⁴ Truelove, Sam. 2018. "Croydon Ranked as One of the Worst London Boroughs for Knife Crime, Report Reveals." London, UK: Croydon Advertiser.

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ Safer Croydon Partnership. 2017. "Safer Croydon Community Safety Strategy 2017/2020." Croydon, UK: Safer Croydon Partnership

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime. 2017. "The London Knife Crime Strategy." London, UK: Greater London Authority; Ofsted. 2019. "Ofsted Research on Knife Crime: Safeguarding Children and Young People in Education." Manchester, UK: Ofsted; Smith, Nicola and Thomas Hughes. 2019. "There is No Protection on the Streets, None': Young People's Perspective on Knife Crime". London, UK: All-Party Parliament Group on Knife Crime; Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. "Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions." *UK Justice Policy Review*, 3: 1-31.

varied: austerity measures, which resulted in cuts to youth centres and community services, have been cited by both professional organizations and young people as a reason for the rise in youth violence in London.⁴¹ Socioeconomic inequalities, school exclusion, mental illness and adverse childhoods can all play a part in shaping a young person in ways which have been shown to be connected to knife crime and youth violence.⁴² Gangs have also been known to take advantage of young people rendered vulnerable by these causes, further driving juveniles towards crime.⁴³

Austerity:

In the book *Austerity Bites: A Journey to the Sharp End of Cuts in the UK* (2015), austerity is defined as “the economic conditions created by government measures to reduce a budget deficit, especially by reducing public spending”.⁴⁴ Following a global recession and financial panic in 2008, a Conservative-led U.K. government enacted austerity measures which cut government-funded budgets for public services. Youth centres saw a significant cut to funding, to the point in which many closed down as a result. After-school clubs and youth centres became few and far between, leaving young people without designated spaces where they could go that didn’t require money to be spent as they would allow young people regardless of financial background to take part in social activities.⁴⁵ The author concludes by noting that those made vulnerable and financially insecure are those who were poor to begin with, resided in low-income areas, and suffered from disabilities or socioeconomic inequalities.

A report from Barnardos (2019), utilizing data from the APPG on Knife Crime, has found that areas seeing significant cuts to funding for youth centres and relevant services have also seen an increase in youth knife crime.⁴⁶ Over the past three years, the average borough council has cut approximately 40 percent of funding for youth services and youth workers.⁴⁷ These areas have also been reported to have significant increases in youth involved violence, most notably a 47 percent increase reported by London’s Metropolitan Police.⁴⁸ Alongside this, a resounding request from young people throughout London is an increase of funding for youth services and the building up of youth centres. Sarah Jones, the leader of the APPG on Knife

⁴¹Barnardo’s. 2019. “Research Suggests Growing Link Between Cuts to Youth Services and the Country’s Knife Crime Epidemic.” Barking, UK: Barnardo’s.

⁴²; Ofsted. 2019. “Ofsted Research on Knife Crime: Safeguarding Children and Young People in Education.” Manchester, UK: Ofsted; Smith, Nicola and Thomas Hughes. 2019. “There is No Protection on the Streets, None’: Young People’s Perspective on Knife Crime”. London, UK: All-Party Parliament Group on Knife Crime

⁴³Goldson, Barry. 2011. Youth in crisis? gangs, territoriality and violence. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge

⁴⁴O’Hara, Mary. 2015. *Austerity bites: a journey to the sharp end of cuts in the UK*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press, pg. V

⁴⁵O’Hara, Mary. 2015. *Austerity bites: a journey to the sharp end of cuts in the UK*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

⁴⁶Barnardo’s. 2019. “Research Suggests Growing Link Between Cuts to Youth Services and the Country’s Knife Crime Epidemic.” Barking, UK: Barnardo’s.

⁴⁷*ibid*

⁴⁸Metropolitan Police. 2019. “Stats and Data.” London, UK: Metropolitan Police

Crime, notes that this is what she hears from young people the most: “Every time I speak to young people they say the same thing: they need more positive activities, safe spaces to spend time with friends and programmes to help them grow and develop”.⁴⁹ Furthermore, a BBC article (2019) reporting on how young people cope with knife crime cites youth centres as important sources of positive reinforcement for young people, and thus crucial in deterring them from crime.⁵⁰Boleto (2019) notes how the free services provided to young people in the apartment complex she had grown up in had served as a positive environment where young people felt safe and protected.⁵¹Boleto’s (2019) report further showed that areas with little funding for youth services also suffered higher proportions of youth involved knife crime.

The report from the APPG on Knife Crime (2019) presents the perspectives of young people affected by knife crime, echoing the previous statements: young people are in need of spaces in which they can interact with one another in a positive environment and build a community.⁵² Expulsion from school heavily influences this, as without any source of community, young people are more susceptible to gang involvements.⁵³ Young people in the report also mentioned positive interactions with community leaders, such as teachers, helped to deter them from becoming involved in crime.⁵⁴ Schools have become important in providing a place where young people can be safe and interact with positive influences and role models; however, many of those surveyed in the report noted a lack of resources both outside of school, and for those teachers interacting with disadvantaged and vulnerable students. By better connecting with their students, teachers would be able to build a more positive relationship and thus deter at risk youth from crime. Young people also noted that students who have been excluded from school or are at risk of being excluded should be offered more support to further deter them from getting involved in crime.⁵⁵

In a report from Coram (2019), which also examines young people's perspectives, knife crime is seen as the result of a lack of opportunity: by not having healthy and positive ways to spend their time, young people become more vulnerable to crime.⁵⁶The young people interviewed also acknowledged that possession of a knife and crime involvement may hinder future job opportunities, but that the use of knife crime involved with selling drugs would be a quick way to make money instead.⁵⁷ Juveniles may feel a sense of belonging when carrying a knife, as it may be prevalent amongst their peers or they may feel they are “looking out” for one

⁴⁹*ibid*

⁵⁰Boleto, Leah. 2019. “Youth Clubs: How Children in London are Coping with Knife Crime.” London, UK: CBBC Newsround.

⁵¹*ibid*

⁵²Smith, Nicola and Thomas Hughes. 2019. “‘There is No Protection on the Streets, None’: Young People’s Perspective on Knife Crime”. London, UK: All-Party Parliament Group on Knife Crime.

⁵³*ibid*

⁵⁴*ibid*

⁵⁵*ibid*

⁵⁶Michelmores, et al., 2019. “Young People’s Views on Knife Crime.” London, UK: Coram.

⁵⁷*ibid*

another, giving themselves a sense of purpose.⁵⁸ This sense of community can be provided both by youth services and youth centres, as well as by gang involvement. The Coram report also notes that juveniles reported that more community engagement and youth centres would help to deter young people from crime involvement.⁵⁹

Socioeconomic Inequalities

The Centre for Crime and Justice found that higher levels of inequality correlate with higher levels of crime both nationally and internationally.⁶⁰ The Centre for Crime and Justice also notes that social factors and levels of trust in individual communities can affect rates of crime.⁶¹ A community with high levels of social inequality and low levels of trust may find it difficult to create a safe community and thus may be more likely to see crime occur.⁶² The most common factor in juvenile knife crime and other violent crimes was the individual's vulnerability.⁶³ Children who were raised in adverse households, who have experienced abuse, poverty, or other forms of trauma were more likely to later become involved in knife crime.⁶⁴ Social exclusion due to socioeconomic family backgrounds, race, and other factors also contributed to this statistic.⁶⁵ School leaders reported to Ofsted that all students who had been expelled from their schools due to possession of a knife or sharp object had at least one of these experiences prior to expulsion.⁶⁶

School Expulsion

School expulsion makes young people more vulnerable to knife crime and gang involvement. Attitudes towards young people carrying knives or sharp objects on school grounds varies for each education institution. For some school leaders, this is an automatic expulsion regardless of the reason why the student had the knife or sharp object on their person. For others, this may prompt an investigation into why the student felt the need to carry a knife, with attention paid to their home life and any possible vulnerability.⁶⁷ Schools also face difficulties in funding appropriate programmes that help educate students on knife crime and deterrence programmes to help prevent students from becoming involved in crime. Furthermore, Ofsted (2019) notes that some gangs who may be grooming students will encourage the individual to carry a knife or sharp object on their person on school grounds with the

⁵⁸Smith, Nicola and Thomas Hughes. 2019. "‘There is No Protection on the Streets, None’: Young People’s Perspective on Knife Crime". London, UK: All-Party Parliament Group on Knife Crime.

⁵⁹Michelmores, et al., 2019. "Young People’s Views on Knife Crime." London, UK: Coram.

⁶⁰Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. "Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions." UK Justice Policy Review, 3: 1-31.

⁶¹*ibid*

⁶²*ibid*

⁶³Ofsted. 2019. "Ofsted Research on Knife Crime: Safeguarding Children and Young People in Education." Manchester, UK: Ofsted.

⁶⁴*ibid*

⁶⁵*ibid*

⁶⁶*ibid*

⁶⁷Michelmores, et al., 2019. "Young People’s Views on Knife Crime." London, UK: Coram.

intent of expulsion, so they may be better integrated into the gang.⁶⁸ If the student is not admitted into another school or inclusive programme, they then become more vulnerable to violence and gang affiliations.⁶⁹

Gangs

Gangs may use social media as a recruitment tool to lure in vulnerable young. They may be able to use their social media presence to make the lifestyle of a gang member appear tempting to someone who is vulnerable, whether it be by portraying a sense of community, protection from perceived dangers, or wealth and goods.⁷⁰ Gangs can provide a source of community or familial bonds for vulnerable youth with adverse home lives. Joining a gang may be perceived as a form of protection, especially if the individual has a history of victimization. Individuals with low self-esteem may also join gangs as a way to boost their self-image and self-worth.⁷¹ County lines drug dealing has become a significant issue for juveniles involved in knife crime and gang-affiliated violence. This process involves the selling of drugs, namely heroin and crack-cocaine, from urban regions into rural and coastal areas of England and Wales.⁷² Vulnerable young people who have been recruited into gangs are more likely to be used for this form of drug dealing. These juveniles are exploited by gangs to carry out the dealings, which usually involve serious violence. In association with county line drug dealing, young people may feel the need to carry knives on them for protection.⁷³

Mental Health

Mental illness is closely related to crime amongst juveniles and is one of the more frequently explored subtopics of violence amongst young people. Factors that may lead to violent behaviour may include difficulties in the home or “adverse childhood environments”.⁷⁴ In addition to this, a separate study provided by the Centre for Crime and Justice shows that high levels of mental illness, a history of using mental health services, and a history of trauma can be found amongst young men in Britain who have been or are currently involved in gang-affiliated activities.⁷⁵ Juveniles who have been inducted into gangs face an increased potential for victimization, which

⁶⁸Ofsted. 2019. “Ofsted Research on Knife Crime: Safeguarding Children and Young People in Education.” Manchester, UK: Ofsted.

⁶⁹*ibid*

⁷⁰Smith, Nicola and Thomas Hughes. 2019. “‘There is No Protection on the Streets, None’: Young People’s Perspective on Knife Crime”. London, UK: All-Party Parliament Group on Knife Crime.

⁷¹Hughes, Karen, Katherine Hardcastle, and Clare Perkins. 2015. “The Mental Health Needs of Gang-Affiliated Young People.” London, UK: Public Health England.

⁷²Hughes, Karen, Katherine Hardcastle, and Clare Perkins. 2015. “The Mental Health Needs of Gang-Affiliated Young People.” London, UK: Public Health England.

⁷³Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. “Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions.” UK Justice Policy Review, 3: 1-31.

⁷⁴*ibid*

⁷⁵*ibid*

can further adversely affect their mental health.⁷⁶ Repetitive exposure to violence of any kind has a notable effect on the individuals' mental health, as reported by Public Health England (2015).⁷⁷ Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) also contribute to knife crime amongst young people. Having experienced poverty, abuse, or other stressful and traumatic events can negatively impact the young person's mental health as early life trauma can have a lasting effect on an individual. Public Health England (2015) found that juveniles with ACEs had higher risks for weapon carrying, bullying, and violence.⁷⁸

Young people who have been inducted into gangs have shown an increased risk of mental illness, including conduct disorders, anxiety, depression, antisocial personality disorders, and drug and alcohol dependence. Hughes et. al (2015) argue youth knife crime, gang involvement, and mental illness are connected: those who suffer from mental illnesses are more vulnerable and more likely to be groomed by a gang, whereas being a part of a gang can have adverse effects on one's mental health. Data taken from screenings of juvenile gang members showed that 40 percent of those arrested had signs of mental illness, compared with only 13 percent of non-gang affiliated juvenile offenders.⁷⁹ This combination of factors demonstrates the increased risk of knife crime, both as an offender and victim, for juveniles involved in gang violence and suffering from a mental illness.

Opposing Political approaches

As made apparent by the data and information provided, juvenile knife crime has continued to pose a serious risk: both to society and to potential victims, as well as to the juveniles themselves, who are more likely to have suffered from ACEs and vulnerabilities that push them towards violent crime. The 2019 General Election saw proposed policies and plans regarding crime and juvenile justice from all major parties. The Conservative and Labour manifestos both included policies which focused on deterring young people from crime. As established by the literature, governmental financial cuts play a significant role in the rise and severity of juvenile violence and knife crime. Policies presented by major political parties, namely the Conservative and Labour parties, can thus influence whether or not a solution is reached. Taken from the Conservative and Labour Manifesto's from the 2019 General Election, proposed solutions to rising juvenile knife crime and violence demonstrate the varied and opposing approaches both parties take.

Conservative plans for violence and knife crime implement a 'tough on crime' approach, with a focus on increased police presence and faster prosecution and

⁷⁶Haylock, Sara, et al. 2020. "Risk Factors Associated with Knife-Crime in United Kingdom Among Young People Aged 10-24 Years: A Systematic Review." *BMC Public Health*, 20:1415.

⁷⁷Hughes, Karen, Katherine Hardcastle, and Clare Perkins. 2015. "The Mental Health Needs of Gang-Affiliated Young People." London, UK: Public Health England.

⁷⁸*ibid*

⁷⁹*ibid*

sentencing for those found with a knife or sharp object on their person.⁸⁰ Stop and search procedures are favoured, giving officers the ability to search individuals known or suspected to have knives on their person. A Serious Violence Reduction Order, part of the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Bill announced in 2021, allows police officers to stop and search known offenders and individuals who have previously been found to have knives or other weapons on their persons.⁸¹ Those found with a weapon would be arrested, charged or cautioned, as well as receiving a court date all within 24 hours.⁸² Both custodial and non-custodial offenders would be subject to the Order, and thus it would act as a deterrent to further commit a crime or carry a weapon. It is worth noting that a 2022 update to this order stipulates that stop and search procedures are only to be allowed on over-18s.⁸³

As the Labour party is an outspoken critic of austerity cuts,⁸⁴ the 2019 Labour manifesto outlined a public health perspective. This approach aimed to collaborate with different professionals to help figure out root causes of youth violence in order to prevent juveniles from getting involved in crime. Police funding would have also been adjusted, allowing for an increase of officers as well as funding for relevant training and equipment. Labour plans included building trust between police officers and the communities they serve by collaborating with youth service workers, social services, mental health professionals, schools, and drug rehabilitation programmes in order to better prepare them for working with diverse communities and constituents.⁸⁵

Possible Solutions

Thus far, this report has presented the climate of youth-involved knife crime in Croydon and greater London through data and relevant literature. Although this report does not seek to propose a conclusive solution, as approaches to this issue can be as multifaceted as the young people involved, it does offer two primary arguments for combating youth knife crime. Considered opposing ends, stop and search procedures and a public health approach to juvenile knife crime demonstrate the varied perspectives on working with local communities and it's young people to lower rates of knife crime. Evidence and literature centring the experiences of young people is presented for both proposed solutions, followed by a conclusion noting which of the two options may provide more favourable outcomes.

⁸⁰Conservative Party. 2019. "We Will Empower Police To Tackle Scourge of Violent Knife Crime,' Pledges PM." Retrieved Dec 5, 2019

⁸¹Home Office. 2022. "Serious Violence Reduction Orders: Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 Factsheet." London, UK: HM Government; Ryan, J., Brown, J., and Holland, S. 2021. "Tackling Knife Crime". House of Commons Library Debate Pack. Retrieved from: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2021-0129/CDP-2021-0129.pdf>

⁸²Conservative Party. 2019. "Get Brexit Done, Unleash Britain's Potential: The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto." Retrieved Nov 15, 2019

⁸³Home Office. 2022. "Serious Violence Reduction Orders: Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 Factsheet." London, UK: HM Government.

⁸⁴Labour Party. 2019. "It's Time for Real Change: The Labour Party Manifesto 2019." Retrieved Nov 15 2019.

⁸⁵*ibid*

Stop and Search Procedures

Young people reported feeling that stop and search procedures created tension between police and juveniles, despite having positive interactions with the police previously.⁸⁶ This is due in part to the racial profiling of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicity (BAME) juveniles.⁸⁷ Young people in these surveys felt police had little respect for the individuals they stopped, and that young black men were more likely to be stopped by police.⁸⁸ Many of the interviewees believed one's appearance, including clothing choice, affect whether or not they would be stopped, adding to frustrations with the police.⁸⁹ Furthermore, the young people interviewed felt that if police stop and searches occurred in private and were more patient with the individual being searched, the overall experience could be more positive.⁹⁰ These experiences can be traumatic for young people, especially BAME individuals due to a potential racial bias. Stop and search procedures may also push individuals who have been searched towards gang-affiliated violence or other forms of crime as a reaction to the procedure. This can be due to a need to feel safe from tense police relations or a response to having been labelled a potential offender.⁹¹ The Centre for Crime and Justice notes that the humiliation that comes from these stop and search procedures, combined with a need to be respected, may inadvertently result in crime involvement.⁹²

While stop and search practices may be temporarily beneficial in which a sharp object or weapon is confiscated, research shows this is not effective in the long term. A ten-year study demonstrated stop and search procedures had an insignificant deterrent effect on violent crime over the period studied.⁹³ The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (2018) cite a report from the Home Office in 2008 which found no significant long-term changes in possession of a knife or sharp objects as a result of stop and search procedures.⁹⁴ A College of Policing report in 2017 also noted over a ten-year period that there was a weak relationship between stop and searches and knife crime and possession.⁹⁵ A Home Office report published in 2017 found that of the 32,852 stop and searches for offensive weapons, 7,097 arrests were made for possession of a knife or sharp object.⁹⁶ There was a total recorded 303,845 stop and

⁸⁶Murray, Kyle. 2018. "Croydon Youth Summit 2018: Enough is Enough". Croydon, UK: Croydon BME Forum.

⁸⁷*ibid*

⁸⁸*ibid*

⁸⁹*ibid*

⁹⁰*ibid*

⁹¹Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. "Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions." UK Justice Policy Review, 3: 1-31.

⁹²*ibid*

⁹³*ibid*

⁹⁴*ibid*

⁹⁵McNeill, Abigail and Levin Wheller. 2019. "Knife Crime Evidence Briefing." Coventry, UK: College of Policing Limited.

⁹⁶Grimshaw, Robert and Matt Ford. 2018. "Young People, Violence and Knives - Revisiting the Evidence and Policy Discussions." UK Justice Policy Review, 3: 1-31.

searches that year, indicating that stop and searches are ultimately an ineffective way of dealing with knife crime.⁹⁷ It is important to note that in 2020/2021, a rate of 69.5 per 1,000 black people in London were stopped, compared to a rate of 20.4 per 1,000 white people, and an overall rate of 38.1 per 1,000 people of all ethnicities.⁹⁸ This is consistent with findings from previous years, and demonstrates stop and searches performed at the discretion of the police officer disproportionately affected members of the BAME community.⁹⁹

Public Health Approach & Youth Services

The study *Confronting Gang Membership and Youth Violence: Intervention Challenges and Potential Futures* (2019) notes that one of the most promising routes to reducing gang violence and youth violence is through a public health approach which focuses on the individual, root causes.¹⁰⁰ These procedures have been the most successful in regard to youth crime deterrence, showing that a collaboration of social welfare, violence prevention, and community engagement produces the most positive results. Investing in the community and its services and providers has the potential to positively impact young people, especially regarding areas impacted by austerity cuts.¹⁰¹ Research suggests that a public health approach to knife crime would be the most beneficial to produce a decrease in knife crime in communities. By using a multi-faceted collaborative approach, professionals and law enforcement can help diagnose underlying causes and work towards a solution. This can also be seen in the “pulling levers” approach, which focuses on targeting repeat-offenders by providing support services and interventions via direct and consistent communication to the offender, so that they are aware of what is taking place and why they are being targeted.¹⁰² Key findings from the College of Policing Knife Crime Evidence Briefings shows that motivations and other factors involved in knife crime vary by the individual, and that a tailored approach to violence reduction may be necessary to see a decrease in knife crime.¹⁰³ This would work by focusing on specific problems such as mental health, cuts to youth services, and social and economic inequalities.¹⁰⁴ Early prevention work and problem-oriented policing is also believed to be hugely effective in combating youth involved knife crime.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ Home Office. 2022b. Stop and Search. London, UK: HM Government.

⁹⁹ Pepin, Sarah, Lipscombe, Sally, Zayed, Yago, and Allen, Grahame. 2018. “Effect of Police Stop and Search Powers on BAME Communities.” London, UK: House of Commons Library.

¹⁰⁰ Wood, Jane L. 2019. “Confronting Gang Membership and Youth Violence: Intervention Challenges and Potential Futures.” *Criminal Behaviour & Mental Health* 29(2): 69–73.

¹⁰¹ Hagell, Ann. 2019. “Youth Knife Crime – What Does ‘Taking a Public Health Approach’ Mean?” London, UK: Coram

¹⁰² Braga, Anthony, David Weisburd, and Brandon Turchan. 2019. “Focused Deterrence Strategies Effects on Crime: A Systematic Review.” *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 15(3) <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1051>

¹⁰³ McNeill, Abigail and Levin Wheller. 2019. “Knife Crime Evidence Briefing.” Coventry, UK: College of Policing Limited.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*

Ofsted's (2019) research on knife crime showed that while children were more likely to be safe on school premises while school was in session, the hours between four to six after school was the most dangerous for young people in terms of crime and gang involvement.¹⁰⁶ Incidents of knife crime amongst young people are more prevalent outside of school hours and on the weekends. This is especially true for juveniles who have been excluded from school and have few resources outside of the home. The overall resounding need communicated by young people themselves is more services made for them as places to go during their free time, in which positive social and community interactions can be made to benefit their personal relationships, sense of self and self-worth, and their relationship with their community.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

To conclude this report, the findings suggest that public health based approaches are the most beneficial in tackling knife crime. Where stop and search procedures target the individual in confiscating a knife, a public health approach utilizes preventative action based on community needs to work with young people in rejecting crime involvement¹⁰⁸. Specifically regarding the contributing factors raised in this report, a public health approach can provide a positive impact for young people. Austerity measures impacted many of the contributing factors noted; funding cuts to youth centres restored through a public health approach can provide no-cost community engagement and activities, providing young people with alternatives to potential gang or crime involvement.¹⁰⁹ While a public health approach to knife crime cannot solve underlying socioeconomic issues experienced by young people, it can address the ramifications of it as it pertains to young people.¹¹⁰ In doing so, it can provide solutions to these issues stemming from socioeconomic inequalities that unaddressed may later contribute to youth crime and knife violence. A public health approach which invests in places of learning as well as staff and educators can better equip those working with young people struggling with engagement, one of the noted factors contributing to juvenile knife crime.¹¹¹ Support services for young people would be prioritized under a public health approach, whether this is towards

¹⁰⁶Ofsted. 2019. "Ofsted Research on Knife Crime: Safeguarding Children and Young People in Education." Manchester, UK: Ofsted.

¹⁰⁷Jones, Sarah. 2019. "These 60 Depraved Children from Croydon Could Tell Us Exactly Why We're Facing a Knife Crime Epidemic." London, UK: The Independent.

¹⁰⁸Hagell, Ann. 2019. "Youth Knife Crime – What Does 'Taking a Public Health Approach' Mean?" London, UK: Coram

¹⁰⁹Potter, Rachel. 2020. "Taking a Public Health Approach to Tackling Serious Violent Crime: Case Studies." London, UK: Local Government Association.

¹¹⁰Hagell, Ann. 2019. "Youth Knife Crime – What Does 'Taking a Public Health Approach' Mean?" London, UK: Coram

¹¹¹Ofsted. 2019. "Ofsted Research on Knife Crime: Safeguarding Children and Young People in Education." Manchester, UK: Ofsted; Hagell, Ann. 2019. "Youth Knife Crime – What Does 'Taking a Public Health Approach' Mean?" London, UK: Coram; Potter, Rachel. 2020. "Taking a Public Health Approach to Tackling Serious Violent Crime: Case Studies." London, UK: Local Government Association.

providing mental health services or other community support for young people vulnerable to gang involvement.¹¹²

There is no one specific reason as to why young people may get involved in knife crime, and the methods used to help deter violent crime must be just as multi-faceted as the individual. Not all members of law enforcement are trained in mental health and social services, which is why it is important to collaborate with an array of professionals to help intervene in situations where vulnerable juveniles become at-risk for knife crime or gang involvement. Furthermore, funding and reinstating of youth centres, clubs and services throughout boroughs will provide young people with safe and inclusive places for them to positively spend time with peers, regardless of their educational or socioeconomic background.

¹¹²Wood, Jane L. 2019. "Confronting Gang Membership and Youth Violence: Intervention Challenges and Potential Futures." *Criminal Behaviour & Mental Health* 29(2): 69–73; Hagell, Ann. 2019. "Youth Knife Crime – What Does 'Taking a Public Health Approach' Mean?" London, UK: Coram

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