

REPORT FOR WALSALL COUNCIL'S  
CORPORATE AND PUBLIC SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
**THURSDAY 12<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2018**

*Produced at the request of the Committee, presented by C. Parsons, Walsall Neighbourhood Policing Commander from*



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# Summary

## UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

Police recorded crime data shows that violent crime has been rising over the past year, both across the borough and in Walsall town centre. Public Place Violence (PPV) has been increasing above the force average, and knife crime has been increasing at a similar rate. However, knife crime accounts for a very small proportion of all crime. The borough has experienced 4 murders in the last 12 months, all involving the use of a knife or bladed weapon, which has attracted public and press attention and the perception for many is that this is a critical issue, particularly for the town centre and its night time economy.

A survey of young people in the West Midlands in January 2017 (including some from Walsall) identified that the lack of reliable evidence on why knives are carried and used leads to assumptions filling this void, some of which can be misleading or even counter-productive. Their survey identified that a large proportion of cases came from petty disputes between individual that already know of each other, that those involved has low opinions and levels of engagement with public bodies and often came from areas with minimal social capital or cohesion, and that feelings of both fear and prestige were involved. The impact of sensationalist media reporting (both traditional and social) was also noted.

The need for better understanding of the issue is fundamental to developing an evidence-based and effective multi-agency approach.

## CURRENT APPROACHES

A wide variety of approaches have been identified, and more have recently obtained funding or are in the planning phase. Strategic borough-wide ownership from the Community Safety Partnership currently sits with Superintendent Sue Parker as the partnerships' lead for the priority of 'reducing violence in Walsall'.

The specific approaches are listed in the body of this report. Most fall into the categories of:

- school- based educational, or
- police patrol and enforcement activity

## LOOKING AHEAD

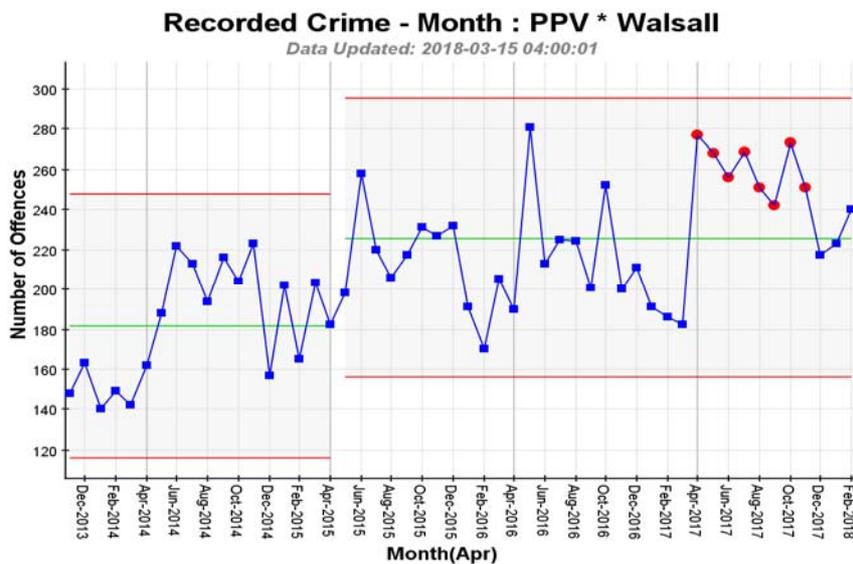
There is acceptance across the Partnership that knife-crime is an important issue in Walsall. Considerable effort and resources are being deployed and are no doubt making an impact, but the relevant recorded crimes and public concern continue to rise. This is an opportune time to review if our current activity is focused in the areas and ways most likely to deliver benefits (both in reducing harm from knife crime but also more generally), and fully coordinated across all partners and stakeholders.

Andy Parsons  
Walsall NPU Commander  
March 27, 2018

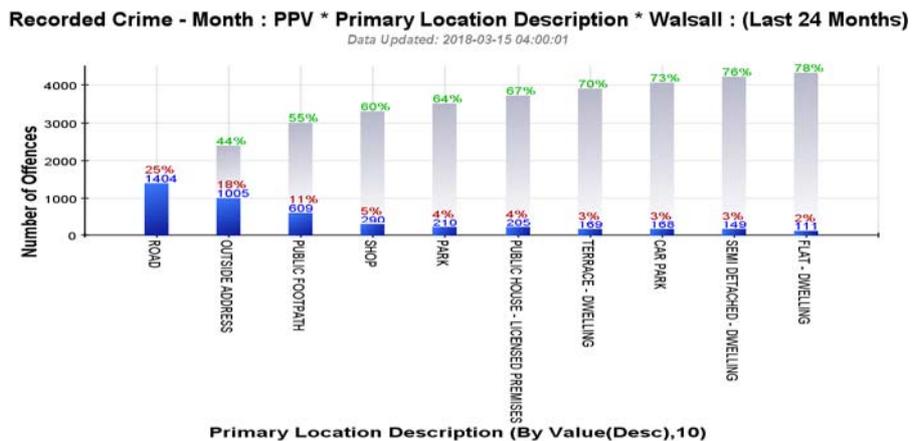
# Understanding the Issue

## CRIME DATA

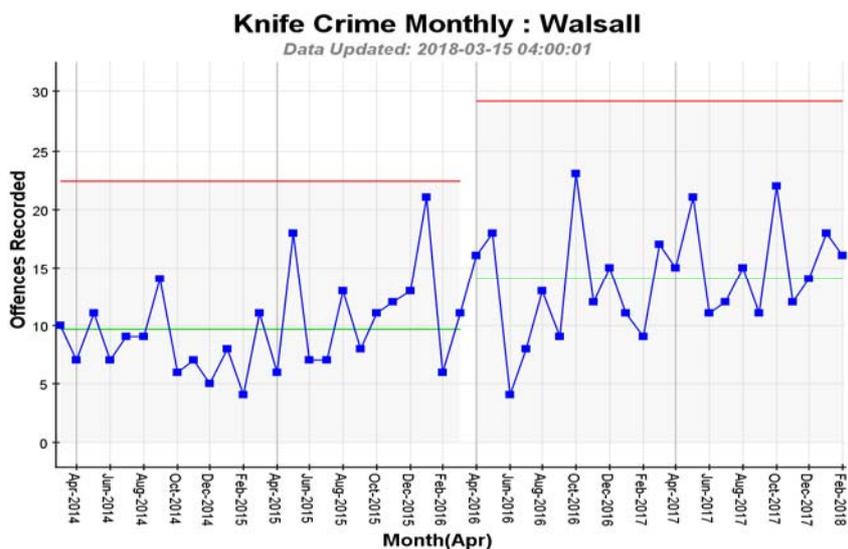
Where police become aware of offences and have enough information to make a crime report, we can track the volume and nature of these offences. Police recorded violent offences will include all forms of violence: assault, wounding, murder, domestic violence, sexual violence and robbery with violence. For this report we have focused firstly on Public Place Violence (PPV), over the past 4 years, to give a view of long term trend, an increase of approximately 60%:



This scale of increase is reflected in force wide and national recorded crime figures. Lower level violence offences are the highest volume contributors. The commonest type of environs where these PPV offences occur are:



Knife crime can be extracted from the complete PPV data, below. We can see that although there has been a similar percentage rise, the volumes involved are much lower – approx. 5-10% of all PPV involves a knife.



Examination of our data also reveals that our PPV problem is borough-wide, but with greatest concentration on the Central Sector, especially the St Matthews ward. It also peaks on the evening and following early morning of Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. There is therefore an overlap with our night time economy.

### SURVEY AND RESEARCH DATA

Whilst police recorded crime records give a picture of knife crime, it is far from the whole picture. For various reasons much of this crime is not reported, or not directly by the victims. It also does not give a reliable picture of the prevalence of knife carrying in the borough. One priority for the Partnership must be to fill these gaps in our knowledge.

A brief survey conducted in 2017 during the Walsall UK Youth Parliament elections found that of the ten listed concerns the participants identified 'knife crime and gangs' as their biggest concern. That is featured so highly is a real concern.

Research, commissioned via the Combined Authority, is studying the impact of abuse, loss, trauma and attachment issues in local children. This is part of the Early Help work stream and will help us better understand what sort of early risk factors lead to negative consequences, including being perpetrators or victims of violence, for our communities.

In spring 2017 the force commissioned an external pilot survey of young people from across the West Midlands (including some from Walsall). This is very helpful in starting to understand why, how and where young people are carrying and using knives (though we must be careful not to assume this is a problem



limited to young people). A copy of this report is attached, and it begins to improve our understanding of the root causes, and therefore help us identify potentially effective (and less effective) responses.

The report identifies that the reasons behind knife carrying and use are different from gang/gun issues, for example that a large proportion of cases came from petty disputes between individuals that already know of each other, and so approaches that tackle 'gang culture' are not suited to knife crime. Other forms of violence also differ, e.g. domestic violence and sexual violence, so each require a coordinated but significantly different approach. The survey identified that many of those involved have low opinions and levels of engagement with public bodies and often came from areas with minimal social capital or cohesion. This highlights that policing and enforcement are unlikely to be a solution on their own, and indeed there is the real risk of some types of activity being counter-productive, increasing feelings of anger, alienation and defiance to authority. The importance of wider programmes that reduce poverty, personal trauma, and increase feelings of 'home', safety and cohesion is clear. The relevance of feelings of both fear (and thus knife carrying for self-protection), and prestige (knife carrying for kudos and 'respect') are identified also. The impact of sensationalist media reporting (both traditional and social) is identified as a particular risk, with the potential on the one hand to make knife carrying seem exciting, and on the other increase the perception of risk and so fuel knife carrying for self-defence.

#### **PUBLIC PERCEPTION**

Walsall has been unfortunate enough to have suffered from 4 murders over the past 12 months, all using a sharp edged weapon of some sort. Whilst these have occurred in different wards and been attributed to very different motivations, they none the less appear to be fueling significant press and public concern.

## Current Activity

A considerable variety of interventions are underway, across the borough:

### SCHOOLS EDUCATIONAL

- School Leadership Forum – is putting on a day of support, guidance and advice for staff to take back and share within their schools. This will include knife crime, alongside other forms of violence. Planned for the 19<sup>th</sup> April
- Youth Justice Services are making one-hour crime prevention sessions available, focusing on knife crime, to all schools. Referrals of individual ‘high risk’ pupils will fill these courses.
- The Cohesion and Inclusion Team have recently been awarded funding from the Active Citizens fund for a ‘Youth of Walsall’ Knife awareness Campaign. This will involve: a specialist supplier to run ten workshops; social media; a short video; a competition; and possibly the use of parents who have lost their children to knife crime to bring the impact home.
- Walsall Police have developed educational inputs for both primary and secondary schools and are currently coordinating their delivery so as to complement other similar inputs.
- The newly elected ‘Youth Commissioner’, Charlie GRAVER, is being supported in recruiting a network of ‘Knife Champions’ in secondary schools, to develop peer-to-peer programmes.
- The ‘Mentor in Violence Prevention’ project is led by the West Midlands Violence Prevention alliance and will soon be up and running in Walsall, supported across the Partnership. This engages the powerful voice of school students, as peers of offenders and victims, to speak up against violence via the ‘Bystander Approach’.
- Schools will also have their own programmes and lessons that may tackle the issue as part of their PSE, but there is no central record of where or when these occur.

### POLICE OPERATIONAL

- Friday and Saturday nights have always seen an increased policing presence in Walsall town centre. Whilst this has had to be reduced as budgets have reduced, we are now more flexible across the force area, and when risk increases we are more able to pull in additional resources, such as for the boxing match at the Town Hall in February (the first since a murder after the last one in 2017).
- Operation Solo – an operation around the night time economy in Walsall town centre that increases officer numbers on patrol, utilises a new metal detection arch and drug/weapons sniffer dogs and other resources as required. Social media is used to advertise the activity and extend its deterrent effect.
- Purchase and deployment of an airport style knife arch. This was a joint purchase between the Council and the Office of the Police commissioner (OPCC). It arrived in February and is now being deployed at suitable events, with the permission of property owners.

## OTHER YOUTH FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

- West Midlands Police have renewed their advice to schools on how to deal with pupils found in possession of knives. This has been distributed to all schools in the borough and further explanation and training offered through a newly formed 'School Panel'.
- The charity 'Street Doctors' works with young people to show them the true impact of knife wounds, how to give first aid to them, and to dispel common myths. They have already given inputs to certain groups and are willing to help further.
- Funding has been obtained for one year to provide an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor to support school children that are affected by domestic violence.
- Youth Justice Services deal with most knife possession (not use) offences outside of court, following the best evidence of how to reduce reoffending. JYS have specific programmes for these offenders, and also do knife/weapons focused work with offenders from non-weapons offences where they believe they also use or carry weapons.
- Precious Lives Programme - a partnership with Alison Cope. Alison's son Joshua Ribera was stabbed and murdered in Selly Oak in September 2013, he was well known within the grime music scene. Alison tells his life story leading up to the night of his murder and how many lives were changed that night by the actions of one person.
- Risk Management and Vulnerability Panel (RMVP) – multi-agency risk assessment and action for all young people assessed as high risk and who carry or use.

## OTHER ACTIVITY

- Locality Panels are now up and running and dealing with specific cases of knife carrying or use. For example, a recent upturn in reports of ASB outside the town-centre McDonalds restaurant led to a multi-agency response involving youth outreach, police and others. This led to the detection of some youths carry knives and their subsequent investigation/sanctioning.
- There is increased sharing of health data with other community safety sources to better understand the issues.
- There was high hopes that the 'Knife Angel', a tall statue of an angel constructed from thousands of knives surrendered during national knife amnesties, would be coming for public display in Walsall. Unfortunately this plan has fallen through and this will not be occurring.

It is also the case that much of the day to day work of the Community Safety Partnership consists of activities that indirectly impact on PPV and knife carrying or use.



## Moving Forward...

We can see that the problem we have in Walsall is not unique, and that West Midlands Police are committed to tackling it in partnership with Walsall Council and all other relevant partners. This briefing has been opportune for me as relatively new to my role, and I can commit to the following course of action (with the support of the Community Safety Partnership):

- 1.1 A review all information on the scale and nature of the issue in Walsall, looking to both recorded data and also to fill the gaps around it, to better understand and tackle it
- 1.2 Review the current best evidence of what works in reducing violence and knife-crime
- 1.3 Review the current strategy and activity against the evidence base
- 1.4 Adjust strategy and activity in line with best available evidence
- 1.5 Where possible, commission new resources to tackle the issue
- 1.6 Report back to scrutiny committee, if the committee wish

Feedback and suggestions from the Committee are welcome.

Andy Parsons  
Walsall NPU Commander  
March 27, 2018



## **Pilot study of youth engagement in combating knife crime**

### **Final Report**

**April 2017**

A study conducted in partnership between West Midlands Police, Centre for Critical Inquiry into Society and Culture (CCISC) Aston University and Legacy West Midlands.

#### **Research Team:**

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## Acknowledgments

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We also acknowledge the encouragement and support of Dr Gary Fooks, Co-Director of the Centre for Critical Inquiry into Society and Culture at Aston University.

Above all, we are hugely grateful to the young people and various stakeholders including families of young people affected by knife crime in the neighbourhoods of this study for sharing their experiences with us.

We acknowledge the financial assistance from West Midlands Police to undertake this pilot project.

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## Background & rationale for the project

Knife crime has been the subject of sustained governmental attention over the past decade (Squires 2009, Wood 2010, Kinsella 2011). There have been a number of policies and campaigns initiated primarily by the Home Office since 2006 when the strapline ‘*turn in your knife before it’s turned on you*’ was rolled out. Since then, knife crime has figured in regular government campaigns with a wider remit to tackle gang and gun related crime. This includes the Home Office initiated strategy to curb knife crime in 2008 that also gave impetus to a series of knife amnesties implemented as a chief intervention among local police forces.

In this pilot research study we set out to understand the views of young people living in parts of Birmingham and surrounding areas where the incidence of knife crime is reported to be high. In the case of North West Birmingham where most of the interviews and consultations with stakeholders were carried out, we also set out to understand the effects of the **conflation of knife crime with guns and gangs**; given that this part of the city has been the focus of initiatives to tackle such crime for over a decade. Our findings suggest that it is important to note the effect of this conflation in popularising the use of knives among young people - in a climate of ‘guns and gangs’ that has been a salient feature of local authority responses to violent crime in parts of large cities like Birmingham. This echoes the approach recently adopted by the London Metropolitan Police following its first knife crime conference in October 2016<sup>1</sup>.

The conflation of guns, gangs and knife crime also impacts efforts to *better design* initiatives that target knife crime *separately*, and, therefore, more effectively. In an attempt to assist in this endeavour, this project sought to interrogate some of the individual and local factors that might propel young people toward carrying knives or becoming involved in knife crime. This

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<sup>1</sup>Most London knife crime no longer gang-related, police say  
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/oct/13/most-london-knife-no-longer-gang-related-police-say>

involved gathering young people's own voices and sentiments, which are markedly absent in almost all the publications and grey literatures surveyed as part of this project.

The findings of this pilot research project are set out below in a thematic way. Firstly, we offer an overview of studies and reports that address the issue of knife crime and young people. We consider the findings of these alongside popular representations of knife crime as these have increasingly begun to feature in the media recently. We then consider young people's experiences and opinions against this background of *what we know*. Analysis of these are then used to inform recommendations toward addressing the issue of young people's propensity toward knife crime.

## What we know

### Existing analyses

Almost all studies we surveyed on the issue of knife crime point to **a lack of reliable data about motivations and patterns of use** (Squires 2009, Silvestri et al 2009, Sethi et al 2010, Ward et al 2011). This is attributed to data about motivations etcetera being hard to collect. **A key consequence of this is that the absence of reliable data leads to assumptions about the prevalence of knife possession among young people** in particular.

From the various literature reviews that exist on this topic we discerned that campaigns such as knife amnesties are often considered to be misleading. For example, the Home Office strapline '*turn in your knife before it's turned on you*', which accompanied the May 2006 knife amnesty has been criticised for being based on unreliable statistics.

**This has a wider consequence of leading to misinformation and subsequently, a spreading of fear, which detracts from the more important questions - such as 'why' young people are increasingly choosing to carry knives** (Fermin 2007, brap 2012).

The life-damaging consequences of knife crime are well documented in the literature too. Of the more recent government sponsored publications in this area, the Kinsella Report offers a nationwide snapshot of the effects. The report describes **'fear and fashion' as two key drivers of knife possession** among young people. While this is an important shift in the focus from generic interventions (such as knife amnesties) and impressions derived from static data sets, we suggest it is also **somewhat simplistic**. Through a number of targeted in-depth interviews and focus groups with young people, this pilot project has **sought to un-pack the appeal represented in the idea of 'fashion' and also 'fear'**.

Some of the **fear could be linked to a sense of distant relations with police and other statutory agencies**. The Kinsella report mentions this and cites examples of projects that attempt to bridge distance. The media is also cited as a problem, where negative stories project knives as an integral part of contemporary urban youth cultures (this is more apparent since the summer 2011 disturbances in cities and towns across England). **The Kinsella report also identified the lack of engagement with schools and families as contributing to the void within which, then, young people are drawn to knives.**

Others carrying knives also spurs people to carry one too (Marfleet 2008). Less is known whether this is because it is considered 'cool' or genuinely for violent use or self-protection. This needs to be unpacked so that interventions can be appropriately targeted. **For example, repeatedly saying that it is criminal may bolster the 'hard' image of carrying a knife. Playing on a different register of emotions – projecting knife carrying as uncool and as 'sheep mentality', where young people are likely to get caught by association – may trigger families or young people to re-think their associations with carrying knives, particularly in settings where crime is glamorized (Gunter 2008).**

## Knives, guns & gangs

Notions of protection and self-defence appear to predominate in accounts of weapon carrying. For example, Broadhurst et al. in their research on 'Gangs and Schools' note one respondent as saying:

*I can protect myself with a knife or a gun. I would rather be arrested than dead.* (Broadhurst et al. 2008)

Although there is considerable research on youth violence and the factors that are likely to engender or restrain it, much less is available on specific forms such as gun and knife crime. A brap report (2012) analyzing the impact of interventions on gang related crime in Birmingham noted that:

Young people and practitioners called for **more sensitive and individual needs-led services**, voluntary and community organisations that we interviewed also tended to **stress the need to view knife and gun youth crime separately**. Gun crime, they felt, was more easily associated with gang activity, but knife crime should not necessarily be regarded as gang-related or gang-driven.” (brap 2012: 38)

This view is in contrast to much law enforcement practice and governmental policy that tends to speak to both knife and gun youth crime as a whole. This is perhaps not surprising given that government policy since 2006 up until the recent Modern Crime Prevention Strategy (2016) has managed the two together.

A first step, therefore, would be to **disentangle knife crime from associations with guns and gangs**, so that we can understand its

significance alone<sup>2</sup>. This is a view that was adopted by the Metropolitan Police after its first knife crime conference held in London last October 2016<sup>3</sup>.

## Popular representations

There has been considerable interest in the media recently about the involvement of young people with knife crime. Although the official working definition of young people is taken to be 16-24 year olds, much recent commentary has illuminated the involvement of even younger cohorts – school age children – in knife crime (Younge 2017). Much, if not most, of the incidences involving school age children and young people with knife crime, involve street level fights. Young people involved in everyday disputes expected to be resolved through ‘a fight’ in the playground or outside the schools gates, now also involve a weapon that is usually a knife.

There is a growing perception that knife crime is ‘taking over the streets’ of big cities. Not surprisingly, much of this sentiment is centred around London where there have been numerous episodes of knife crime with fatal consequences. Indeed, there has been much focus too from the Mayor of London (Crime Summit) and recent pronouncements by the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick that tackling violent crime (guns and knives) would form a defining feature of her new tenure.

A recent BBC documentary entitled Teenage Knife Wars<sup>4</sup> describes some of the culture surrounding young people and knives. A key theme that emerges is that of young people carrying knives because of petty disputes, where they might do so to guarantee their own safety in the face of perceived escalation of violence *from people they know*. It is key to note that this is a personalized

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<sup>2</sup>This is not to suggest that associations with guns and gangs will not or do not exist. We recognize there will be overlaps.

<sup>3</sup>Most London knife crime no longer gang-related, police say  
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/oct/13/most-london-knife-no-longer-gang-related-police-say>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p04xwqh7/teenage-knife-wars>

phenomena and not part of gangs or postcode wars. Young people professed to carrying knives to help settle petty disputes - stabbing each other over small sums of money or arguments over girls, for example.

### 'Show' and bravado

In the midst of the media frenzy on knives and knife crime, there appears to be a normalisation amongst young people to carry knives, where the carrying of particularly big knives is for show. In this endeavor, social media can be a powerful platform for young people to evidence this and 'look cool'. Examples include the use of Snapchat and Instagram where pictures can be flashed, posted momentarily and taken down instantly leaving little trace. This may also help explain the prevalence of more severe stab wounds on victims as evidenced by the increase in numbers of deaths attributable to knife crime (Younge 2017, BBC). Stabbing to kill or to seriously injure and not just to scare the victim, but to kill or seriously wound appear to be the hallmarks of recent knife crime incidences reported in the media.

This normalisation of knife crime also means that it is unremarkable for young people to know someone who carries a knife or someone who has been the victim of a stabbing. The everyday feature of knives and knife crime, partly aided by the media reporting mentioned above, means that certain types of crime such as robbery become popular as knives become 'trendy'. Carrying a knife can become part of the cultural habitus of certain young people. In such a climate, a 'culture of knife crime' can emerge where knives are resorted to when petty disputes get out of hand. In this climate too, young people are claimed to possess or carry knives in case the people they have misunderstandings with happen to be carrying knives too. It is about 'bravado; having to match what they may be up against. Even if a young person may seek to simply enter into a fight in hostile circumstances, their presumption that the other party is carrying a knife is likely to propel them to arm themselves too.

This also highlights many young people's concern about their own *protection*,

which appears as a key theme in media reporting on the issue. This is generally explained as stemming from perceptions about the lack of police presence and lack of faith and trust in the police. So young people choose or express a desire to take their 'protection' into their own hands, leading to cycles of violence in which knives come to feature.

As part of this pilot research project we set out to probe these issues further. The research questions sought to understand the role of media representations in leading to a sensationalizing of knives and knife crime; the resultant glamorization among young people of knives; and the very personalized nature of their use in petty disputes or to ward off threat or simply to carry these in response to a perceived sense of fear.<sup>5</sup> Below we discuss findings from interviews and focus groups with a range of young people as well as stakeholders from across Birmingham, Coventry and Walsall.

## Methods

The research was carried out between November 2016 and February 2017. The initial research brief was to conduct a number of interviews in already identified areas in Birmingham, Coventry and Dudley. As the fieldwork commenced we were able to broaden the fieldwork sites to also include Winson Green, Bordesley Green and Birmingham city centre. We also covered Walsall in place of Dudley due to challenges with gaining access to young people in the latter. This, however, did not diminish the results but added an extra layer of insights as will be discussed below.

In total 70 young people were interviewed for this research. This included 30 one-to-one interviews across the areas 10 focus groups consisting solely of young people.

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<sup>5</sup>See Appendix 1 for the semi-structured interview guide used to elicit young peoples responses to these questions.

In addition we conducted 12 one-to-one interviews with stakeholders and 2 focus groups with parents and community representatives in Walsall and Lozells & East Handsworth. These provided valuable insights into discussions about engaging young people and working with statutory agencies to help combat knife crime.

The objectives of the research were:

- To gain a better understanding of young people's propensity toward knife crime in a number of designated areas
- To identify and understand the role of different drivers and factors in generating propensity toward knife crime
- To identify local dynamics in terms of behaviours, cultures and actions that might be acted upon to help reduce propensity to knife crime
- To identify effective interventions to prevent young people becoming involved in knife crime

It is intended that the research findings along with suggested interventions will enable West Midlands Police to enter into dialogue with a range of stakeholders - including young people, practitioners and community groups—toward designing a collective, informed and sustained approach to handling knife crime in the West Midlands.

## Findings

### Why are young people carrying knives?

#### Everyday fears

Our consultations highlighted a number of common causes or motivating factors for knife carrying. Firstly, young people reported a sense of fear about a perceived prevalence of crime in their daily lives. This was often linked to media portrayals as well as a sense of their neighbourhoods as areas where crime was prevalent due to a number of factors (discussed below). It is important to note that fear was not always attributable to previous experiences of being a victim of crime. Fear was often coupled with the belief that knives were a source of protection.

“If someone is going to use a knife against me, I wont give a fuck and will knife him back” (14 year old, male, Lozells)

There is nothing to do, so we go about looking for fights.’ (15 year old, male, Erdington)

“I can protect myself with a knife or a gun. I would rather be arrested than dead”. (Broadhurst et al. 2008)

Another motivating factor was the perception that carrying a knife is a means of acquiring status or ‘prestige’ particularly on the street or in the neighbourhood where these were areas marked as ‘dangerous’. Knives appear to be the “weapon of choice” by young people who professed to carry a weapon, and the ready availability of knives (i.e. in the home) helped preserve this sentiment. All young people we spoke to stressed that they did not go out of their way to acquire sophisticated knives, instead they relied on knives that were available in their kitchens.

We learned of instances where young people drew on knives in personal or one-to-one altercations as opposed to organised criminal activities that may be part of ‘guns and gangs’. The personal - as opposed to organised

'gang' - nature of knife crimes was suggested/confirmed by the overwhelming use of household type instruments (i.e. kitchen knives) in the testimonies of young people who carried knives or witnessed others carrying them.

"Everyone thinks that it (carrying knives) is about gangs and being cool but the reality is that we are more at risk of racist attacks, paedophiles, drug dealers and terrorists but nobody cares" (18 year old, male, Hockley)

Some young people highlighted their concerns about threats; risks and dangers in their immediate neighbourhood or community. Journeys to and from school were often particularly difficult prompting some to take complicated routes to avoid threatening areas, and in extreme cases to even play truant. Our interviews with a younger cohort of males highlighted school journeys as particularly problematic, implying that initiatives focused on making schools more secure and weapon-free may not be addressing the main issue, which concerns journeys to and from school. One of the young people we interviewed stated:

"I feel the need to bring a weapon into school. You might get attacked on the way to school, on the way back. It's the only way to protect myself." (15 year old, male, Newtown)

### **Case Study**

In January 2017 there was an incident reported at a Further Education College in Birmingham where two young men were involved in a knife crime.

Both the perpetrator and victim had never met in person prior to the attack; they had a disagreement on Facebook that led one young man to stab the other when he was on his way home from college.

We had informal conversations with the perpetrator's mum who insisted that her son not be viewed as a criminal and was 'just a normal teenager'.

She was distraught and struggled to understand why her son acted in such a cruel manner. This incident highlights the personalised and one-on-one nature of knife crime.

## 'Prestige'

Our conversations with practitioners working with young people in deprived parts of Birmingham and Coventry highlighted that notions of 'street credibility' and 'respect' can become significant to young people who may lack legitimate access to other forms of status achievement. Yet this 'street social capital', while it bonds young people closer to their peer groups can also serve to distance them from the wider community and societal values. Acting to maintain one's local reputation and the 'respect' of others can provoke conflict and violence. Interestingly while young people say they carry weapons to protect themselves in areas they perceive to be unsafe, it is **the presumption that others are armed that helps produce fear and insecurity.**

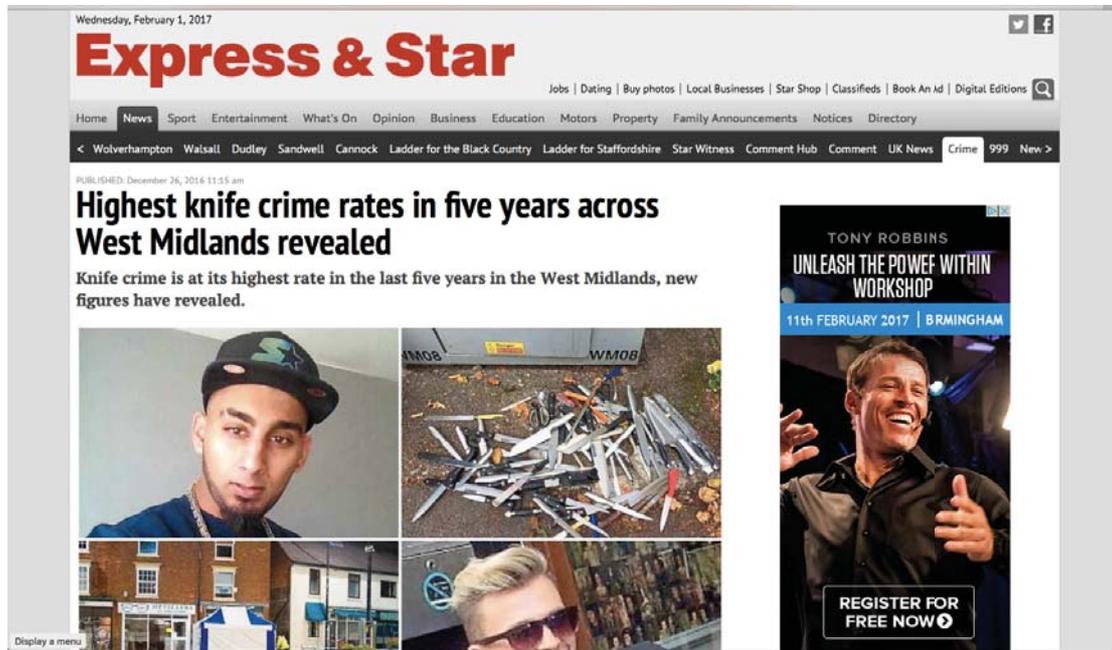
"A very worrying development that many young people are wowed by the glamour of criminal lifestyle. Instead of developing their skills in positive things they are thinking of doing harmful things" (Youth Engagement Practitioner)

"Only those lads that are part of gangs carry knife, mainly for protection" (16 years old, male, Lozells)

Often the only way to preserve or project local prestige was through involvement in violent activity and using weapons. Similarly, as our consultations highlighted, carrying a knife may appear to make sense to a teenager worried about being attacked, especially in an area where stabbings or threats with knives are common.

Knowing that other people are carrying weapons makes young people consider new and different ways of seeing their surroundings. Where you go, who you talk to, how you talk to them – are all surrounded by the need to evaluate and consider risk and threat. Similarly, in an area where reputation may be very important to the way people see themselves - as well as how others see them - that reputation needs to be preserved if challenged and 'losing face' becomes something to be avoided at all costs

The regular media attention has generated considerable sensationalism around knife crime. The image below is an example of local media coverage on knife crime.



Many participants in our research agreed that media and particularly certain genres of music such as grime helped to glamorise street crime. Yet, the influence of media needed to be placed alongside peer group pressure where it was felt that certain individuals who were perceived to have 'street cred' made crime more attractive.

Many participants in our research did not view carrying a knife as something that was cool or fashionable, however. Knives were reportedly carried out of necessity so that people could feel safe.

"Sometimes you get drawn in with friends due to the reputation that comes with carrying a knife" (18 year old, male, Newtown)

"Most of my friends carry a knife" (17 year old, male, Newtown)

Many participants felt that they were vulnerable and felt 'exposed'. Young people claimed to know about several incidents involving knives in their areas that were not reported by the media. In Lozells and East Handsworth, Winson

Green and Aston young people insisted that knife crime not be viewed as a 'black thing', and that all young people witnessed varying levels of crime on a day-to-day basis, which made them feel nervous.

"Everyone thinks that it (carrying knives) is about gangs and being cool but the reality is that we are more at risk of racist attacks, paedophiles, drug dealers and terrorists but nobody cares" (18 year old, male, Aston)

Many young people said they were not scared of the police but were afraid of the judicial system. Many described themselves as 'victims' and 'targets' of police injustice:

"When I see a police officer I don't feel comforted that he is there to protect me, in fact the opposite, I expect to be further bullied and abused, my first experience of being threatened in my neighbourhood came from a police officer, not a drug dealer". (19 year old, male, Lozells)

In one focus group held in Walsall with nine young men, they were asked about how young people might get hold of a knife. Their responses were as follows:

- the kitchen drawer
- a friend/elder
- eBay/Amazon

These young people claimed that knives were concealed in clothing and/or hidden at home. They also acknowledged that if their parents found them to be carrying a knife they would go 'mad' and be disappointed. All participants in this focus group said that they would never admit to possessing a knife if caught, and would make up some 'excuse' to explain why it is in their possession.

Those who claimed to carry a knife said that it was usually used as a scare tactic and to "act hard". All participants agreed that most knife crime incidents were a result of personal 'beef' that had got out of hand and the knife was used in self-defence. It was thought that very rarely would someone go out with the intention on stabbing or killing someone.

## Place

The sensationalised nature of knife crime did, however, impact people in the areas we researched; through the negative representations and narratives about knife crime in areas of high deprivation and those marked off as places where 'guns and gangs' were rife:

"The issue is Birmingham is centrally located. Its like a dumping ground; people from all over the country travel here do their business (crime) and then move on, many times the crimes committed here are not by local young people, its outsiders" (Senior Youth Worker)

Interestingly, however, sensationalist media coverage of knife crime in the Midlands was also discussed by participants as a form of **deterrent** too. Young people in Birmingham East described trends they were witnessing (as a result of exaggerated media stories) as 'stupid' and 'enough to put [them] off'. Although they complained about a lack of police presence in their areas, the devastation witnessed within their communities as a result of knife crime, especially the recent rise, was also suggested as being enough to turn them away from such activity. So they perhaps might have considered carrying a knife previously (failing to regard the act as a serious crime), but a perceived increase of instances and presence in the news has actually prevented some young people from becoming active or embroiled in knife related activities. In this sense, **it is important to think about influencing media coverage and dialogue around knife crime and the resulting effects that can be produced.**

**The sensationalism around knife crime, however, was more important as a driver of fear. Where fear does play a part in propelling young people to carry knives,** there were a number of reasons that shaped this disposition. In a climate where young people feared being attacked they suggested that carrying a knife made them feel safe, not adequately realising the dangers of doing so.

"I am always concerned about being stabbed "

“Carrying a knife make life much safer for me, no one can touch me”

“I always fear being attacked, that is why I am paranoid”

“If I die tonight, my blood is on your hands.” (13 year old, male, Winson Green)

In this powerful invocation, the young person was talking candidly about a perceived need to defend himself. He uttered this against a background of feeling left on his own, because of a detachment from youth services, family and society in general.

It is important to note the importance of area or **territory** here. The young person was stating this knowing the notoriety of his neighbourhood; Winson Green. This sense of fear and insecurity associated with territory was also mentioned by other young people:

“I do not feel the need to put a knife in my back pocket if I am going to Sutton or somewhere posh. But If I am going to link with friends in the City Centre or in our back yards I will carry it”  
(15 years old, male, Newtown)

“If danger was to present itself we want to show that we are protected to warn people off” (18 year old, male, Newtown)

“I am afraid that going into different areas that I will be attacked or questioned so I must have something to defend myself” (19 year old, male, Nechells)

“So many young people carry knives in this generation that others are afraid not to also” (21 year old, female, Handsworth)

“I have personally been threatened by knife, near the town centre” (20 year old, male, Lozells)

Our consultations revealed that young people felt that a higher proportion of crime and violence mostly affect disadvantaged areas. People living in deprived localities do not just experience higher levels of crime, but also suffer from various other problems, including poverty, low social capital and limited social mobility. The evidence appears to show that where young people attained academic achievement, associated with peers who were not involved

with criminal activity, and lived with caring and supportive parents or other adults, the desire or need to carry a knife was far lower.

“Where neighbourhoods are threatening, weapon carrying may make young people feel safer”. (17 year old, male, Bordesley Green)

Inner city areas are looking more and more like ‘ghettos’ whilst the city centre seems out of this world and out of our reach. The buildings are looking sleek and shiny” (17 years old, male, Perry Barr)

“I do not feel the need to put a knife in my back pocket if I am going to Sutton or somewhere posh. But If I am going to link with friends in the City Centre or in our back yards I will carry it” (15 years old male, Newtown)

“Young people see injustice around them, like not find jobs, live in crap houses and get emotionally affected. The gangs use these situations to recruit vulnerable young people” (17 year’s old, male, Aston)

One participant in a focus group held in Hockley stated that while gang and postcode wars had ‘died down’ in Birmingham they had been replaced by ‘beef’ on social media that ‘gets out of hand’:

“Carrying a knife is just a symbol to stay safe and represent my area” (18 year old, male, Aston)

### Which young people are prone to carrying knives?

Our consultations suggest that knife crime is also an expression of wider phenomena of youth crime and violence. Therefore, it needs to be viewed in more general contexts of disaffection and delinquency, which are in turn the complex products of inter-related individual, family, social, biological and environmental factors.<sup>6</sup>

As part of this research we interviewed a number of stakeholders who had experience of working with young people as youth workers, family outreach

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<sup>6</sup>A recent feature length report published by the Guardian entitled ‘Beyond the blade: the truth about knife crime in Britain’ drew a correlation between austerity - and particularly the stripping away of services for young people since 2009 - and higher rates of knife crime (Younge 2017).

and/or in the context of 'guns and gangs'. These interviews yielded valuable insights about Knife crime as **not** an organised issue, which made it less easy to predict and police.

"Young people frequently complain of 'boredom', frustration and a lack of age-appropriate and affordable social and leisure facilities. They often describe a distrust of adults and authority figures" (Senior youth worker, Birmingham, Coventry)

"Inequality, lack of opportunity, poverty and (relative) deprivation are conducive to thwarted aspirations. The development of criminal careers can therefore also be understood as a way of satisfying material aspirations" (Youth worker, Birmingham)

A senior youth worker with extensive experience of working with young people on 'guns, gangs and knives' offered a valuable insight into the major predictors of young people committing violent crimes:

- "individual characteristics (e.g. gender, age, age at first offence, academic performance or IQ: that is to say, being male and/or low performing at school, and/or emotionally unstable, and/or with a low IQ are factors which increase the likelihood of violence during adolescence and into adulthood)
- their relationship with parents and family
- their behaviour and their performance in school
- whether they have friends who carry out violent offences
- whether they carry out other types of crimes
- drug and alcohol use
- whether they have been exposed to violence, either as a victim or as a bystander"

In addition, our discussions with a recognised expert practitioner in the area of guns and gang related violence highlighted how the factors considered above might play into creating young people as impressionable to a range of violent activities including knife crime, particularly in disadvantaged areas:

"People living in deprived areas do not just experience higher levels of crime: they suffer from other problems, including poverty, low social capital and limited social mobility.

“The impact of multiple problems is cumulative: the more social problems are encountered by families and individuals, the more likely they are to remain in poverty”.

“Violence in such areas is a complex product of the way opportunities and lives are shaped for people living there, and the way that people respond to their situation and to their environment.”

“Violence causes fear and stress: it can result in various forms of mental illness and even lead to suicide. Being exposed to violence – as a victim or by seeing someone else being victimised – makes people more predisposed to commit violence themselves and to carrying weapons.”

“Although research is still limited in this area, where young people live seems to affect whether they get involved in crime, and whether (or how difficult) it is to stop.”

### Summary of findings

- motivations for using knives seem to be private i.e. personal feuds and not related to guns and gangs per se
- the media frenzy and regular stories about knives being used in petty crime or disputes have popularized and normalized knives and knife crime among young people
- this private focus also helps explain why young people we spoke to choose to use domestic knives and not seek out or spend on elaborate instruments
- lack of police visibility along with diminished trust in official institutions prompts young people to want to fend for themselves
- knife crime is not only a black/Asian thing – it is spread across the city and involves all groups
- certain parts of the city (i.e. deprived neighborhoods) prompt a sense of insecurity among young people who claim to want to carry weapons for security
- there is a worrying trend in use among school age children
- interventions need to involve joined up approaches among police/families/schools/youth clubs

## Interventions

A further objective of this project was to suggest how WMP might intervene in addressing knife crime. Below we will draw in from our research and discussions with young people and practitioners to incorporate their suggestions about 'what works'. We discern a number of areas of possible interventions WMP may pursue. These are concerned with:

- Improving how we understand the problem
- Improving how we can approach the problem

While at the same time helping to move us away from traditional approaches that view policing knife crime through conventional methods such as stop and search, police patrols and knife amnesties. These, as the evidence from data reviews and our interviews have shown, have limited impact and indirectly sensationalise the issue further.

The findings from this pilot study and the interventions deriving from these offer a number of areas that could be included in any new strategy on knife crime.

## Existing initiatives

Most of the participants in this research felt that the police were not adequately representative and supportive of young people. It was felt that the police are very much aware of the 'real' crime (often perceived as drugs related) in their areas, but chose not to do anything about it while using young people as political scapegoats.

"It's easier to explain to the little old lady she is under threat from a powerless 14year old in a hoodie rather than tackling a drug underworld"  
(20 year old, male, Aston)

"I think police could do more to prevent real crime so that we didn't have to carry a knife"(17 Year old, Male, Soho)

Many young people said they weren't scared of the police but scared of the judicial system. Many described themselves as 'victims' and 'targets' of police injustice.

"When I see a police officer I don't feel comforted that he is there to protect me, in fact the opposite, I expect to be further bullied and abused, my first experience of being threatened in my neighbourhood came from a police officer, not a drug dealer" (21 year old, male, Handsworth)

When probed further on this issue young people commented that traditional policing methods were their cause for concern. Practices such as stop and search were seen as archaic and out-dated and not responsive to the complex nature of young people's attitudes and involvement in knife crime.

Almost all participants dismissed knife bins as a sufficient strategy, suggesting that they were pointless and not an effective deterrent. In particular it was felt that they should not be placed near to a police station or where CCTV was in operation:

"I would rather give it to the rag and bone man!" (19 year old, male, Winson Green)

Instead sustained engagement with local communities was seen as able to deter crime in general.

"Stop, wasting money on adverts, leaflets etc. and partner/fund with real people that are trusted in the community and supporting youths" (18 year old, Lozells)

### Intervention:

Acknowledgement should be made of the very real fear many young people have of victimisation, the origins of which are complex. This acknowledgement should involve taking young people's fears seriously. Once the fear is acknowledged, young people should be reassured that police and other agencies are working hard to ensure their safety, so rendering carrying a knife unnecessary.

It should also be emphasised to young people that carrying a knife increases rather than decreases their risk of victimisation.

Knife amnesties are ineffective on their own, but do have an awareness raising function, which can supplement and reinforce the messages contained in educational interventions.

Appropriate community organisations with reach among younger cohorts should be co-opted to help design and deliver positive messages of engagement with statutory services toward a building a civic culture that is open to young people.

### Engaging young people

The majority of young people we spoke to did not think that adults had a sufficient understanding of how dangerous young people felt their neighbourhoods were. The sense of fear as discussed above, was, therefore, allied with a deep distrust and lack of confidence in public institutions such as the local authority and police.

In addition to this 'lack of confidence', many young people from deprived areas tended to share anti-police attitudes, which for many were compounded by a sense that they are routinely 'over-targeted and under-protected'. One senior youth worker we spoke to highlighted the deep-rooted existence of 'no-

grassing' rules, sometimes sustained by threats, intimidation or reprisals. These anti-police sentiments are in the main reinforced by having experienced some of the least satisfactory forms of 'community' policing.

Negative attitudes towards police were informed by 'bad experiences' young had when reporting crime, for example, or when hearing stories about police misconduct and police harassment. Some young people reported not feeling listened to by police as well as a general lack of respect. Furthermore, a large number of young people viewed police as 'outsiders' who have a negative view of *their* community.

Young people reported their first contact with police and PCSOs as taking place in their school environments and these were largely described as positive. Subsequently, young people reported greater levels of trust in police and PCSOs based at their school.

#### Interventions:

Strengthening partnerships between local policing teams and youth projects at a neighbourhood level.

School-based police and PCSOs could be better utilised as a resource for building links between police and young people. They have existing relationships with young people that can be used to break down barriers and bridge the gap between local young people and police.

Diversionary activities have some potential to help combat knife crime. These activities, which include engagement in sport and mentoring programmes, may help prevent young people from choosing to carry a knife. Many of the young people we spoke to that attend youth clubs showed a more mature outlook to issues around knives and understood the implications of carrying one.

Social Media should be embraced to raise awareness about the consequences of knife crime. Almost all the people we consulted were users of at least one of the main social media platforms (Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter). A well conceived media campaign could involve young people in its design and delivery.

### Representations

We have noted above that knife crime has become a very public concern, much of which is generated through media portrayals, which simultaneously work to glamorise the issue as well as inform the public about the horrific effects of knife crime.

Stakeholders commented on how young people become caught between competing representations, and that it is in this in-between space where messages are circulating that young people are open to influences; positive and/or negative.

### Intervention:

Developing educational campaigns and approaches that portray an unglamorous image of knives and knife crime. These could involve the use of testimonies from people affected by knife crime. This should also involve publicising more widely the criminal consequences of being involved in such crime.

Focusing on knives as weapons may prove to be more of a distraction. A longer term and sustained approach is needed to understand and tackle the conditions in which weapon carrying and use becomes an option – or perceived necessity in some areas of the city.

## Partnership working

As part of this research project we held two round table discussions with police practitioners at different stages while the research was evolving. This enabled us to discuss emergent findings with practitioners, which in turn helped inform thinking around interventions.

These discussions, alongside the consultations with young people and stakeholders, yielded valuable insight about the challenges of partnership working to address knife crime. For example, the reluctance of schools to engage in the tackling of knife crime or move towards nurturing closer partnership working between youth clubs, community groups and statutory agencies.

Many young people we interviewed from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities expressed respect for family (particularly mothers). This played into their attitudes about avoiding knives and knife crime - not so much out of guilt and getting caught but more about 'shame'. Significant numbers of participants agreed that their parents would be "ashamed", "worried", "disgusted" or "disappointed" if they found out that their child carries a knife. It was felt that this has a negative effect as it leaves the child with no one to talk to and makes them vulnerable to negative influences by peers.

Importantly, many young people were aware of the laws around carrying knives but did not realise the real life consequences of doing so. Instead, they saw a greater immediate risk of the consequence of not having a knife to protect themselves.

A number of youth workers and community organisations we interviewed suggested, from past experiences, that training/engaging parents was an effective method of preventing offending. Our discussion with youth workers and young people highlighted that where parents were spending less time with their children or seemed 'disinterested' in their children's lives those

children were at risk of carrying knives and had less deterrent of ‘what their parents *will think if they got caught*’:

“The combination of less time with parents plus few affordable or easily accessible alternatives of adult-led activities has resulted in some of the most-at-risk groups of young people being “freer” to socialise unsupervised with peers in public areas than in the past” (Senior youth worker)

In most of our discussions both with young people, practitioners and youth workers it was suggested that early preventative programmes can deter young people away from a) crime b) carrying weapons including knives. Some of the below were suggestions of areas to focus on:

- behavioural strategies (e.g. rewards, good behaviour ‘contracts’);
- cognitive techniques (which focuses on changing thinking skills: e.g. problem solving, anger control)
- social skills training (e.g. communication skills, conflict management)
- counselling and therapy (group, individual or family)
- peer mediation
- parent training (including skills training and family group counselling).

#### Interventions:

Mentoring programmes could be developed or harnessed to help develop better inter-personal relations between young people prone to violence and statutory agencies. This may involve mentoring between a young person and a positive adult role model; our research suggests that fostering a positive relationship between young people and adults can serve as a protective factor against violence. Mentoring may also be between peers themselves, which may build self – confidence; self -esteem was also identified as a protective factor against violence.

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## Appendix 1

### Pilot study of Youth Engagement in combatting Knife Crime

#### Guide for interviews/focus groups/consultations

To explore **why** young people are carrying knives:

- Fear – what causes/leads to people fearing that they need to carry a knife
  - Media stories?
  - Personal histories
- What are you afraid of? Why do you need to carry a knife?
- Have you ever been threatened personally with a knife?
- Do you fear being attacked?
- Are you concerned that you could be stabbed (if you carry)?
- Do you think carrying a knife makes you safer or less safe?
- What would your parents think if they found out you carried a knife?
- Do/would you carry other weapons? If so what?
- Do your friends / family members carry knives?
- Do young people consider it cool/fashionable to carry a knife?
  - What makes it fashionable? Peer group, family, media, computer games
  - What type of knife do/would they carry?
- Are people aware of the consequences of carrying a knife?

To explore **what** young people might do with a knife:

- Do you know where to get a knife from?
- is it just for creating a scare? Or to act 'hard'? or part of membership of a 'gang', group, postcode?
- Would you use it? If so in what situation?
  - Self defence? Crime?
- What would your parents think if they found out you carried a knife?
- Have you ever seen your parents use a knife outside of your house?

To explore **how** WMP could intervene:

- Do you feel safe in your neighbourhood?
- Do you think B'ham is a safe/scary place?
- What would stop you from carrying / using knives?
- What do you think of the police?
- Does the idea of getting trouble with the police scare you?
- What do you think of 'knife bins' or other ways the police is trying to stop people carrying knives?
- What do you think the police should do?