

# Understanding misunderstood youth

The facts behind the public's fears and how early intervention can build a safer future

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## Introduction

Street violence involving guns, knives and gangs is a major concern for people in the UK. The human and financial costs fuel regular media reports about young people harming each other and damaging the communities in which they live. Calls to 'get tough' with youth violence never seem to be far away. But what is the real story behind the headlines? What is the true extent of young people's involvement in gangs and how should the problems be addressed? How can we achieve the right balance between prevention and punishment?

nfpSynergy has created this report to:

- contribute to the knowledge of charities, policy makers and community organisations working to support young people involved with and affected by street violence
- explore the facts about young people's involvement in street violence and identify the groups most at risk
- examine the solutions proposed by charities and not-for-profit organisations working to support young people with their needs and aspirations to prevent them becoming offenders.

## 1. Public concern about street violence

Violence can devastate families and cut short the lives of both victims and offenders. Aside from the human cost, street violence puts a strain on public services. The Home Office estimate that homicide and wounding cost society around £13 billion every year, £4 billion of which is spent on the NHS and criminal justice system.<sup>1</sup>

Young people's involvement in street violence, especially gang-related violence, is of particular concern to the public. The 2008 report by the Street Weapons Commission suggested that

<sup>1</sup> The economic and social costs of crime against individuals and households 2003-2004, Home Office, 2005, cited in C. Booth QC et al, 2008, The Street Weapons Commission Report, Channel 4, p.66

victims and perpetrators of street violence were getting younger, while the number of children and young people carrying knives was increasing.<sup>2</sup>

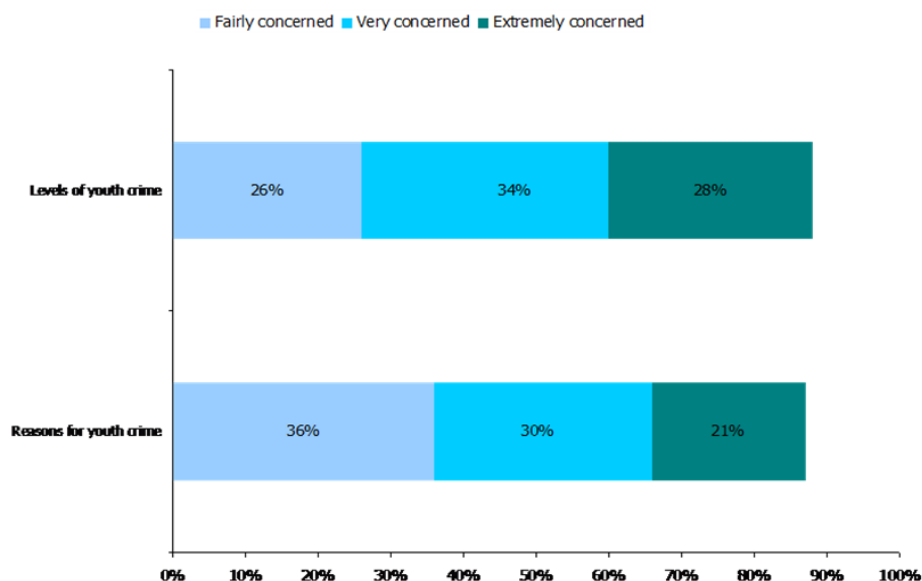
The same report noted that hospital admissions for 'assault with a sharp object' (widely considered a reliable indicator of knife woundings) increased (among all age groups) by more than 20% between 2003 and 2007.<sup>3</sup> Over the same time period, the number of children (under the age of 15) admitted to hospital for such assaults rose from 61 to 95 per year.<sup>4</sup>

Concerns raised by the same report, which received widespread media attention, were highlighted by nfpSynergy's Charity Awareness Monitor in January 2009. We found that well over half (62%) of the UK public were extremely concerned or very concerned about levels of youth crime, and over half (51%) with the reasons young people commit crime.<sup>5</sup>

It is not inappropriate for the public to be concerned about young people who are getting involved – or at risk of getting involved – in crime. However, as we will suggest below, public concern about youth crime is often misinformed, disproportionate, and misdirected; this has damaging consequences for the social cohesion between generations and it distorts society's response to young people in trouble.

## Respondents' concerns about prompted issues related to child welfare

"Thinking about the following issues related to child welfare, please state how concerned you are about them"



Base: 1,000 adults 16+, Britain.

2 C. Booth QC et al, 2008. The Street Weapons Commission Report, Channel 4

3 C. Booth QC et al, 2008. The Street Weapons Commission Report, Channel 4

4 NHS Information Centre, Hospital Episode Statistics: Inpatient Data (External Cause). (Accessed February 2010: <http://www.hesonline.nhs.uk/Ease/servlet/ContentServer?siteID=1937&categoryID=211>). The increase among 0-16 year olds in the same period was 63%, as reported here: (Accessed February 2010: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1030082/Child-knife-victims-62-cent-just-years.html>)

5 By contrast, only 26% of respondents were extremely or very concerned about how young people are perceived by the media (according to nfpSynergy's Charity Awareness Monitor in January 2010).

## 1.1 Young people are not the problem (violence is)

### Public concern is misinformed

In this report, we take public concerns about street violence seriously. We will address them by examining the facts, as well as some proposed solutions. But we are also wary of treating young people, rather than street violence, as the problem – a process some academics have called the ‘problematism’ of youth.

It is well documented that young people are often seen as trouble, or always in trouble, by adults in their community and society at large.<sup>6</sup> The public’s concerns about youth violence come as no surprise when one in three media articles about young people is about crime.<sup>7</sup> Teenage boys get the worst deal: over half of all articles about them are about crime. Sadly, most of the limited occasions where teenage boys are described in glowing terms – ‘model student’, ‘angel’, ‘altar boy’ or ‘every mother’s perfect son’ – are reserved for those occasions where boys have met a violent and untimely death. Indeed, teenage boys are presented so negatively by the media that even other teenage boys are wary of them.<sup>8</sup>

Negative views about young people in the UK are not just limited to crime. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of all media stories about young people are negative and only 14% are positive.<sup>9</sup> This is all the more damaging when nearly two-thirds (64%) of adults cite media reports as their chief source of information about young people.<sup>10</sup> Anxieties about young people result from, as well as feed into, a lack of contact between generations. As the research literature politely notes: “public perception is not always grounded in people’s actual contact or interaction with young people.”<sup>11</sup>

Young people in the UK are well aware of their negative image. Our research with the Scout Association found that the majority (70%) of 13-18 year olds feel adults in Britain today are overly critical of young people. This is despite the fact 34% of young people report they have helped out in their community and 72% want to make a difference in the wider world.

It is not surprising that in the most recent report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the four UK Children’s Commissioners identified negative attitudes towards children as one of the areas where the wellbeing of young people in the UK has deteriorated.<sup>12</sup>

We think that young people often get a raw deal in the public’s perception. We believe that with the right support even the most vulnerable young people can avoid the dangers of street violence in the areas they live and build bright futures for themselves and their communities.

6 See e.g. YouthNet UK and British Youth Council 2006, Young and Shah 2008, Henderson et al 2007, Margo et al 2006.

7 Children and Young People Now/MORI, 2008.

8 Women in Journalism, Hoodies or Altar Boys?, 2009. More than one in four teenage boys (28%) ‘always’ or ‘often’ feel wary when they see other teenage boys they don’t know.

9 Children and Young People Now/MORI, 2008

10 Hough M & Roberts JV, 2004. Youth Crime and Youth Justice: Public Opinion in England and Wales, The Policy Press

11 Halsey, K & White, R, 2008. Young People, Crime and Public Perceptions: a Review of the Literature (LGA Research Report), Slough: NFER

12 UK Children’s Commissioners’ Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2008

## 1.2 Public fears versus the facts

### Public concern is disproportionate

As we have already seen, research shows that adults in Britain are concerned about levels of youth crime. Two-fifths (42%) of people in Britain mistakenly believe that half of all crimes in the country are committed by young people.<sup>13</sup> Other research suggests that adults perceive young people in Britain to be 'the worst in Europe,' and they are seen as the most likely to engage in offending behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

But do these negative images match up with reality? Official statistics suggest they don't. In fact, according to official research, the majority of young people in the UK are law abiding citizens. In 2006 a Home Office study found that over three-quarters (78%) of young people had not committed a criminal offence in the last 12 months. (Of those that did break the law, many did so infrequently and committed relatively trivial offences unlikely to have come to police attention.)<sup>15</sup> The evidence suggests that there has been little change in youth crime over the last 15 years, and certainly no notable increase.<sup>16</sup>

Home Office research also suggests that young people's involvement in gun and knife crime is rare. The 2006 study mentioned above found that fewer than 1% of 10 to 25-year-olds had carried a gun and only 3% had carried a knife in the last 12 months.<sup>17</sup> Of the young people who did carry a knife, a very small minority reported using it to threaten or injure someone (4% and 1% respectively).

We have to approach statistics such as these with a degree of caution because they rely on the honesty and co-operation of interviewees. Recorded crime figures too, suffer from the problem of under-reporting. Hospital admission figures are seen as more reliable, and as noted above, evidence from hospital admissions (unlike police data) suggested an increase in stabbings between 2003 and 2007. However, this was accompanied by an almost comparable fall in gunshot injuries over the same time period, suggesting a changing pattern of violence rather than any real increase.<sup>18</sup> And, thankfully, the stabbing statistics have since improved: the number of under-15s admitted to hospital for assault with a sharp object fell by 23% from 2008 to 2009.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the number of young people (aged between 10 and 19) in the UK losing their lives to violence fell from 73 in 2008 to 51 in 2009.

13 Hough M & Roberts JV, 2004. Youth Crime and Youth Justice: Public Opinion in England and Wales, The Policy Press. See also Ipsos MORI, 2006, Attitudes Towards Teenagers and Crime

14 Margo, J. et al, 2006. Freedoms Orphans: Raising the Youth in a Changing World [cited in Halsey, K & White, R 2008. Young People, Crime and Public Perceptions: a Review of the Literature]

15 Roe, S & Ashe, J, 2008. Young people and crime: findings from the 2006 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, Home Office. The survey covers young people aged 10 to 25, and 20 core offences grouped into the following offence categories: Burglary; Vehicle-related thefts; Other thefts; Criminal damage; Robbery; Assault; and Selling drugs.

16 A considered review of the evidence can be found in: Halsey, K & White, R, 2008. Young People, Crime and Public Perceptions: a Review of the Literature (LGA Research Report), Slough: NFER

17 Roe, S & Ashe, J, 2008. Young people and crime: findings from the 2006 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, Home Office. The survey asked whether they carried a gun or knife with them for their own protection, for use in crimes or in case they got into a fight.

18 Knives, guns and teens, 2008. BBC News Blog: Mark Easton's UK (Accessed February 2010: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2008/07/knives\\_guns\\_and\\_teens.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2008/07/knives_guns_and_teens.html))

19 NHS Information Centre, Hospital Episode Statistics: Inpatient Data (External Cause). (Accessed February 2010: <http://www.hesonline.nhs.uk/Ease/servlet/ContentServer?siteID=1937&categoryID=211>). The actual fall was a drop of 21, from 93 to 72 incidents.

The statistics can fluctuate considerably, none are entirely unproblematic, and they often paint a mixed and complex picture – or more frequently, they are selected to paint the picture that is desired.<sup>20</sup> But what has never been in doubt is the gap between public perception and the reality of young people’s involvement with knives and guns. The statistics never added up to a nationwide gun and knife crime epidemic; media hysteria was driven by real increases in knife violence in specific inner-city areas (primarily within deprived boroughs in London). Recently, the retreating wave of media hysteria has left exposed what was apparent to reasoned analysis all along: serious street violence and gang crime are problems that affect a minority of young people in specific, well-defined areas. Regardless of the ebb and flow of national statistics and public anxiety, for these young people such problems are real – a daily and often terrifying concern.

These young people, their families and communities, are our primary concern in this report. But we are at pains to stress that the problem is not with “all young people these days.” Inevitably, the phenomenon of youth violence is more complicated than that. We’ll show how, and where public concern might be better directed, in section 2. But first we examine a final aspect of public and media concern, the presumed link between gangs and street violence.

### 1.3 The role of gangs in young people’s lives

#### Public concern is misdirected

#### **Gangs and street terror are now part of the fabric of national life<sup>21</sup>**

As this striking headline from The Daily Telegraph shows, gangs and street violence are often seen as closely linked.

But the true influence of gangs on young people is not clear-cut. Studies, including our own research with young people, suggest that gangs are complex and varied. The term ‘gang’ is fluid and often used in a wide range of situations.

In London, for example, a recent Metropolitan Police survey found 174 ‘youth gangs’ in the capital. However, the survey defined a gang as everything from ‘organised and armed crime syndicates’ to ‘low-level groups of youths’.<sup>22 23</sup>

Our research in inner London secondary schools found that young people have a whole range of meanings for gangs, from trustworthy supportive friends, to violent criminals. Home Office guidance uses a definition developed by Hallsworth and Young, which groups gangs into three different types: peer groups, street gangs and organised crime groups.<sup>24</sup> The diagram below illustrates the three types.

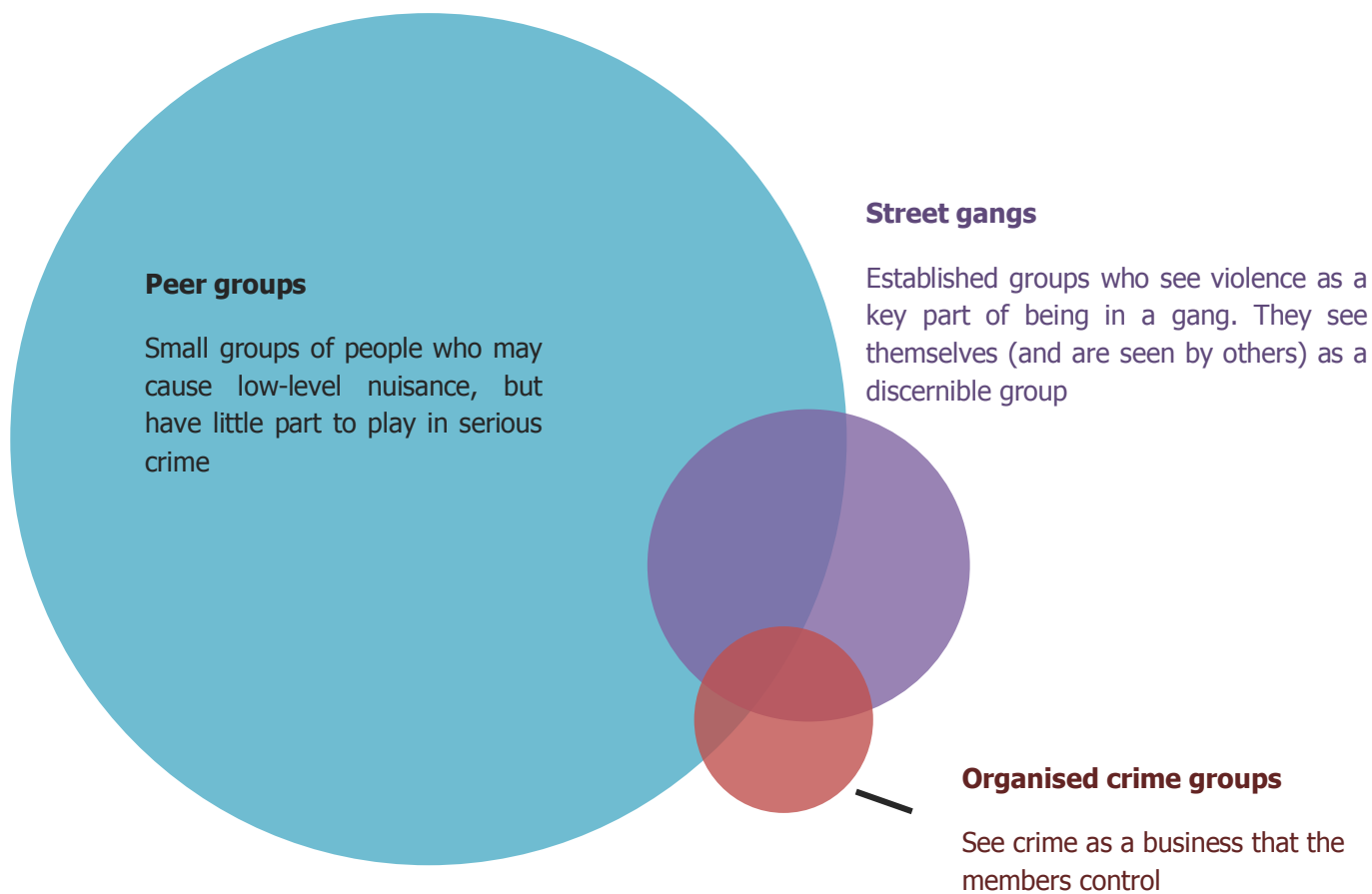
20 Usually, but not exclusively, to present an image of moral decline and youth in crisis. It does not help public confidence in official statistics that government itself has been said to engage in such manipulation. (Accessed February 2010: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2009/03/the\\_wrong\\_impression.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2009/03/the_wrong_impression.html))

21 Mary Riddell, Daily Telegraph, 17/12/2008

22 C. Booth QC et al (2008) The Street Weapons Commission Report, Channel 4

23 Inside Britain’s girl gangs (2009) News of the World website (Accessed February 2010: <http://www.news-oftheworld.co.uk/fabulous/features/436772/Inside-Britains-girl-gangs-gang-violence-teenage-violence.html>)

24 Tackling Gangs: A Practical Guide, 2008. Home Office (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/violentstreet/violentstreet012.htm>); also quoted on Metropolitan Police Authority website (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.mpa.gov.uk/publications/briefings/2007/0712/>)



The sizes of the circles above are meant to hint at (although not precisely represent) the actual proportions of the different types of group. The diagram also highlights the limited overlap between different types of gang. This should give a sense of the risk involved in classifying all gangs within the same category – particularly the risk to the majority of so-called ‘gang-involved young people’ whose gang involvement will never go beyond membership of a peer group. There is something very distorting about a singular category that includes both organised criminal groups – practising armed robbery, kidnapping, extortion and murder – and a group of teenage friends whose criminality extends to minor acts of vandalism, drinking or taking drugs together (things many young people do).

Recent research suggests that this singular conception of gangs – combined with a mistaken notion that ‘gang membership’ versus non-membership is always a clear cut thing – has led to some serious police mistakes. In certain neighbourhoods, young people have been labelled by the police as ‘gang-involved’ purely on the basis of their clothing or the company they are seen with.<sup>1</sup>

*“Being in a gang to me is belonging to a group of people who love you and trust you.”*

Black/Black British, Female, Year 8

<sup>1</sup> Ralphs, R. et al (2009) Who needs enemies with friends like these? The importance of place for young people living in known gang areas. Some people identified with these markers by the police will be members of street gangs, but others are unfairly labelled and may be subsequently targeted by unreasonable police attention.

We believe that young people often get a raw deal when it comes to the public perception of gangs. As the above quote suggests, for most young people, belonging to a gang sometimes means nothing more sinister than hanging out with a group of friends. The most recently published Youth Justice Board Youth Survey revealed that four-fifths (82%) of young people considered themselves to be part of a 'youth group' but most (55%) thought that their group viewed criminal behaviour as unacceptable; only 3% said criminal behaviour would always be acceptable to their group.<sup>2</sup>

However, data from successive British Crime Surveys reveals that, for adults, 'teenagers hanging around' has for several years remained the most widely perceived problem of anti-social behaviour. The 2008/09 figures showed that 30 per cent of adults perceived teenagers hanging around to be a problem in their local area.<sup>3</sup> This suggests an important conflict of perspectives between young people and adults.

Obviously, anti-social behaviour is a legitimate concern that can have negative effects on communities and neighbourhoods. But we do not think that young people should be demonised for hanging about on the street, being a bit loud and having fun with their friends.<sup>4</sup>

We agree with commentators who warn against branding groups of young people as gangs and refer to young people hanging around in the street as being involved in 'gang activities.' This kind of thinking can only reinforce fear of young people and inflame public and political debate.<sup>5</sup>

As our diagram above shows, there are types of gang about which public concern is legitimate. Street and criminal gang affiliation is linked with increased levels of criminal activity and the willingness to use weapons. A Home Office report found that current gang members were more than twice as likely as non-gang members to report possessing weapons and firearms.<sup>6</sup> A significant proportion of gang violence and weapon use is directly connected to the organised supply and distribution of illegal drugs. The Home Office has identified a small number of London street gangs that pursued criminal activity for several years before becoming organised criminal networks.<sup>7</sup>

Street-level gangs are often made up of a small core of violent criminals, plus a larger group of vulnerable young people. These young people sometimes get involved because they are attracted to the glamour of being a street gang member, believing that it makes them appear more masculine and mature. But more often their involvement is not wholly voluntary; it is primarily a means of securing some degree of protection from their own and other street gangs. In practice, the idea of remaining neutral or disaffiliating from a street gang can be exceptionally difficult; if you are not with the gang you are at the bottom of the

2 Youth Justice Board/Mori, Youth Survey 2008 – Young people in mainstream education. A group was defined in the survey as three or more people – including themselves. Note that young people in Pupil Referral Units are more likely to be part of a group that is reported to consider criminal behaviour acceptable.

3 Home Office Statistical Bulletin, Crime in England and Wales 2008/09

4 Indeed, some commentators have criticised the Home Office for classifying 'teenagers hanging around' as a problem in the same category as vandalism, graffiti, damage to property, drug dealing, drunkenness, excess noise etc. (See for example: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2008/11/>). However, this classification does clearly match the perceptions of many adults.

5 C. Booth QC et al (2008) The Street Weapons Commission Report

6 C. Booth QC et al (2008) The Street Weapons Commission Report; it is not clear precisely what definition of 'gang' was used in this research.

7 Home Office (2008) Tackling gangs a practical guide for local authorities, CDRPS and other local partners

of the hierarchy and as such very vulnerable. Research in London suggests that perhaps a third of those affiliated with larger street level gangs street level gangs will fall into this category of essentially pragmatic involvement.<sup>1</sup>

While young people's involvement in criminal gangs and street violence is far less common in the UK than the public believes, these issues are still a problem for some groups of young people and their communities.

The points where different kinds of gangs overlap present the greatest risks for these young people (but also suggest opportunities to offer help and support). In particular, a gang made up of friends may be drawn to the edge of violent street gangs as they get older, particularly if siblings or older friends are already involved. Street gangs may in turn have links with older people involved in serious, organised crime and both may "effectively groom juveniles by actively involving them at the margins of their activity."<sup>2</sup> Once they set off on this path, young people may find it difficult to see an alternative to criminal activity.

However, individuals do not automatically follow a set path through the different types of gangs. The majority of young people, if they get involved in gangs at all, will go no further than hanging around with a friendship group. These friendship groups are an important source of social support and an essential part of most young people's transition to adulthood. Rather than being viewed with fear and suspicion, these groups need to be engaged by society; 'at risk' young people in particular should be supported to ensure that they build positive relationships and do not get involved in criminal activities.

## 2. The need for intervention

As noted above, it is not the case that 'all young people are the problem,' and it is only a very small minority of young people who get involved in the worst street gangs and serious street violence. With this understood, we can begin to consider specifically who gets involved in serious crime, why they get involved, and how preventative work can divert them from this path.

Identifying young people as 'at risk' is not always straightforward or even desirable. The reasons for young people's involvement in gun and knife crime are complex and variable, as is the influence of gangs on their lives. However, a better understanding of the complex phenomenon of youth violence can help to indicate where public concern, and support, would be best directed. We feel that it's important to highlight why some (small) groups of young people and their communities need more targeted support to combat involvement in criminal gangs.

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1 J. Pitts (2008) *Reluctant Gangsters: The changing face of youth crime*  
2 Youth Justice Board (2007) *Groups, gangs and weapons*

## 2.1 Offenders as victims of crime

Young people's vulnerability to getting involved in crime, or becoming victims of street violence, is related to a number of different social issues. These can include the level of deprivation in their communities, their social background, and their behaviour and attendance at school.

Research also shows that young people involved in crime are more likely to have been, or are at greater risk of becoming, victims of crime themselves. So, it's no surprise that the issue of protection is a key concern for young people who carry weapons.

The Home Office's 2006 Offending Crime and Justice survey found that half of young people who committed an offence in the previous 12 months had also been victims of a personal crime in the same period, compared to about a fifth (19%) who had not committed any offence.<sup>3 4</sup>

Evidence shows that most young people who carry knives report doing so because they are afraid of becoming victims of crime. The same Home Office survey found that the majority (85%) of young people who had carried a knife in the last 12 months said the main reason for doing so was for protection. 8% said it was in case they got into a fight.<sup>5</sup>

At a youth consultation event held by Community Builders, an organisation working with people on the fringes of street gang activity, young people suggested that protection, and experiencing violence in the past, are key factors in choosing to carry a knife: (Quotes are given in the context of young people being asked to explain situations where they have carried knives)

*"The majority of boys in my school carry a weapon of some sort."*

*"I know family and friends who use weapons to solve problems."*

*"I had hype (a conflict situation) with another group of black youths. When I had to go to that estate, I decided to bring a knife."*

*"Black youths approached my estate and so I brought my knife."*

*"Times were hard, needed money and had beef (a conflict situation) where I was outnumbered. A knife was my only option."*

*"Carried a knife as some family members needed protection but I was arrested."*

<sup>3</sup> Roe, S & Ashe, J (2008) Young people and crime: findings from the 2006 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, Home Office. See also Youth Justice Board/Mori Youth Survey 2008.

<sup>4</sup> In certain places, being a victim (e.g. of a mugging) is sometimes in itself a prelude to a career of street crime, as young people endeavour to rebuild respect in their social milieu in the wake of an attack. See, for example: J. Pitts (2008) Reluctant Gangsters: The changing face of youth crime

<sup>5</sup> Home Office, Offending Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS), 2006. Respondents were asked whether they had carried a knife or gun with them for their own protection, for use in crimes or in case they got into a fight. See also Youth Justice Board/Mori Youth Survey 2008.

## 2.2 Other factors in understanding youth violence

### Social and geographic factors

- Street violence, involving weapons and gangs, is most common in deprived neighbourhoods in big cities. Young people living in these areas are at higher risk of committing and becoming victims of gun and knife crime than young people living elsewhere in the UK.<sup>6</sup>
- According to official sources, 40% of gun and knife crimes happen in London. Greater Manchester and the West Midlands are also high on the city violence 'league table'.<sup>7</sup>
- In these big cities the pattern of violence is never evenly spread. For example, in London, street violence is focused in poor and deprived boroughs.<sup>8</sup>
- The London boroughs most affected by gun and knife crime are: Hackney, Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Haringey, Waltham Forest, and Brent.<sup>9</sup>

### Gender and ethnicity

- Boys are significantly more likely to be involved in street violence and other criminal activities than girls. A Home Office survey found that boys were more than twice as likely as girls to have carried a knife (5% versus 2%).<sup>10</sup> A 2008 survey for the Youth Justice Board reveals that 27% of boys say they have committed an offence in the past 12 months, compared with 18% of girls.<sup>11</sup>
- Black and minority ethnic communities are disproportionately affected by gun and knife crime. Of the 160 murder victims in London in 2007, more than half (82) were from black and minority ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> Nationwide, for those aged 10-19 murdered in 2008 and 2009, 33 of the 69 who were stabbed and all nine of those who were shot were from black and minority ethnic groups.
- However, it is important that this is not taken to provide an excuse for the 'racialisation' of the problems of gangs or youth violence. For example, recent research focussing on a single English city found that it was only the gangs from areas with a proportionally higher black minority that received media and policy attention. This alienated both black communities, who felt stereotyped and unfairly targeted, and white communities, who complained of a 'discriminatory neglect' of their street gang problems.<sup>13</sup>

### Educational background

- Young people who have been excluded from school are more likely to be involved in criminal activity. Studies have found that 45% of children in custody have been permanently excluded from school.<sup>14</sup> Excluded pupils are more at risk of joining street gangs and committing gun and knife crime than pupils who stay in school.<sup>15</sup>

6 C. Booth QC et al (2008) The Street Weapons Commission Report

7 London crime briefing (2006) (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.london.gov.uk/gangs/docs/guns-weapons-report.pdf>)

8 C. Booth QC et al (2008) The Street Weapons Commission Report

9 London crime briefing (2006) (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.london.gov.uk/gangs/docs/guns-weapons-report.pdf>)

10 Home Office, Offending Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS), 2006

11 Youth Justice Board/Mori, Youth Survey 2008 – Young people in mainstream education

12 C. Booth QC et al (2008) The Street Weapons Commission Report

13 Aldridge, Judith et al, Youth Gangs in an English City: Social Exclusion, Drugs and Violence, 2007.

14 Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, June 2008

15 C. Booth QC et al. (2008) The Street Weapons Commission Report, Channel 4

- Children and young people who are permanently excluded from school often continue their education in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). According to a survey of young people in PRUs, 64% say they have committed a criminal offence in the past year and 6 in 10 admit to having carried a gun or knife. Young people in PRUs are also more likely to report that the youth groups they are a part of consider criminal behaviour acceptable (44% and 14% saying committing a crime is seen as sometimes OK or always OK, respectively, by their group).<sup>16</sup>
- Young people who play truant are also more vulnerable to getting caught up in criminal activity. A Youth Justice Board survey found young people who have committed a crime in the last year are more likely to have played truant (50%) than young people who have not offended (15%).<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Young people and the criminal justice system

Although the risk factors identified above are widely acknowledged, and the value of preventative interventions is increasingly recognised, our response to vulnerable young people is still very reactive. An estimated 70,000 school-age offenders enter the youth justice system every year, costing the UK £1 billion.<sup>18</sup>

We strongly believe that we should work together to prevent vulnerable groups of young people getting seriously involved in street violence and becoming offenders who regularly come into contact with the police and courts. Through effective early intervention we can stop them getting involved in crime in the first place.

There are clearly situations where a criminal justice response to situations may be appropriate. However, we are particularly concerned about the use of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), Stop and Search, children in custody, and the strong links between serious frequent offenders and homicide.

#### Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

The number of ASBOs issued has fallen somewhat since a peak of 4,122 in 2005. However, in 2007 (the most recent year for which data is available), there were still 2,299 issued in England and Wales and 40% of these were to young people aged between 10 and 17.<sup>19</sup> The extent of use against young people is particularly alarming given the claim that ASBOs were originally intended to be used against children and young people only in "exceptional circumstances."<sup>20 21</sup> Young men are more likely than anyone else to receive an anti-social behaviour intervention, including warning letters, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders.<sup>22</sup>

16 Youth Justice Board/Mori, Youth Survey 2008 – Young people in pupil referral units

17 Youth Justice Board/Mori, Youth Survey 2008 – Young people in mainstream education

18 Prince's Trust (2007) The Cost of Exclusion – Counting the cost of youth disadvantage in the UK

19 ASBO statistics, Home Office Crime Reduction website (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/asbos/asbos2.htm>)

20 Too much use of Asbos for teenagers, says ex-prison head (2006) Guardian website (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/mar/30/ukcrime.law>)

21 Children bear the brunt of "anti-social behaviour" measures, Statewatch website (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2004/sep/01uk-asbos.htm>)

22 National Audit Office/Home Office (2006) Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour

The breach rate for ASBOs given to young people (aged 10 to 17) is high, at 64% up to December 2007.<sup>23</sup> The National Audit Office also found that young people were likely to re-engage in anti-social behaviour after receiving an Acceptable Behaviour Contract (non-statutory, voluntary agreements generally used for relatively minor acts). This has caused concern about the extent to which both types of intervention are setting up young people to fail, by not acknowledging the importance of association with friends and access to public space.<sup>24</sup>

A Home Office study in 2005 suggested that the cost of obtaining an ASBO (including staff and legal costs) had fallen but was still on average £2,500.<sup>25</sup> Some ASBOs can cost much more when the costs of breaching the order are included.<sup>26</sup>

Our concerns about the use of ASBOs mirror those of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the UK Children's Commissioners to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and the Howard League for Penal Reform, among others. Frances Crook, director of the Howard League, has said: *"We fear that current legislation has the effect of widening the net of the criminal justice system, by criminalizing naughty children ... Anti-social behaviour legislation relies on a low burden of proof. It does not rely on an objective test of behaviour but on the reaction to that behaviour by others. Yet anti-social behaviour legislation uses the criminal justice system if the original order is breached. There is a blurring of the boundaries between civil and criminal law which serious implications for due process and the rights of the child."*<sup>27</sup>

## Stop and Search

Police powers to stop and search young people they suspect of being involved in criminal activity have increased, as has the use of such powers, especially in areas identified as knife crime 'hotspots'. However, a number of concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of Stop and Search. Critics claim that the law unfairly targets minority groups and alienates communities the police should be working with.

Figures show that, nationwide, the police carried out 955,000 stop and searches in 2006/07, up 9% on the previous year. But few people stopped are likely to be arrested. In 2008, the Metropolitan police stopped and searched 157,290 people, but only had cause to arrest 1,200 of them (equivalent to less than 1%).<sup>28</sup> A senior Metropolitan Police officer has anonymously described Stop and Search as "stupidity policing."<sup>29</sup>

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) reported in late 2008 that the number of complaints made about Stop and Search incidents was rising rapidly (up by 24% from the previous year). A number of organisations too have questioned how Stop and Search is being used.

23 Home Office (2009) Impact Assessment of : Mandatory parenting orders for parents or carers of 10 to 15 years olds who breach an ASBO

24 National Audit Office/Home Office (2006) Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour

25 Home Office (2005) The cost of Anti-social Behaviour Orders

26 ASBOwatch, Statewatch website. (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.statewatch.org/asbo/asbowatch-concerns.html>)

27 Abolish ASBOs for Children (2005) Howard League for Penal Reform Press Notice

28 Stop criminalising children (2009) Guardian website (Accessed February 2010: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/aug/19/stop-and-search-children-police-10>)

29 Radio 4 Investigation Series 5, Episode 3. 28/08/08 8-8.30pm.

We agree with the views of human rights group Liberty; Director Shami Chakrabarti has said: *“Stop and Search is one tool of policing, but use it as a bludgeon not a rapier and you alienate far more people than you protect. Formal complaints about Stop and Search are inevitably the tip of the iceberg, as the young and most vulnerable lack the confidence to complain.”*

We think that the police need to make extra effort to ensure that minority groups and young people do not feel unfairly targeted and/or viewed with suspicion.

Ministry of Justice statistics reveal that black people are up to seven times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people. It is therefore no surprise that many young people from minority groups feel alienated from the police. In a survey by Community Builders during their youth consultation event 'Bin Dem or Bury Who' in June 2008, only 6% of the young black and minority ethnic participants from south London felt that the police were respectful; 40% felt they had no rights in their encounters with the police.

In July 2008, our focus group with over 20 young people engaged with Community Builders in Lewisham, also revealed that young people are mistrustful of the police. When asked where they would go for help on the main issues that concerned them (including knife crime, conflict and gangs) the police were not mentioned.

### Children in custody

Although there has been, until very recently, a sustained fall in the number of children in custody, we still lock up more children in England and Wales than almost any other country in Western Europe.<sup>30 31</sup> We lock up about twice as many young people as we did ten years ago, despite no firm evidence of an increase in crime committed by children in that time; the use of custody for 10 to 14-year-olds has increased even faster.<sup>32</sup> The vast majority of children are held in prisons or Youth Offending Institutions (YOIs). One-tenth are held in privately run secure training centres, while another tenth are held in local authority secure children's homes.<sup>33</sup>

Prisoners are much more likely to have suffered social exclusion than the general population. They are 13 times more likely to have been in care as a child; 13 times as likely to be unemployed; 10 times as likely to have been a regular truant; and 2.5 times as likely to have had a family member convicted of a criminal offence.<sup>34</sup> 40% of children in custody have previously been homeless, 71% have previously been involved with social services and 75% have lived with someone other than a parent – compared to just 1.5% of children in the general population.<sup>35</sup>

There are about 2,200 young people in custody in England and Wales. It is estimated to cost about £100,000 per year in direct costs to provide a prison bed in a YOI; a recent report by

30 Number of kids in custody on the rise again (2010) Out of Trouble website (Accessed Jun 2010: <http://www.outoftrouble.org.uk/learn/news/number-kids-custody-rise-again>)

31 Council of Europe, SPACE 1 annual penal statistics, 2007, cited on Howard League for Penal Reform website (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.howardleague.org/451/>)

32 Barnardo's (2010) Locking up or giving up – is custody for children always the right answer?

33 Howard League for Penal Reform website (Accessed Feb 2010: <http://www.howardleague.org/451/>)

34 Prince's Trust (2007) The Cost of Exclusion – Counting the cost of youth disadvantage in the UK

35 Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, June 2008

the New Economics Foundation suggests that the indirect costs – including the effect on employment prospects and subsequent criminality – may be significantly higher.<sup>36</sup> We sympathise with, among others, the former Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, when he affirms that “prison is no place for a child.”

### **Hardcore offenders**

Evidence suggests that there is a hard core of young criminals who frequently breach ASBOs, are well known to the police for offending, and are more likely to be victims of violence.

It is this small minority of young people who become frequent offenders (1% of all people aged between 10 and 25 in the UK<sup>37</sup>) who are most at risk of committing the most serious offence: homicide. A total of 88% of homicide offenders are known to the police, and have perpetrated violent crimes such as common assault and robbery.<sup>38</sup>

Ex-employees of the Metropolitan Police’s homicide prevention unit have argued that police need to be smarter in identifying particular hard core offenders and target resources accordingly. The police in London deserve recognition for achieving a 90% conviction rate for murder. But there is more work to be done to prevent murder, through targeting offenders, gathering intelligence and working with communities.<sup>39</sup>

## **4. Prevention through early intervention**

When young people get caught up in the criminal justice system it can be very hard to draw them back to the aspirations and hopes they may once have had for a better future. Around 40% of offenders aged 10 to 17 are convicted of another offence within 12 months of their return to the community.<sup>40</sup> We therefore need to intervene earlier and build upon the positive involvement in the community that ‘at risk’ young people already have.

### **4.1 Helping young people succeed**

Research shows that young people in the UK are ambitious, value their families and are concerned about their health. The chart below shows that young people’s main aims for the future are having a good place to live, finding a good job and achieving a good education; all young people surely deserve the support to develop and pursue such aspirations.

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36 New Economics Foundation (2010) Punishing costs: how locking up children is making Britain less safe

37 Home Office, Offending Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS)

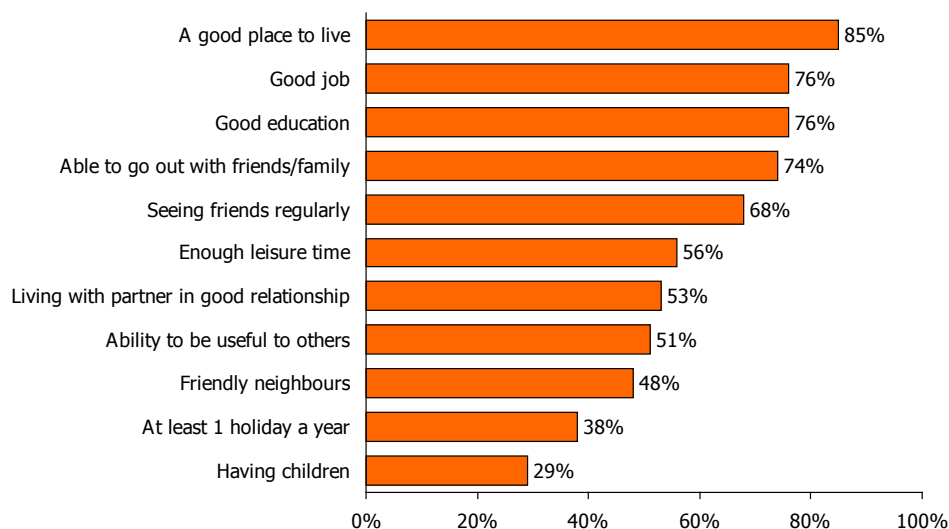
38 Radio 4 Investigation Series 5, Episode 3. 28/08/08 8-8.30pm.

39 Radio 4 Investigation Series 5, Episode 3. 28/08/08 8-8.30pm.

40 Ministry of Justice, Reoffending of Juveniles Statistics. (Accessed February 2010: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/reoffendingjuveniles.htm>) The results cover juveniles released from custody (either from Young Offender Institutions, Secure Training Centres or Secure Children’s Homes) or commencing a non-custodial court disposal or those given an out-of-court disposal (either a reprimand or final warning) who are proven to have reoffended with 12 months.

## Young people's aspirations for the future

"For each of the following please select if you think it is absolutely necessary to live properly"  
(prompted)



Source: The Scout Association/nfpSynergy, 2006  
Base: 1,004 respondents 13-18, UK

### 4.2 What charities are doing

Young people's lives are complex, and all young people have different needs and capabilities. On one level, youth clubs, mentoring schemes and sports societies can support young people in their personal relationships, participation in community life and engagement with society.<sup>41</sup>

We recognise that in some cases young people's needs must be met through government, criminal justice and social care interventions. Government schemes on offer to young people include those aimed at prevention, and building opportunity – notable examples include Sure Start, Connexions, Neighbourhood Renewal programmes, and Youth Offending Teams (which also provide dedicated support aimed at rehabilitating young offenders).

However, in this section we focus on the work of charities and other not-for-profits in these areas. There are numerous projects that make a difference to the lives of young people at risk of getting caught up in street violence. They demonstrate the best way to support these young people and help them develop and pursue their aspirations.

#### **Trust, credibility, availability: key features of successful interventions**

One of the features common to successful interventions with vulnerable young people is the provision of one-to-one support by trusted contacts. Our research for the Vodafone Foundation found that young people will rarely seek or accept help from those they do not trust. The social commentary around young people is so overwhelmingly negative and so often damning (as highlighted above) that it's not surprising that they are unsure who is on

41 The Scout Association/nfpSynergy, 2006

their side. Those who have had or heard about negative experiences of statutory agencies<sup>42</sup> are likely to be even less trusting of these authorities, and less likely to seek help from them. Again, our research found that young people are much more likely to consult their friends and family when a problem arises, especially if what they want to talk about is socially acceptable and “not too weird.”

The Youth Justice Board’s research with ‘gang-involved’ young men showed that they themselves thought that having a respected individual available to turn to might have prevented their involvement in gang criminality. What matters most to vulnerable young people is that a trusted contact is *available* – in the broadest sense of the word. Being available to a young person means not just providing a service from 9 to 5. *Social* availability means understanding their world; *emotional* availability means providing a non-judgemental “shoulder to cry on.” *Geographical* availability (i.e. where support is based) can be crucial for young people on the margins of street gangs.<sup>43</sup> A recent study has demonstrated how living within the territory of street gangs can severely restrict a young person’s ability to move around freely – often preventing them from accessing youth facilities. An example is given of young people entering a community building in balaclavas in an attempt to hide their identity from members of a local street gang.

Our research suggests that trust, credibility and availability are crucial for those seeking to help young people protect themselves from becoming involved with street gangs and violence. While there are many ways of tailoring the provision of help and support to these insights, we consider one example: peer-to-peer support. Our previous research suggests that peer-to-peer support fits well with the need for trust, credibility and availability.<sup>44</sup>

### Peer-to-peer support

When people talk about ‘peer-to-peer relationships’ they usually mean ‘friendships’, so we are particularly enthusiastic about programmes that capitalise on young people’s willingness to support friends. The value of peer-to-peer support has been highlighted by many different services. For example, Ricochet is a Shelter Young Persons Housing Resource Centre in Rochdale that runs a peer education service, where formerly homeless young people use their experiences to educate school-age children about the advantages and disadvantages of leaving home.

However, in our Vodafone report we showed how peer-to-peer support can be a double-edged sword. Seeking help from non-professional sources can spread confusion, misinformation and lead to negative behaviour. We have already noted how certain peer groups, such as street gangs, can encourage involvement in street violence.

This is why we support organisations like Community Builders, who provide training for professionals on youth conflict, resolution and supporting young people on the fringes of gangs and criminal activity. Their work is based in some of the London boroughs most affected by street violence, including Lewisham and Lambeth. Their peer-led activities, workshops and

<sup>42</sup> For example, if they have been stopped and search by police and have not felt they have been treated with respect.

<sup>43</sup> Ralphs, R. et al (2009) Who needs enemies with friends like these? The importance of place for young people living in known gang areas

<sup>44</sup> The success of the anti-smoking ‘TRUTH’ campaign in the USA also speaks to the power of peer-to-peer influence in a broader sense.

mentoring support divert young people from crime and anti-social behaviour while raising their achievement in education, employment and training.

#### Box out: The work of Community Builders

### **'Bin Dem or Bury Who' youth consultation event, Lewisham**

In June 2008, Community Builders ran a youth consultation event 'Bin Dem or Bury Who', on behalf of the Lewisham Community Partnership.

The aim of the day was to engage a number of young people aged 13-19 from Lewisham to discuss issues relating to gun and knife crime. They were also invited to suggest feedback and their own solutions.

The event attracted 50 young people who joined Community Builder's actors, workshop leaders and youth workers. Members of the local community and policy makers also attended.

The interactive programme included a drama demonstrating the impacts of knife crime; workshops for young people to voice their concerns and solutions; motivational speakers and inspirational poetry performances.

*"In order to get real dialogue going, community-based organisations that know local young people and are able to relate with them, are key. Lasting change will only be achieved by ensuring that actions are taken and owned by the community itself, including young people, not imposed by statutory agencies such as council and police."*

Mayor for Lewisham, Steve Bullock  
(on the importance of peer-led organisations like Community Builders)

For more information about Community Builders, visit [www.communitybuilders.org.uk](http://www.communitybuilders.org.uk)

As well as the work carried out by Community Builders, there is a wide range of innovative UK programmes to help young people at risk of getting involved in street violence. These programmes, run by not-for-profit organisations and charities, include those dealing with conflict management, supporting socially and educationally excluded young people, and providing alternatives for young offenders. We've outlined some key providers below:

## Conflict management

### The Safety Box

The Safety Box runs programmes in schools as a vital part of the Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) and citizenship curriculum. The programmes teach young people how to manage conflict and also help to raise self-esteem and confidence. In each session children and young people are helped to avoid threats such as bullying, harassment and serious violent situations. Techniques involve using psychology, verbal resolution, aggression management and assertiveness training.

For more information visit [www.thesafetybox.org](http://www.thesafetybox.org)

### Supporting excluded young people

**From Boyhood to Manhood Foundation (FBMF)** is an independent school which provides lifestyle management programmes for young black males aged between 12 and 21 years of age who are in danger of, or are already, excluded by school or society. The programme provides basic education in maths, English and science, as well as anger and lifestyle management, community service and extra curricular activities. There is also a peer mentoring scheme for the older 17 - 21 age group.

For more information, visit [www.london.gov.uk/gangs/projects/southwark/project-01.jsp](http://www.london.gov.uk/gangs/projects/southwark/project-01.jsp)

**Kidsco's** projects range from a drop-in centre in Lambeth to a post-16 educational institute in Southwark where vulnerable young people learn basic literacy and numeracy skills, alongside subjects like art and business, before being reintegrated in mainstream education or employment. At 33 inner-city schools across London staff use therapy, social work and group activities to help pupils cope with emotional pain and prevent them from being excluded or dropping out of school.

For more information visit [www.kidsco.org.uk/our-work](http://www.kidsco.org.uk/our-work)

**The Prince's Trust** supports young people who are unemployed, underachieving at school, leaving care, or are young offenders or ex-offenders. Their courses are designed to get young people back into work, education and training. They include personal development courses, vocational courses and services and financial assistance for young people looking to start businesses or community projects.

For more information, visit

[www.princes-trust.org.uk/about\\_the\\_trust/what\\_we\\_do/programmes.aspx](http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about_the_trust/what_we_do/programmes.aspx)

### Providing alternatives for young offenders

**Barnardo's** believe that society demonises children and young people and campaigns for the public to change their perceptions. The charity runs a variety of projects for children in trouble with the law. They include schemes providing a direct alternative to custody, projects working with children at risk of becoming involved in crime, plus those that provide education and support for parents.

For more information, visit:

[www.barnados.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/our\\_projects/youth\\_justice.htm](http://www.barnados.org.uk/what_we_do/our_projects/youth_justice.htm)

**Action for Children** runs community-based programmes for young people who have committed crimes, encouraging young people to take responsibility for their actions and diverting them from high-risk behaviour. Specific projects include Youthbuild, a nine-month placement for unemployed young people in Glasgow's most deprived areas working in the construction industry with intensive support.

For more information, visit:

[www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=222](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=222)

**The Children's Society** works with children in trouble with the law, aiming to provide support and guidance to help them escape the cycle of crime and custody. They also campaign for children to be seen as children, rather than hardened criminals. Programmes work with children at risk of offending and affected by substance abuse. Others support communities affected by conflict and run anti-bullying projects.

For more information, visit:

[www.childrensociety.org.uk/all\\_about\\_us/what\\_we\\_do/children\\_in\\_trouble\\_with\\_the\\_law/Children%20in%20trouble%20with%20the%20law.asp](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/all_about_us/what_we_do/children_in_trouble_with_the_law/Children%20in%20trouble%20with%20the%20law.asp)

## Our conclusions

Youth street violence is a major concern for the public. We recognise that street violence has terrible consequences for those involved and that the fear of becoming a victim of crime can blight people's lives. However, we are weary of the media demonization of young people as criminals and troublemakers. Our research has led us to these conclusions:

- Young people in the UK have talent and ambition that should be nurtured for the good of society.
- The transition to adulthood is complicated and can be particularly hard for some groups of young people.
- Street violence is a real cause for concern for some vulnerable groups of young people and the communities where they live. It is most likely to affect young people who live in deprived inner city areas.
- Preventative, supportive peer-to-peer work is particularly important to equip young people with the skills and attitudes they need to avoid getting caught up in street violence.
- Young people's lives are complex and they need varied support schemes to help them improve their chances of building a better future for themselves and their communities.
- Statutory services, including the police, could work still more closely with charities and community groups to get a real handle on the issues around the prevention of criminal behaviour. The perennial problems of inadequate partnership working and insecure funding relationships need new approaches.

nfpSynergy is a research consultancy dedicated to the not for profit sector. Our aim is to provide ideas, insights and information that help non-profits thrive. From our origins in syndicated tracking research on public attitudes for non-profit clients, nfpSynergy has grown its portfolio of bespoke research to become one of the leaders in non-profit sector market research.

**Projects and consultancy** Each year we carry out around 50 projects for non-profit clients and we are on the COI list of approved qualitative research agencies. We carry out focus groups, depth interviews, either face-to-face or over the phone, conduct workshops as well as small and large scale desk research projects. We specialise in stakeholder audits and in supporters and client/user satisfaction studies. We also have a particularly strong record of work in the health and young people sectors.

Our clients include charities, housing associations and public bodies who use our research to inform their strategies and planning.

**Our tracking research** provides lower cost, more frequent and more detailed research than any organisation could achieve by acting on its own.

We run surveys that monitor attitudes and opinions of key stakeholder groups on behalf of a syndicate of participating charities who share costs and data. Our monitors include:

- Charity Awareness Monitor (CAM) - the general public
- Charity Media Monitor - journalists
- Charity Parliamentary Monitor (CPM) - MPs and Lords
- Youth Engagement Monitor (YEM) – young people
- Brand Attributes (BA)
- Health Professionals Monitor – primary healthcare professionals

In addition, we have developed syndicated tracking studies on local authorities, the general public in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland and regional audiences across England.

**Social investment:** Our social investment programme runs as a thread through every aspect of our business. At its core is the range of research reports and briefings we produce each year that are free to download and that benefit non-profit organisations. We use evidence from our research to campaign on behalf of charities on key issues such as reducing the costs charged by mobile phone companies for charitable donations by SMS. We support small non-profits by providing free places at our seminars, by doing talks to groups all over the UK, in-kind support and through pro bono research assistance. We have produced free reports on topics including:

- understanding young people's help seeking behaviour
- branding
- fundraising
- volunteering
- how charities use the internet and new technology
- governance

By producing free reports, editorials, and presentations, we help small charities (with little or no budget for research) benefit from our wealth of data and knowledge of the third sector. Please see descriptions of all of our free research at [www.nfpsynergy.net/freereports](http://www.nfpsynergy.net/freereports)

As full members of the Market Research Society, we comply with their code of conduct at all times, ensuring that research is carried out in a professional and ethical manner.

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