

**NCAS Conference 2019 Tackling County Lines and Serious Violent Crime.
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My presentation will cover the key points developed in the ADCS discussion paper on Serious Youth Violence & Knife Crime published in July 2019 as well as proposing that in local areas a joined up approach across the statutory and voluntary agency sector is taking shape and this can inform a national direction of the next government.

The challenges facing children, young adults, families and public services are evolving and new risks that could not have been envisaged even a few years ago have emerged and is not covered in most child care and criminal justice legislation. These risks include digital dangers and criminal gangs using children and young people as runners to move drugs, weapons and money around the country. However, at the same time understanding this in the broader context of exploitation of children, young people and young adults is now being seen as increasingly important.

We are beginning to see younger children aged 11-15 appear to be at risk of abuse and exploitation. The loss of youth services as a result of year-on-year funding reductions for local government has been cited as a key driver in recent ADCS research.

We have got better at recognising the vulnerability to exploitation of children and young people who display risky, harmful or criminal and/or abusive behaviours because of grooming or exploitation, even if these initially may appear as showing some element of "choice", by being clear that no child can consent to their own abuse. Coercion, fear and threats are a feature of this abuse meaning at times it can be difficult to respond to a victim who may also be acting as a perpetrator and vice versa, but we must gain a deeper understanding of what is going on. This is why exploitation is a more helpful way of understanding the complexity of young people's experience, their world and indeed rationale for what is happening. Reference Channel 4 programme last week on gangs and knife crime where a young man talked about thinking only girls were "groomed" and now he understood he had been groomed too.

Serious youth violence and knife crime is not a new phenomenon nor is it common. It is important we do not demonise all young people, nor employ scare tactics amongst the wider population, for example the highest number of violent incidents in many areas is through domestic violence and abuse. However, the fact is there have been recent increases in proven possession offences and a worrying rise in the numbers of children and young people treated for assault with a knife or fatally stabbed on our streets. These issues are not limited to London and other big cities and the examples of activities focused on prevention, building resilience and awareness raising come from a range of areas. Some of these I will mention later.

Those identified as at risk of carrying knives or becoming criminally exploited are not always known to children's social care or the police however are almost always known to wider services e.g. staff in educational settings, youth workers or youth offending teams or health services. Schools are critical in both early identification and preventative efforts. Schools are a key safety factor for young people in enabling aspiration, positive relationships and choices and linking into help and advice. I attended on Saturday our Governors Conference in Hertfordshire. The key note speaker gave a really interesting presentation on the school curriculum and how the curriculum starts from when a pupil walks through the school gates and extends throughout the school day in lessons, activities, what you see in school corridors and what is taken home. If young people find a variety of experiences to enjoy at school and feel they belong that goes a long way to protecting them from challenges they may face.

We know there are various risk factors that can increase the likelihood of children and young people being drawn into criminality or exploited, including being out of school, poor employment opportunities, a lack of positive activities in the local area as well as deprivation and poor mental health. We need to understand and address individual risk factors and enable a personalised approach and at the same time turn our attention to the wider societal determinants in order to make meaningful progress; multiple studies demonstrate a clear link between inequality, poverty and higher levels of violence.

In the face of increasing serious violence, knife crime and gang related activity - often linked to wider, organised criminality - **we need to hold our nerve**. Ministers, criminal justice partnerships and the police are under pressure to act. Tougher laws, longer sentences and an expansion of police powers will not address the reasons why some individuals, groups or indeed whole communities are vulnerable to risk and/or harm.

A holistic central government strategy to address the issues of serious youth violence and knife crime that articulates shared objectives, with an agreed action plan is required to promote a joined up approach to prevention and protection. A somewhat piecemeal response I would say has emerged. National summits have been held, new research has been commissioned, new programmes developed, campaigns rolled out and different pots of funding launched by different government departments. It's not always easy to see how these things fit together and how learning will be shared.

A huge amount of work is happening in local areas to develop multi- agency systems and to understand 'extrafamilial' risks in order to keep children and young people safe. Development of practice has moved from approaching violence from a criminal justice stance to understanding these issues as part of the broad range of exploitation which can be interlinked and provides a more in depth means of understanding some of the reasons why young people may be vulnerable to getting involved in and being recipients of this kind of violent activity. Responses are evolving and now include multi-agency panels to look at the vulnerabilities of adolescents in the round e.g. exploitation, going missing, radicalisation or offending behaviours. Charities and community groups are engaged in important work on the ground, particularly filling the gaps left in youth provision. Weapon awareness sessions and one-on-one mentoring is taking place in schools and youth workers are being embedded in some hospital trauma units to support young people admitted with knife-related injuries to make positive changes at this 'teachable moment.'

We hear regularly about the range of innovative initiatives being run in cities and metropolitan areas so I wanted to share some other examples today.

In **Southend** the communications campaigns on county lines have run in three stages in order to address each of the audiences with a message pertinent to them. Parents of 8-18 year olds were targeted with the campaign entitled, Who's controlling your child? Which aimed to educate 13,000 parents in the borough of the signs to spot that their child could be being targeted by criminal gangs, and to reassure them that we treat children as victims first. Targeted social media ads were complemented by significant outdoor advertising in key areas in the town centre and around the borough. The messages were viewed over 485,000 times in the borough, digitally with over 7,000 likes, comments, shares and clicks. The accompanying video was viewed over 99,400 times online. 74% parents surveyed online remember seeing the campaign material. Intelligence was received to the dedicated email address, set up for the campaign.

Recreational drug users were targeted in the lead up to the Christmas period with a campaign aiming to appeal to the consciences of 5,000 drug users, letting them know that it is young children who are forced in to working in the supply chain to get their drugs to them. With confronting graphics, *Just a bit of festive fun? #MerryMuletide* was run on social media, on trains and at stations in key locations, as well as in bars, clubs and colleges in the borough. The messages were viewed over **191,000** times in the borough, digitally, with a very strong engagement of over **8,600** likes, comments, shares and clicks. It generated much discussion in local Facebook groups as the gravity of the situation dawned on key demographics.

Having reached parents and then recreational drug users themselves, our next campaign is aiming to support and draw key intelligence from high school-aged children. *Who's controlling your friend?* is currently running on Snapchat, Instagram and YouTube, and supports the workshops the children's services team run in high schools. High schools are displaying the campaign material on poster sites within the schools, on digital screens and on PC screensavers. To date, the social media campaign has reached over 24,000 young people.

The next stage will be to reach primary-aged children, with age-appropriate messages.

Suffolk "Families Learning about Thinking Skills" programme working with parents and young people involved in violence or gang activity. Delivers 12 week intensive, small group and individual work for specific cohort of young people and engagement programme with parents at stages during the work with their children. Young people had common experiences of domestic abuse, traumatic bereavements, on-going contextual risk factors in home and local community and inter-generational trauma and adversity. These adverse childhood experiences can severely impair the protective factors for children within their family. Early outcomes show improved emotional well-being, improving connections with e.g. parents, schools and teachers and no further arrests during course of programme. There has been 100% retention rate and positive feedback from young people. The outcomes of the first cohort will be further evaluated in Feb 2020.

Positive Alternatives programme run in Hertfordshire by youth workers- this is a preventative education programme to raise awareness of risks and realities of violence and gang related crime. Two programmes ran over the summer holiday of 7 sessions and worked with over 100 young people. Healthy relationships, sexual health, social media and emotional health and wellbeing were also covered in the sessions.

These are examples of where positive and preventative programmes are being developed. At a local level partners across LAs, Police, health agencies, Schools and the voluntary sector are reconfiguring the way they join up their response. At a strategic level adults and children's safeguarding boards, Criminal Justice Boards and Community safety Partnership and drug and Alcohol Partnerships are working together to agree actions often based on the 3 Ps Prevent, Protect and Pursue to establish a whole systems approach. It is essential that a whole systems response is adopted that prioritises prevention rather than reacting to each individual incident and underpinned by sharing data, intelligence and knowledge of to understand and address the root causes of violent activity. And in some areas more significant shifts are beginning to take place across some local partnerships taking a more holistic approach to "exploitation" and understanding the contextual and complex nature of how young people are involved in being both exploited and taking part the exploiting activity.

What's missing currently?

Tackling the root causes of harm as well as the societal conditions that allow abuse and exploitation to flourish requires a radical shift in both policy, practice and funding. The best way to make headway is to take a holistic and integrated approach. We are missing:

- A shared understanding of what a 'public health' approach to reducing exploitation- serious youth violence and knife crime actually means
- A proactive debate the age threshold of the cohort we are working with, 16//18/21/25? I would strongly argue the 17-25 age group are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and are the least likely to be able to access preventative services and can quickly end up in the criminal justice system. The effectiveness of the multi- agency YOT system ends at the age of 18 (and has successfully kept young people out of the criminal justice system)
- An integrated children's workforce strategy that supports integrated multi-agency working
- A national commitment to, and investment in, providing help and support at the earliest possible opportunity rather than individual funding streams which often have to have a bidding process
- Sustainable, equitable funding, Glasgow has invested in their VRU over a decade and it is showing real results.
- Finally we cannot underestimate the importance of education and school being the most effective protective factor through future aspiration, peer support and developing self-esteem.

Way forward

If knife carrying is driven by fear, if young people are being criminally exploited because they're disengaged from education, lack alternative employment options or because they're seeking a sense of belonging and a gang seems to offer this, then enforcement activity alone is not the answer.

A public health approach isn't a quick win or a miracle cure; it requires political buy-in, a long-term commitment to cultural change as well as funding beyond the life cycle of a spending review or a parliamentary term. A multi-layered response is needed consisting of **universal services** for all; **targeted work** aimed at those already at risk; and, **specialist interventions** offering support to anyone already affected by or involved in serious violence.

The injury or even death of children and young people on our streets and their ruthless exploitation by criminal gangs is an issue that must sit beyond party lines and the parameters of professional boundaries. It deserves all of our focus and all of our attention.