Solutions to Knife crime

A path through the red sea?

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For Callum, Reece, Paul, Dario and Tom.

Thank you

Introduction

This book arose from a two-year project looking into the causes and effects of knife crime in Britain, with special reference to London. The work began in 2018 when the rapid rise in killings and knife offences came to the attention of the public through media reporting. It was with some surprise that I noted, as a former public and civil servant, that the only really hard-hitting and insightful research appeared to be that done by media organisations such as the BBC, ITV, The Guardian, The Independent and others. This surprised me because I expected academics and other experts to be called in to talk about the crisis. However, this was not the case. Many commentators appeared, and powerful testimony from those involved in the violence, and those affected by it, featured strongly in this media research, but there did not seem to be any live academic research featured in the coverage early in 2018.

Later, whilst watching a TV group interview with the mothers of several young people who had died as a result of knife attacks, it became clear that there were significant voices within our communities that may have hitherto gone unnoticed. Over time, I watched many interviews on TV and online with young people who were involved in knife crime, and youth workers who had been trying so hard to make a difference in their communities. I wanted to understand more about where this violence had come from and given my own experience over fifteen years in local and national government, I felt compelled to ask why the voices of young people were not being heard by the central government. Just as important, from my point of view, was the clear role that youth workers, social workers, community development workers, police, community safety and charities could possibly play in making sure the true position was uncovered. Their voices too have not been heard to any great extent and to my knowledge, are not commonly heard and still less acted upon, when they are raised in any public fora. It seems to be the case that civil servants are not routinely included in social research because they are often bound by the Official Secrets Act and both civil and public servants have a strong sense of their ethical responsibilities when working under the terms of their employment in political environments. Speaking out publicly about a major political and societal issue such as knife crime is not within their ambit and carries some risk of sanctions should they do so. However, colleagues and former colleagues were very keen to speak to me about this issue and their words are included in this book. They have a key contribution to make because the public sector provides so many of the support services that the most vulnerable people in society use and it is the case, as we shall see in this book,

that knife crime can be associated with the most vulnerable and the most deprived people in our communities.

I began a research project in 2018 looking at the causes of knife crime, using the many contacts I had accumulated arising from my work with local authorities from Merseyside to the south coast, including London, over fifteen years. Here I began speaking to the people involved with young people in every setting; from schools to prisons, from Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) to churches. They were able to put me in touch with the young offenders, gang members and at-risk children who contributed to this research and that of the early study in 2018 (Roberts,2019). I should say that all the young people who kindly participated were unwilling to allow their names or location to appear in the research. In some cases, children and young people asked for their ages to be withheld also. The reasons for this should be obvious. This is an environment in which young people fear for their lives on a daily basis. Any hint as to who may have talked about their activities could result in revenge attacks and these can be, and often are, fatal. The young people know this, and they knew the risk they were taking when they spoke to me. They are also often distrustful of anyone in authority and only tend to put their trust in people who are known to them already or come from their own communities. I have protected their identities at all stages and anonymised contributions from these young people and from individuals from statutory agencies in London and elsewhere.

A handful of contributors have given permission for the transcripts (anonymised) of their interviews to be included in the academic requirements for the publication of evidence under my University. All the public servants I spoke to in my research for this book gave permission for their transcripts to be used by the University of Portsmouth, with the proviso that most wanted to remain anonymous, some out of fear of losing their jobs. Others freely gave permission for their names and locations to be used. I am especially grateful to those of my friends at Police Scotland who were so generously giving of their time and good will. Whilst Glasgow, like London, may sometimes be a violent city, its people welcomed me at every stage in my research and were more than willing to answer my endless questions. It was less easy to gain the complete trust of the children and young people, perhaps because I appeared to some of them at least as a representative of many of the authority figures they so hated. I use this term advisedly because some of the conversations I had were clearly very emotional, with young adults expressing their open hatred of the police and others perceived as associated with them such as probation or prison officers and other authority figures. Mostly, however, these were children and young people who desperately wanted their plight to be heard and understood. The offenders who kindly agreed for me to talk to them were keen to get their point across in terms of the difficulties they faced in their daily lives prior to

prison. The irony of this is that some regarded prison as a safe place where they would be fed and sheltered. This struck me as a sad indictment of an increasingly anomic society in which young people feel that their only refuge after a life of extremity on the streets is in a prison.

This book is therefore an attempt to provide a robust, academic investigation into the issue of knife crime, and an attempt to find solutions. It should be said, however, that my paper, published in 2019 about the London Killings (Roberts, 2019) looked at many of the causes. It was with some surprise that virtually all the young people I interviewed, plus the youth and community workers, offered their opinion on what the solutions to knife crime should be. This is the focus of the current research: solutions. We know, or should know by now, that knife crime is a symptom of a society at odds with its most vulnerable people. It is one in which children and young people feel abandoned by the State and this reason alone is why the concept of Anomie fits so well with the theoretical framework. There is a strong feeling among young people that society, politicians, those in positions of power, the police and anyone associated with them have let them down.

In this connection, I cannot say that I interviewed a single child or young adult who was not intelligent, able and articulate. I saw a great deal of untapped potential and neglected talent among these people. I also witnessed the pain and frustration felt by social workers, some distraught and in despair at having to give up roles in their own communities as a result of cuts to public sector spending. Many had lost their jobs, precipitating the loss of decades of experience among some of the most vital community workers and projects. I listened to charity workers who had lost their funding from local government, striving to keep pace with exponential demand from young people who needed support and refuge. I heard from probation officers made redundant through the semi-privatisation of the service who were despairing at having to let down those who depended on them by having to leave the service. It would be no exaggeration to use words such as heartbroken. The public sector was and is peopled with those who care very deeply about their work. Their voices are all included in this book alongside a stricken police service trying to make up the loss of 20,000 officers over the last ten years and contend with the need to save many millions from their budget.

A few years ago, two years after the financial crisis of 2008, I worked in a very deprived community with the children and young people who attended primary and secondary schools in the area. It was with real distress that after a year of continuous work with these children and their parents, I had to tell them the funding for my post had been cut due to the budget reductions in local authority funding by the central government. All the trust that had been painstakingly built over a year was gone the instant I opened my mouth and

told them I had to leave. I became just another "bloody official" who had let them down. My story is not unusual and is reflected across the public sector in multiple communities who have lost their support workers. It shows in the interviews undertaken for this book where those who participated have expressed resentment over the loss of their community workers and removal of the very people they relied upon to help them the most.

And yet in spite of all this, the main message of this book is that all is not lost. The remedies for knife crime are there if we can see clearly enough into the causes and then provide the resources and education to take up and apply the right solutions once more. More than anything else, the young people themselves need to know that they are not abandoned, that we can restore their youth clubs, their evening and Saturday football clubs run by community safety staff at the local authority, their community centres, detached youth workers, social workers, community development workers and all the support services around education such as Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and housing benefits for young people. It is the loss of these and the absence of community and neighbourhood policing that have contributed so much to the rise in knife crime. As one respondent put it

> "If you take away their places to go, their sanctions for bad behaviour, their support when they get into trouble, their advisory services, their social workers and their neighbourhood police officer, why are we so surprised that they behave like this? The underlying message is – do what you like. We don't care." (R:8. 20 June, 2018)

Ultimately, solutions lie in the restoration of these services: the visibly material redress for all that they feel has been lost. Solutions are put forward by the children and young people themselves in this book, and by those who have worked with them for so long. There are policy changes that we can make and the approach we can take is set out in this book in the section headed "The Case for Policy Transfer." There are lessons we can learn from those who have direct experience of working together to solve violence in communities; the work done and the real achievements made by Cure Violence in the USA and the Violence Reduction Unit in Glasgow are both discussed here. There are workable, tried and tested remedies for our knife crime epidemic in Britain, but they must be led and supported by Government.

As explained, I have included in the research the voices of some of the staff formerly employed by local authorities. It is often the case that the public at large are not fully aware of the range of support services provided by local government, and more importantly, are unaware of the extent of the cuts made to councils at all levels. Additionally, some may not know that local councils

have a duty to safeguard vulnerable children and young people under a statutory obligation placed upon them by the Government (House of Lords Library, parliament UK, 2019). It is only now, after the public sector spending cuts, that we are seeing the huge rise in knife offences and homicides when services have been withdrawn by local councils as a result of reductions in funding. Remembering that public sector spending cuts have not excluded other services, Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick made the connection between the loss of funding for policing, the reduction in police numbers and the rise in knife offences when she was quoted as saying

> "…….of course I would be naive to say that the reduction in police finances over the last few years, not just in London but beyond, hasn't had an impact,"[on the rise in knife crime] (Parliament TV, 5 June 2018; Huffington Post, 19 May 2018)

Public sector spending cuts have been a significant contributor to the increase in knife crime. This is why an important section of the book deals with the loss of public services, to which I have added evidential data provided by former local authority personnel to ensure that their voices are not lost in the debate.

A further purpose for this book is to ensure that both primary and secondary research into the problem of knife crime in Britain are presented as part of the academic discourse. I have chosen hermeneutic phenomenology as an element of the theoretical framework for this study because of its emphasis on the significance of context. Without understanding the context in which knife crime proliferates, it will be hard to address the required remedies in any positive and effective way. Context yields the full extent of the issue, laying it bare not just in terms of its causes but also, fully, in terms of the solutions that are necessary. We should therefore begin to look beyond the knife towards the context; to the effects of the public spending cuts and the endemic inequality that exists in British society and gives rise to the persistent deprivation, poverty and prejudices that make the context surrounding the knife so significant. That is what we will do here. In simple terms, things happen for a reason, and reasons accurately understood and then expertly and comprehensively acted upon, can help to provide the solutions.

Note: Where quotes are included from respondents to the interviews for the research in this book, they are referred to by the letter 'R', then the number of the respondent, followed by the date on which the interview took place. For example, (R:1. 19 July, 2019). There are 29 respondents who were recruited through colleagues and contacts in public services in line with the author's experience in the sector. The age range for the young people who participated

is from age 9 to age 28. The interview questions followed the same semi-structured pattern used in the author's 2018 paper on the London stabbings of 2018 (Roberts, 2019) and were trialled with professionals before the research began. Where direct permission has not been given for names to be included in this book, respondents have been anonymised.

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Interviews

Respondent 1: Mike Perry of the Staten Island True2Life Centre, CureViolence programme in New York. Mike is a "Violence Interrupter" (Interview 13 July 2019)

Respondent 2: Director of Science and Policy at CureViolence in Chicago (Interview 11 July 2019)

Respondent 3: Professor Wesley Skogan Professor Emeritus, Weinburg College of Arts and Sciences USA (Interview 30th May 2019)

Respondent 4: Police Sgt. Police Scotland.

Respondent 5: Offender, Milton Keynes prison, January 2019.

Respondent 6: Group Interview, 30th July 2018

Respondent 7: Young offender, 9 November 2018 & 31 July 2019

Respondent 8: Youth worker, Croydon. 20 June 2018

Respondent 9: Youth worker, London Borough of Hackney, 18 August, 2018

Respondent 10: Director of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, Glasgow, 12 November 2018

Respondent 11: Former Prison officer, London Belmarsh. 04 June 2018

Respondent 12: Former youth worker, central London. 19 July 2019

Respondent 13; Dr Brian Chappell, University of Portsmouth. Gangs and Gang Violence specialist. 24 July 2019

Respondent 14: Young former gang member, central London. 12 June 2018

Respondent 15: Charity worker and probation officer, 14 May 2018

Respondent 16: Police Community Support Officer, 22 April 2018

Respondent 17: Police Commander. Hampshire Constabulary, 21 August 2019

Respondent 18: Young former offender and victim of knife crime: Glasgow, 4 September 2019

Respondent 19: Chief Inspector. Police Scotland. 3 September 2019

Respondent 20: Police Sergeant. Police Scotland 4 September 2019

Respondent 21: Police Sergeant. Violence Reduction Unit. 4 September 2019

Respondent 22: Director Ben Kinsella Trust 21 August 2019

Respondent 23: Police Community Support Officer, May 2018

Respondent 24: Representative from Nuffield Southampton Theatres 6 February 2020

Respondent 25: VRU manager, Southampton. 6 February 2020

Respondent 26: Police Constable. Campus Cop. 3 September 2019

Respondent 27: Local Authority Intervention Officer. Glasgow 3 September 2019

Respondent 28: Former prison officer, London Pentonville. 4 June 2018

Respondent 29: Chief Inspector, Hampshire Constabulary 14 January 2020

Glossary of Terms

ACES	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ER	Emergency Room (USA)
GST	General Strain Theory
HCLG	Housing, Communities and Local Government
H1 and H2	Hypothesis one and hypothesis two
LSOAs	Lower Layer Super Output Areas. (Geographical data area for the purpose of the national Census)
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
Navigators	Volunteer force used in Accident and Emergency Departments by the Scottish VRU
PCSO	Police Community Support Officers
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
Violence Interrupters	First responders used by the Cure Violence programme in the USA to "interrupt" violence
VRU	Violence Reduction Unit
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

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