

Guest speaker: Esperanza Gomez, Home Office

Ending Gang and Youth Violence

Esperanza Gomez works as a policy lead at the Home Office. As part of her presentation, she introduced and described the Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV) programme (this programme has been implemented in Wales and England only – Scotland has its own youth offending programme). [See here for latest report on work carried out.](#)

After the London Riots, the government wanted to understand where that explosion of violence had come from. Based on the expertise of practitioners and academics, in addition to the experience of programmes that had been implemented in the USA, EGYV was developed.

The programme has given good results, but also challenges as it is based on a model from the USA.

EGYV covers different approaches:

- **Early intervention and prevention:** the [Early Intervention Foundation](#) works directly with grassroots organisations to champion and support the effective use of early intervention to tackle the root causes of social problems for children from conception to adulthood
- **Public Health:** there has been a lot of learning from Scotland and their [public health approach to youth violence](#). It looks at the impact youth violence has on health, i.e. mental health consequences, cost to NHS, etc.
- **Women and girls:** violence against women and girls is an increasing problem and generally underreported
- **Criminal Justice response:** work with Youth Justice Board to identify programmes that support rehabilitation and prevent re-offending (Esperanza Gomez' strand of work)

Gang injunctions

Esperanza explained that gang injunctions were introduced by the previous administration in 2009. The way these were set out was very much influenced by USA model and didn't work very well in England (although good results were obtained in Liverpool in Sheffield, these were not used in London).

The first change to this legislation was to change the definition of gang to 'a group of three or more people that share a characteristic'. Several participants highlighted how the use of terminology can have a negative effect on the trust relationship that young people have with their youth workers. Using the word 'gang' (which is increasingly fundable) will deter young people from opening up to youth workers. Young people will be reluctant to speak openly if the word 'gang' is involved, as they feel it means they admit to being a gang member.

Another change to gang injunctions was to include drug-dealing to the list of activities for injunctions. During the last years, drug-dealing has started being exported to county areas and is getting increasingly violent.

Policy

There is a dedicated team in the Home Office, the Ending Gang and Youth Violence Frontline Team which works closely with communities and local areas, using local authorities, the police and a network of 100 peer reviewers as critical friends. Their focus is on young people who commit a crime and preventing them to re-offend.

Additionally, the [Knowledge Hub](#), a free to join, secure UK-hosted collaboration platform, offers the opportunity to connect, discuss, exchange knowledge and develop initiatives to improve public services.

Knife Crime

Ahead of the meeting, Esperanza Gomez from the Home Office shared some questions around knife crime that were discussed during the meeting:

- How can we make carrying knives be seen as unacceptable as drinking and driving, not wearing a seatbelt, etc.?
- What would be an effective deterrent or sanction?
- Does sentence length matter?
- How can we increase young people referring/reporting someone carrying a knife?
- How can we prevent young people from carrying knives?

Some additional and follow up questions were asked by other participants.

Answers to the questions below are drawn from the discussions that took place during the meeting and should not be seen as advice from London Youth.

Currently, young people are not prepared to report if they know that someone else is carrying a knife. How can we change that mentality? Can it be changed at all? What would a successful campaign consist of?

One of the biggest barriers for young people to provide any information about their peers carrying a knife is linked to perceived risk. Informing the police, is understood as being a 'snitch', which is seen as being more dangerous.

There was a discussion around mentality (young people simply choosing not to report) versus fear of reporting knife possession, where it was argued that what stops young people from reporting knife possession is more linked to fear than mentality. As long as young people feel that they will be in danger of being attacked if it is found out that they 'snitched', they will not provide any information – regardless of how aware and conscientious they are about the issue of knife crime amongst young Londoners.

So, if it is an issue of fear rather than mentality, what are alternative solutions to reduce that feeling?

- Incentivise the use of projects that allow young people to share information without negative consequences:
 - o [Fearless](#) provides information about Knife Crime and other risks for young people. They also offer an anonymous online form for young people to report any incidents: <https://www.fearless.org/give-info-anonymously>
 - o Knife Bins which are away from CCTV and allow for safe and anonymous knife disposal. [Word 4 Weapons have distributed several around the capital](#) and offer the opportunity for other organisations to become partners and host a knife bin on site
- Engage in activities that ensure young people understand the consequences of crime for the victim, their family, local community and perpetrator:
 - o [The Ben Kinsella Foundation runs an interactive exhibition for groups of young people aged 10-17](#) to educate young people about the consequences of violent crime and how they can make smart choices to stay safe
- Be clear and straightforward with young people: explain what you will do with the information that they provide

As a youth professional, what to do when you see/get a knife from a young person? Do you need to report it to the police or do you still keep the knife?

It was discussed that, in principle, you should report to the police - although there is awareness within the police that this is not always the case. You do not necessarily tell the police, but you may still want to speak to a YOT. You can offer the opportunity to hand a knife in anonymously, but need to report that it has been done.

As a youth professional, it is all about risk mitigation: if anything happens, what did you do, as an adult and a professional, to prevent this from happening?

How can you make young people continue to trust you even though you report any information you receive from them?

Be clear from the outset about what you will do if you find them carrying a knife: make them understand the consequences of their actions and agree that, in order to take part in the activities, these are the roles. For example, make them sign an agreement.

Does length of the sentence matter?

It was generally agreed that higher and tougher sentences are needed for young people to understand that engaging in criminal activities has strong consequences – length of the sentence should bring a message with it:

- One participant shared an example of a local youth who had murdered another young person at the age of 16. The perpetrator of the crime got a five years' sentence and is expecting to be serving two years. Locally, this youth is seen as a hero by some of his peers and he is not bothered about spending a couple of years in prison

- Another participant shared their personal experience of spending some time in prison and the comforts that they experienced: PlayStation 2, flat screen TV, private shower in their room, etc. which increases the risk that young people glamourize prison

Regulations against knife possession were discussed and it was suggested that sentences for knife possession should be at the same level as for carrying a gun. In London, the starting point for knife possession tends to be charge rather than cautioning – unless there is a good reason.

It was also highlighted that regulations around knife sales have not been tightened up as much as around gun sales. Due to the nature and use of knives it is not possible to licence everyone that is selling or buying a knife. In fact, most crimes are perpetrated with kitchen knives. However, some work is done to monitor compliance with legislation in terms of selling knives to young people and to reinforce the message that it is not ok to sell a knife to a young person.

However, it was also acknowledged that in some cases, the mere fact of being sentenced to prison will be enough for a person to will be willing to change their lifestyle. In those cases, a longer sentence would be detrimental. This reflection led to some questions around what work is done in prison to change young people's mentalities whilst they are in prison.

A point was made about those young people who associate carrying a knife with safety and might not be influenced in their decision by the risk of getting a sentence. It was questioned whether sentence length would affect their mind-set and participants agreed that more needed to be done to understand what it is that makes young people carry a knife and unpick it.

Most people who carry a knife would never be able to attack someone. Young people need to be made aware that if they carry a knife, they may encounter people who will use it. There are very few people who are actually able to use a knife to attack someone. Young people need to understand the risk at which they expose themselves by carrying a weapon.

Other Topics

Beside knife crime, which was the main focus of the conversations, other topics were also discussed at the meeting.

Supporting ex-offenders into work

The group discussed the different ways in which they support ex-offenders into work. One of the questions raised was around employer engagement. Generally, small local employers will provide better opportunities for young ex-offenders to get into employment. Bigger corporations have some apprenticeship opportunities available, but entry requirements are too high for that demographic. Recently, traineeships are becoming available, for which no qualifications are required.

The best incentive to engage employers is to acknowledge that there is a risk in employing an ex-offender, and reassuring that by knowing the details of that risk and having a youth worker supporting that young person, the risk will be mitigated. There is always a risk when employing a new person, and there is rarely the chance to know in advance what the risk may be.

The main barrier for ex-offenders to engage with a longer-term programme or employment is the risk of them not completing it. It is important to understand that getting started and engaging on a programme or employment is a success in itself and that dropping out is not necessarily a sign of failure. Another barrier is the need for ongoing support once they have engaged into training or employment. Some young people need to receive support throughout work, as well as education around administering money. Others will need to continue receiving financial support whilst training to obtain a qualification.

What can be done during probation to prevent young people from going around the system again?

Influencing Decision-Makers

A topic that was mentioned throughout the meeting is the need for grass-roots organisations and front-line professionals to be able to feed into decision-making at different level.

It was also stressed that it is important for commissioners to understand that it is as essential to deploy the right initiatives as it is to finding the right people to work on the ground.

Esperanza encouraged organisations to share any issues or challenges they have with their local representative (MP), who will then be able to pick the issue up locally and will also come back to the Home Office when required.

Measuring and Demonstrating Impact

Throughout the meeting it was acknowledged that there is an increasing need to provide evidence of the impact that programmes have on changing young people's behaviours and lives. Evidence is the key to programme sustainability and robust evaluation needs to be embedded before a programme starts to be run.

The Cabinet Office launched in 2014 the [Centre for Youth Impact](#) (CYI) with the aim to support youth organisations to evidence their impact. London Youth is one of the three early adopters working with the CYI and, as part of our work with the centre, are working with four member organisations to support them to develop a robust Theory of Change, intervention plan and evaluation model for their programmes. In the next two years we will be supporting another 20 organisations through this process – please email rosa.palli@londonyouth.org.uk if you would like to find out more.

[Project Oracle](#) is an independent evidence hub for youth organisations. They support organisations who are working with children and young people to validate their evaluation at different levels. They also support community organisations to find a researcher to support them with their evaluation work.