

## ‘Youth knife crime’ in context Adolescents beyond objects of concern

Laura Kinsey,

Former Youth Justice Manager and an NAYJ Trustee\*

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[www.thenayj.org.uk](http://www.thenayj.org.uk)

email [info@thenayj.org.uk](mailto:info@thenayj.org.uk)

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### ● Introduction

It is widely accepted that adolescence is a period more likely to involve risky behaviours<sup>1</sup>, with emergent research suggesting adolescents are predisposed to experiencing ‘acute anxiety about social exclusion’ with the presence of peers amplifying the perceived or coveted rewards of risk-taking<sup>2</sup>. The peer context strongly influences their developing social norms and propensity to take risks<sup>3</sup>. The concept of youth justice explicitly recognises that the behavioural patterns of adolescents are distinct from adult crime trajectories<sup>4</sup>. Adolescence is a time of transition from childhood to adulthood, impacted by the onset of puberty<sup>5</sup>. Increasingly, adolescents are distinguished also from younger children, due to the increasing importance of agency, the development of independence and the intensified influence of peers<sup>6</sup>.

Media portrayals of ‘out of control’ youths, gangs and knives typify

- 1 Steinberg, 2004 in Chein, J., (2015). ‘Peers and Adolescent Risk Taking’. *Emerging Trends in Social and Behavioural Sciences*. Ed. Scott, R., & Kosslyn, S., (2015). John Wiley & Sons: Londo
  - 2 Blakemore & Mills (2014), p190 in Stone, N., (2015). ‘Eradicating ‘This Dreadful Knife Problem’: Legislative and Judicial Initiatives against Knife Crime’, *Youth Justice*, 15(2), pp 182-194. DOI: 10.1177/1473225415582865
  - 3 Firmin, C., (2015). *Peer on Peer Abuse: Safeguarding and implications of contextual abuse between young people within social fields*. University of Bedfordshire
  - 4 Bateman, T., (2017). *The State of Youth Justice*. National Association of Youth Justice: London. Available at: <http://thenayj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/State-of-Youth-Justice-report-for-web-Sep17.pdf>
  - 5 Allen, R., (2002). There must be some way of dealing with kids?: Young offenders public attitudes and policy change. *Youth Justice*, 2, 3-13
  - 6 Hanson, E, & Holmes, D., (2014). *That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence*. Research in Practice/ADCS Leading Children’s Services: London
- Lloyd, J., (2017). ‘Peer on peer abuse and contextual safeguarding of children and young people’. Risk and Decision Making challenges for Children’s Services Management and Practice. Contextual Safeguarding Network: Bedfordshire
- Firmin, C., Horan, J., Holmes, D., & Hopper, G., (2019). Safeguarding during Adolescence – the relationship between Contextual Safeguarding, Complex Safeguarding and Transitional Safeguarding. Research in Practice, University of Bedfordshire, Rochdale Borough Council & Contextual Safeguarding Network: online

a societal perception of young people in England and Wales<sup>7</sup>, and a growing consensus that youth knife crime is a national epidemic, fuelled by a rise in predominantly London-based knife-related homicide<sup>8</sup>. The possession and use of knives by children has become enshrined in current debate.

In the wake of the London riots of 2008 – the trigger of a previous preoccupation with youth deviancy - British psychologist, Professor Tanya Byron<sup>9</sup> suggested a 'cultural ephiphobia' or 'generalised fear of young people' exists in our society. This, she proposes this, has created conditions within which society has generalised youths negatively, provoking fear. Accordingly, she warns, young people risk feeling marginalised and discriminated against and may become more likely to actualise the negative identities adults have assigned to them. Byron highlights the recurrent condemnation, by adults, of young people throughout history, with a nostalgic propensity to favour previous generations of youth while perceiving the current generation of young people as wayward. So, in contrast to younger children, adolescents are seen as objects of (often inflated) concern<sup>10</sup>.

Society's tendency to look for absolute solutions to criminality - and for policy-makers to favour measures that appear to offer both 'technical certainty and greater defensibility'<sup>11</sup> – precedes responses that too often ignore the complex realities of youth crime and adolescent risk-taking. This has not only led to widespread academic criticism of a system that favours simplistic, punitive responses<sup>12</sup> but has also resulted in widespread scepticism and confusion among practitioners about 'what works', or more usefully, what *might* work, for whom and in what circumstances<sup>13</sup>.

Sensationalist headlines that call for the 'issue' of youth knife crime to be '*... treated as an emergency*'<sup>14</sup> are feeding into political declarations of a 'broken society' and reactive assurances not dissimilar to New Labour's 'tough on crime, tough on the causes' rhetoric. Common media images of masked youths wielding kitchen knives further provoke a sense of imminent significant risk. Though some recent commentators have sought to contextualise the carrying and use of weapons by young people through a safeguarding lens<sup>15</sup>, a deterrent and punitive discourse evidently remains in aspects of policy, practice and public opinion. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the media, politicians and other 'interested parties' (eg, public agencies and voluntary organisations) have attributed blame to a range of cultural factors, including drill music, gangs, exposure to violence via social media and Brexit, which is seen as having distracted political attention<sup>16</sup>. Central to all these 'explanations' is the archetypal malevolent (usually black, male) youth. Meanwhile, communities are often presented as helpless bystanders who lack the ability to contribute to solutions, whilst victims, who are often young themselves<sup>17</sup>, are polarised as either innocent (worthy) children, or, if somehow gang-related, as active (unworthy) participants.

The incongruence between desistance research literature and the cyclical reliance on child incarceration as both a deterrent and to 'risk manage' those who fail to be dissuaded by the threat of punitive sanctions<sup>18</sup>, is strikingly exemplified in the mandatory custodial sentencing for a second knife crime conviction, enshrined within the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 for 16/17 year olds (unless for exceptional circumstances).

The Offensive Weapons Bill 2017-19, currently going through parliament, provides for the introduction of Knife

7 Pitts, J., (2015). 'Youth Crime and Youth Justice 2015-2020'. Youth & Policy Special Edition: The Next Five Years: Prospects for Young People. 114, pp 31-42. Available at: <http://youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/pitts-yoht-crime-youth-justice-2015-2020.pdf>

8 Allen, G, & Audickas, L., (2018). Knife Crime in England and Wales. (9 November 2018) House of Commons Library: online. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN04304#fullreport>

9 Byron, T., (2009). 'We See Children as Pestilent' The Guardian, 17 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/mar/17/ephebiphobia-young-people-mosquito>

10 Butler-Sloss, 1988 in Frost, N., (2011). Rethinking Children and Families: The Relationship Between Childhood, Families and the State (New Childhoods), Bloomsbury: London

11 Farrow, K., Kelly, G., & Wilkinson, B., (2007). Offenders In Focus: Risk, Responsibility and Diversity.

12 Raynor, P., (2000). 'Developing effective practice in the United Kingdom'. Sustaining Effectiveness in Working with Offenders. Andrews, D., Hollins, C., Raynor, P., Trotter, C., & Armstrong, B., (2000). The Cognitive Centre Foundation: Dinas Powys. 3, p57-78

Bateman, T., (2015). The State of Youth Justice. National Association for Youth Justice: London. Available at: <http://thenayj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/State-of-Youth-Justice-Oct15.pdf>

13 Muncie, J., (2004). Youth and Crime. London: Sage Publications

14 @Indyvoices., (2018). 'The Rise in Youth Knife Crime should be treated as an Emergency' The Independent, 24 June. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voiditorials/knife-crime-london-stabbing-death-police-investigations-weapons-a8413516.html>

15 Lloyd, J., (2017). 'Peer on peer abuse and contextual safeguarding of children and young people'. Risk and Decision Making Challenges for Children's Services Management and Practice. Contextual Safeguarding Network: Bedfordshire

16 Inewscouk. 2019. Inewscouk. [Online]. [15 March 2019]. Available from: <https://inews.co.uk/news/brexit/brexit-attention-children-young-people-abuse-traumatised/>

17 Allen, G, & Audickas, L., (2018). Knife Crime in England and Wales. (9 November 2018) House of Commons Library: online. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN04304#fullreport>

18 Standing Committee for Youth Justice (SCYJ), (2015). Children and custodial sentences for a second knife offence: A briefing for YOTs. Accessed 05.06.17, Available at: <http://scyj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Signed-off-briefing-for-YOTs-children-and-second-knife-offences.pdf>  
Full Fact. (2018). *Are a majority of youth knife offenders minority ethnic?*. Available: <https://fullfact.org/crime/are-majority-youth-knife-offenders-minority-ethnic/>

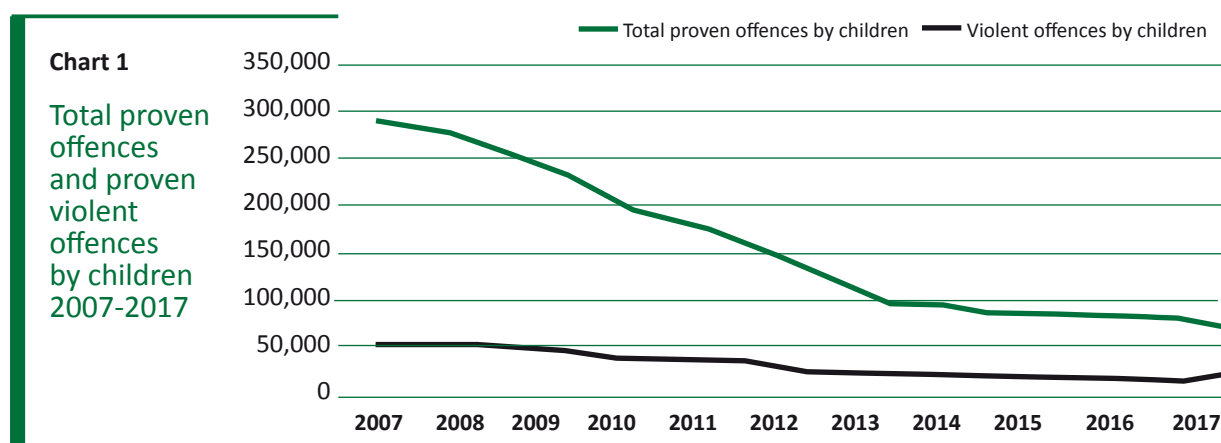
Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs) for people aged 12 and over. Similar in structure to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, the KCPO would impose various requirements and prohibitions on recipients, compliance with which would be overseen by youth justice services (in the case of children and young people), with breach resulting in imprisonment. Critics highlight the fact that these key proposals within the bill (on which magistrates were not consulted) are based on a perceived probability of behaviour rather than a 'criminal standard of proof' and the Ministry of Justice has accepted that its response lacks an evidential base<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore despite the drive to reduce short-term prison sentences because of their ineffectiveness, proposals to exempt knife crime offences from a suggested short-term prison sentence ban, is currently being considered by the Justice Secretary, David Gauke<sup>20</sup>.

Responses such as mandatory custodial sentencing and ASBO-style 'prevention' orders have prompted some to suggest that the current debate on youth knife crime is essentially a 'moral panic' and that the extent of public concern is disproportionate to the reality of the problem; referred to by one commentator as '*... one of Britain's episodic fixations with knife crime and youth violence*'<sup>21</sup>.

## ● How big is the problem?

Rates of detected youth crime and youth violent crime have both declined over the past decade<sup>22</sup>, to a greater extent than the trend across all age groups and, as Chart 1 shows, although offences of violence against a person rose as a proportion of overall youth crime (up from 19% in 2006-2007, to 28% in 2016-2017) there was still an overall reduction of 64% during this period<sup>23</sup>.



Looking specifically at knife-related violence, hospital admissions data for injury by a sharp instrument show a rise of 22% since 2014/15<sup>24</sup>, though there is no breakdown available by instrument type or perpetrator age. Homicide committed across age groups that involved a knife or sharp instrument has risen, with currently-known deaths evidencing a 33% increase between the year ending March 2017 and March 2018<sup>25</sup>, accounting for the highest number of related deaths (285) since records began in 1946<sup>26</sup>.

When looking at violence broadly, data convincingly demonstrates the small proportion of knife related incidents as shown in chart 2 overleaf.

19 Prison Reform Trust. (2019). "Knife crime ASBOs" will put vulnerable kids at risk. Available: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/vw/1/ItemID/637>

20 Wheeler, T. (2019). Knife crime: David Gauke in retreat over abolition of short sentences. [online] [TheTimes.co.uk](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/knife-crime-david-gauke-in-retreat-over-abolition-of-short-sentences-s5dwj2cht). Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/knife-crime-david-gauke-in-retreat-over-abolition-of-short-sentences-s5dwj2cht>

21 Younge, G., (2018). 'The Radical Lessons of a Year Reporting on Knife Crime' *The Guardian*, 21 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2018/jun/21/radical-lessons-knife-crime-beyond-the-blade>; online

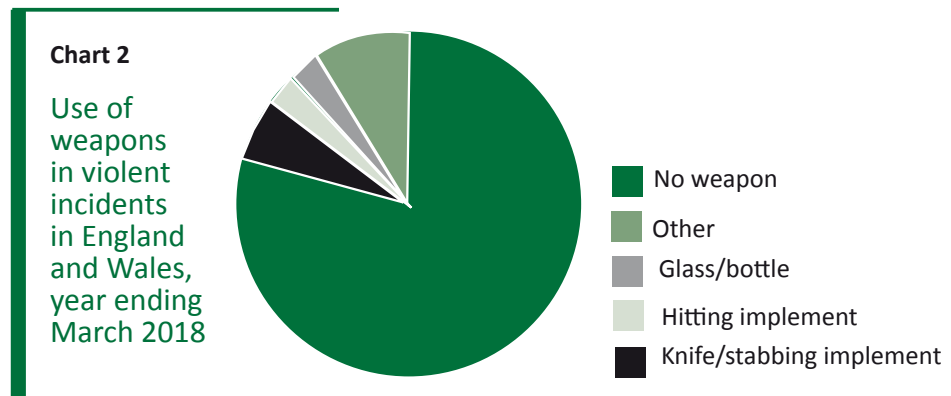
22 Youth Justice Board / Ministry of Justice., (2018). Youth Justice Statistics 2016/17: England and Wales. Youth Justice Board, Ministry of Justice & National Statistics: Online. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/676072/youth\\_justice\\_statistics\\_2016-17.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/676072/youth_justice_statistics_2016-17.pdf)

23 Ibid

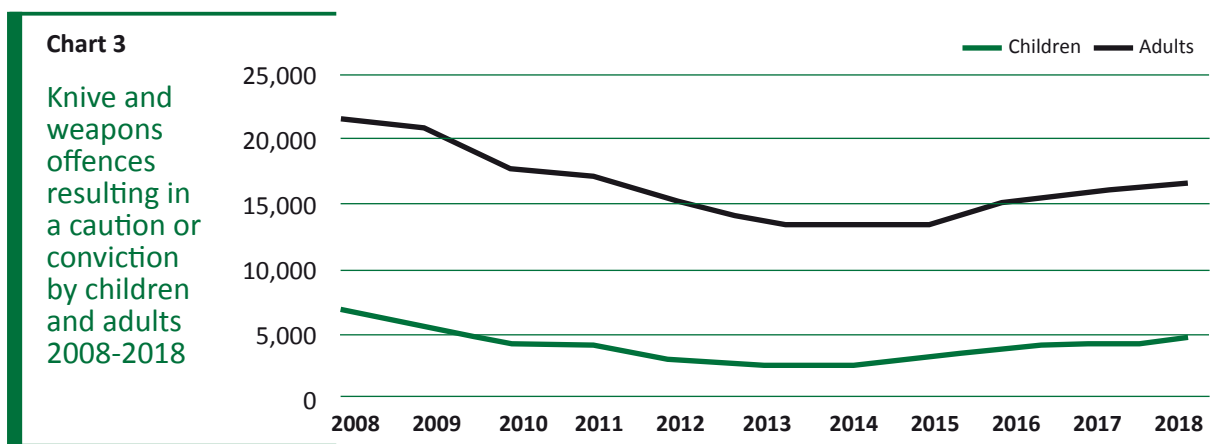
24 Ibid

25 Ibid

26 O'Leary, J, & Reland, J., (2019) What's happening to knife crime?, Available at: <https://fullfact.org/crime/knife-crime/>



Turning specifically to data that distinguishes between age groups, an 11% increase in proven knife-possession offences by children between 2011-12 and 2016-17, compares with a 10% decrease during the same period for the adult cohort<sup>27</sup>. However, this is widely attributed to more proactive policing<sup>28</sup>. Perhaps more significantly, over the slightly longer-term, knife and weapons offences committed by children have fallen, displaying a very similar pattern to that of adults<sup>29</sup>.



As indicated in chart 3 above, the number of weapons offences committed by children in 2018 was 34% lower than 10 years previously. There has however been a rise, of almost 70% in the last five years, from the historic low in 2013. The rise has occurred at a time when there has been an increased focus on youth knife crime, leading to the suggestion that the recent increase is at least in part a consequence of changes in policing practice. Some of the evidence for this derives from children's self-report data. Though only captured over the past three years, the self-report data for 10 to 15-year olds contained within the Crime Survey for England and Wales provide no demonstrable increase in knife possession<sup>30</sup>, which remains stable at around 0.7%. Conversely (and testament to the complexity of the issue), the number of children reporting that they 'know others who carry' has increased<sup>31</sup>.

27 Youth Justice Board/Ministry of Justice., (2018). Youth Justice Statistics 2016/17: England and Wales. Youth Justice Board, Ministry of Justice & National Statistics: Online. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/676072/youth\\_justice\\_statistics\\_2016-17.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/676072/youth_justice_statistics_2016-17.pdf)

28 Grimshaw, R., & Ford, M., (2018). Young People, Violence and Knives – revisiting the evidence and policy discussions. UK Justice Policy Review Focus (3). Centre for Crime and Justice Studies & The Hadley Trust: London. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Knife%20crime.%20November.pdf>

29 Youth Justice Board/ Ministry of Justice., (2018). Youth Justice Statistics 2016/17: England and Wales. Youth Justice Board, Ministry of Justice & National Statistics: Online. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/676072/youth\\_justice\\_statistics\\_2016-17.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/676072/youth_justice_statistics_2016-17.pdf)

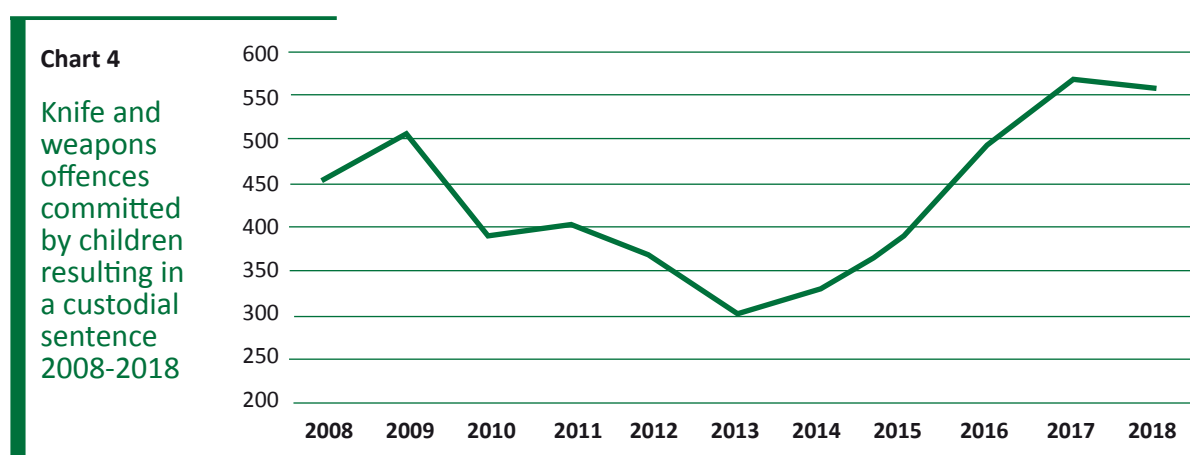
30 Older adolescent findings contained within 16-25 year cohort

31 Grimshaw, R., & Ford, M., (2018). Young People, Violence and Knives – revisiting the evidence and policy discussions. UK Justice Policy Review Focus (3). Centre for Crime and Justice Studies & The Hadley Trust: London. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Knife%20crime.%20November.pdf>

One way of reconciling these potentially contradictory findings is that self-reports suggest that in already violent environments, the risk of victimisation has risen, in contrast with the population overall who are reporting fewer experiences of crime<sup>32</sup>.

If the evidence in relation to children's behaviour is a little hard to interpret, it is clear that some youth justice responses to weapons offending have become increasingly harsh. Although a relatively small proportion of possession offences result in actual violence or injury,<sup>33</sup> and notwithstanding the increasing ineffectiveness of custodial environments to keep young people safe or reduce reoffending<sup>34</sup>, the use of immediate custody for possession offences has increased<sup>35</sup>.

Following a substantial decline in the number of custodial sentences imposed on children up to 2013, there has been a sharp increase over the subsequent five years, from 298 to 558. As shown in chart 4, while the custodial trend in each period was in the same direction as the number of weapons offences, the extent of change was greater. Thus, while the number of offences receiving a caution or conviction rose by nearly 70% between 2013 and 2018, the corresponding growth in incarceration was 87%; the rate of custody (considered as a proportion of weapons offences) grew correspondingly from 11.2% in 2013 to 12.5% in 2018.



In 2008, the Sentencing Advisory Panel noted that ‘...Considerable emphasis has been placed on the deterrent effect of increasing the likelihood both of prosecution and of the imposition of a (longer) custodial sentence. However, the reasons for carrying a knife commonly cited include protection, fear and the anticipation of being attacked as well as experiences of personal victimisation. Where that accurately reflects the situation, the most effective way to reduce the number of young people carrying weapons is likely to be a focus on addressing those social factors; changes in prosecution or sentencing practice are likely to have a lesser impact’<sup>36</sup>.

While interpreting the data is not without challenge, the figures for detected offending demonstrate a fall followed by a rise over the past decade. The latter is clearly a concern, though it should be borne in mind that the extent of weapons offending in 2018 remained below that in 2008. Concurrently, responses to such offences have evidently become more punitive, with a pronounced increase in the use of child imprisonment, despite the overall drive to reduce England and Wales’ damning youth custody figures.

32 Webster, C and Kingston, S (2014) Poverty and crime review. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York, available at: [http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/71188/1/JRF\\_Final\\_Poverty\\_and\\_Crime\\_Review\\_May\\_2014.pdf](http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/71188/1/JRF_Final_Poverty_and_Crime_Review_May_2014.pdf)

33 Allen, G and Audickas, L (2018) *Knife crime in England and Wales*. Briefing paper, Number SN4304, 9 November 2018. London: House of Commons Library available at: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04304/SN04304.pdf>

34 Bateman, T., (2016). The State of Youth Custody. NAYJ: online. Available at: <http://thenayj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NAYJ-Briefing-State-of-Youth-Custody-2016.pdf>

35 Youth Justice Board / Ministry of Justice., (2018). Youth Justice Statistics 2016/17: England and Wales. Youth Justice Board, Ministry of Justice & National Statistics: Online. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/676072/youth\\_justice\\_statistics\\_2016-17.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/676072/youth_justice_statistics_2016-17.pdf) - from when the most recent published youth justice data derives.

36 Blakemore & Mills (2014) in Stone, N., (2015). ‘Eradicating ‘This Dreadful Knife Problem’’: Legislative and Judicial Initiatives against Knife Crime’, Youth Justice, 15(2), pp 182-194. DOI: 10.1177/1473225415582865; p187

## ● How might youth related knife crime emerge?

It is often argued that knife-related offending, gangs and higher levels of youth violence emerge from a culture that gradually develops in deprived areas and in environments of social exclusion<sup>37</sup>. Within this culture, violence becomes normalised with perpetrators, victims and communities becoming desensitised to its impact and with much of the crime going unreported<sup>38</sup>. Societal trust is purported to mediate the link between inequality and violence, with societies that exhibit both low levels of trust and equality less likely to develop safe communities<sup>39</sup>.

Once synonymous with inner city hotspots, as organised crime groups evolve and with an increased professional spotlight on County Lines drug supply, a picture is emerging of young people more widely being exploited in supply chains, in which interpersonal and instrumental (goal-oriented) violence often features. In 2017, 35 out of the 44 police forces in England and Wales reported examples of County Lines related knife experiences in their areas<sup>40</sup>. Unsurprisingly, children from deprived backgrounds are identified as particularly vulnerable to being involved<sup>41</sup>.

There are multiple contexts and motivations within which young people carry and use knives<sup>42</sup>. Exploring the unmet needs a young person is attempting to accomplish should be a critical consideration. Young people frequently report fear, image concerns and a need for protection among the key drivers for their and their peers' involvement in knife crime<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, one longitudinal study of youth violence posits, '*the more serious the deeds the more deep-seated the needs*'<sup>44</sup>. And although, for some, the unmet need to be safe will be real, research shows that young people who behave violently are often more susceptible to misinterpreting scenarios as threatening<sup>45</sup>.

The association between mass media, consumerism and crime is gaining attention, a relationship that confuses wants with needs. Unlike previous generations, adolescents now have constant exposure to the filtered ideals of celebrity lifestyles. Conversely, the proportion of young people who are now vulnerable by virtue of care status, homelessness and/or school exclusion has grown<sup>46</sup> and the opportunities to economically thrive have lessened. In its report on the 2011 national riots – which were, in part, characterised by opportunistic looting – the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel<sup>47</sup>, referred to the 'commercialism of childhood', a concept that hinges on the deliberate manipulation of 'needs' to generate profit.

A London-based youth worker interviewed by the Guardian's Beyond the Blade project<sup>48</sup> expressed a concern that young people are growing into 'flaky adults' having experienced a lack of longevity in childhood relationships, for example following frequent changes of teacher. The move in 2016 to exempt under 25s from the National Living Wage, instead introducing a staggered Lower Living Wage, exemplifies an observation made by other practitioners of the lack of value accorded to young people. Critics refer to the impact on younger workers' morale<sup>49</sup> of a system that allows them to be paid just over half (53.6%) the earnings of an older

37 Grimshaw, R., & Ford, M., (2018). Young People, Violence and Knives – revisiting the evidence and policy discussions. UK Justice Policy Review Focus (3). Centre for Crime and Justice Studies & The Hadley Trust: London. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Knife%20crime.%20November.pdf>

38 Firmin, C., Turner, R., & Gavrielides, T., (2007). Empowering young people through human rights values: fighting the knife culture. Race on the Agenda. Accessed 02.04.17, Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291945336\\_Firmin\\_C\\_Turner\\_R\\_and\\_Gavrielides\\_T\\_2007\\_Empowering\\_young\\_people\\_through\\_human\\_rights\\_values\\_Fighting\\_the\\_knife\\_culture\\_London\\_Race\\_on\\_the\\_Agenda](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291945336_Firmin_C_Turner_R_and_Gavrielides_T_2007_Empowering_young_people_through_human_rights_values_Fighting_the_knife_culture_London_Race_on_the_Agenda)

39 Grimshaw, R., & Ford, M., (2018). Young People, Violence and Knives – revisiting the evidence and policy discussions. UK Justice Policy Review Focus (3). Centre for Crime and Justice Studies & The Hadley Trust: London. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Knife%20crime.%20November.pdf>

40 Ibid

41 Coomber, R. and Moyle, L. (2017), 'The changing shape of street-level heroin and crack supply in England: commuting, holidaying and cuckooing drug dealers across "county lines"', British Journal of Criminology, 58(6)

42 Gliga, T., (2009). The 'Knife Crime' phenomenon - A psychological perspective on youth knife culture. BPS Parliamentary Office: online. Available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.710.778&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

43 Blakemore & Mills (2014) in Stone, N., (2015). 'Eradicating 'This Dreadful Knife Problem': Legislative and Judicial Initiatives against Knife Crime', *Youth Justice*, 15(2), pp 182-194. DOI: 10.1177/1473225415582865,

44 Action for Children, (2008). Step Inside Our Shoes: young people's views on gun and knife crime. Action for Children: London. Available at: [https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/3298/action\\_for\\_children\\_step\\_inside\\_our\\_shoes\\_young\\_peoples\\_views\\_on\\_gun\\_and\\_knife\\_crime\\_2008.pdf](https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/3298/action_for_children_step_inside_our_shoes_young_peoples_views_on_gun_and_knife_crime_2008.pdf)

45 McAra, L., McVie, S., Haines, K & Case, S., (2013). Justice for Young People: Papers by the winners of the Research medal 2013. The Howard League for Penal Reform: London. Available at: [https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Justice\\_for\\_young\\_people\\_web.pdf](https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Justice_for_young_people_web.pdf), p4

46 Lipsey, M., Landenberger, N., & Wilson, S., (2007). Effects of Cognitive Behavioural Programs for Criminal Offenders. Norway: Campbell Collaboration

47 Allen, G, & Audickas, L., (2018). Knife Crime in England and Wales. (9 November 2018) House of Commons Library: online. Available at: <https://research-briefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN04304#fullreport>

48 Riots Communities and Victims Panel., (2012). The Final Report of the Riots Communities and Victims Panel. London: Riots Victims and Communities Panel, p4

49 Younge, G., Sanderson, M., Bannock, C., Shutti, G., Scotland, S. and Poulton, L. (2019). Episode 3: Croydon - Beyond the blade podcast. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/audio/2018/sep/10/croydon-beyond-the-blade-podcast>

49 New Policy Institute. (2017). Young Adult and the Minimum Wage: the case for lowering age eligibility. New Policy Institute: Online. Available at: <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2017/07/Supplementary-evidence-2017-NPI-report-on-Young-Adults-and-the-Minimum-Wage.pdf>

worker undertaking the same work. In addition to devaluing young people, this approach risks perpetuating the perceived rewards of illegitimate earning.

Of recent knife-related homicides, one commentator says, *'These deaths occur at a moment when the country has made a conscious decision to defund and under-resource its young. When you slash youth services, underfund child mental health services and make swingeing cuts to education and policing, there will be an effect. The most vulnerable will suffer. Austerity didn't invent knife crime, but it is certainly contributing to the conditions in which it can thrive'*,<sup>50</sup>. Another observer proposes a link between London based youth knife violence and a reduction of youth centres in the city by 104 since 2011<sup>51</sup>.

In summary, crime does not exist in a social vacuum<sup>52</sup>. Addressing the individual pathology of the 'perpetrator' may act as a sticking plaster, but it over-simplifies a much more complex problem. Responses designed and undertaken without reference to contextual family, community, peer and social factors will be of limited value in tackling causality<sup>53</sup>. Though the contexts within which social phenomena occur may alter, the themes of unsafety; fear; self-protection; peer influence; identity; ethnicity; social class; power; control; exploitation; disengagement from education; boredom; deprivation and a lack of connection to the wider community, are not new nor exclusive to groups associated with knife crime.

## ● What might work?

It is often suggested that the 'what works' agenda oversimplifies the complex nature of youth crime and encourages responses that are offence rather than young person focussed<sup>54</sup>. This certainly appears to be the case in relation to knife-related youth violence.

Despite repeated warnings<sup>55</sup> of the risk of labelling and reinforcing negative behaviour, there is still a demand for specific 'knife crime interventions'. Such a narrow focus may inhibit the identification and strengthening of resilience and protective factors that could harness sustained (secondary) desistance. O'Mara et al<sup>56</sup> refer to young people themselves reporting feeling dissatisfied with 'overly targeted programmes'. Yet these off-the-shelf interventions continue to emerge, so seductive is the notion that the solution lies in young people simply understanding the potential consequences of their actions.

At a strategic level, enforcement and containment remain prominent responses. One extensive review<sup>57</sup> concludes that the use of enforcement and punitive action to respond to the carrying and use of a knife, such as harsher sentences, fails to take account of it being 'merely one expression of interpersonal violence', suggesting that effective responses will only be achieved by dealing with the underlying causes of violence, fear and insecurity.

Accordingly, effective responses tend to explore young people's expressions of unsafety as a key motivator to the carrying of weapons, alongside the desire to attain street social capital<sup>58</sup>. One theoretically-informed framework, contextual safeguarding, draws attention to the interconnected nature of adolescent peer-on-peer abuse and vulnerability, from which knife crime can stem. It considers the interplay between motives, power, hierarchy, gender, age, consent, culpability, vulnerability and safety and attends to the contexts of harm, engaging with the (offline and online) spaces and places within which young people exist and where

50 Younge, G, (2019). Beyond the blade: the truth about knife crime in Britain. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/28/beyond-the-blade-the-truth-about-knife-in-britain>

51 Hancox, D., (2019). Number of London youth clubs nearly halved since 2011 riots, report finds. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/mar/22/number-of-london-youth-clubs-nearly-halved-since-2011-riots-report-finds>

52 Kubiak, C., & Hester, R., (2009). 'Just deserts? Developing practice in youth justice'. *Learning in Health and Social Care*, 8(1), 47–57. Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/12929/1/>

53 Batchelor, S., & McNeill, F., (2005). The young Person-Worker Relationship. In: *The RHP Companion to Youth Justice*. Bateman, T., & Pitts, J ed. (2005). Lyme Regis: Russell House. 26, 166-171

54 Bateman, T., (2015). The State of Youth Justice. National Association for Youth Justice: London. Available at: <http://thenayj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/State-of-Youth-Justice-Oct15.pdf>

55 Hanson, E, & Holmes, D., (2014). That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence. *Research in Practice / ADCS Leading Children's Services: London*

Grimshaw, R., & Ford, M., (2018). Young People, Violence and Knives – revisiting the evidence and policy discussions. *UK Justice Policy Review Focus* (3). Centre for Crime and Justice Studies & The Hadley Trust: London. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Knife%20crime.%20November.pdf>

56 O'Mara et al, (2000): Hanson, E, & Holmes, D., (2014). That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence. *Research in Practice / ADCS Leading Children's Services: London*

57 Eades, C., Grimshaw, R., Silvestri, A. and Solomon, E. (2007), 'Knife crime': A review of evidence and policy, London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

58 Silvestri, A., Oldfield, M., Squires, P., & Grimshaw, R (2009). Young People, Knives and Guns: A comprehensive review, analysis and critique of gun and knife crime strategies. Accessed 14.04.17, Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications/young-people-knives-and-guns>, Lloyd, J., (2017). 'Peer on peer abuse and contextual safeguarding of children and young people'. Risk and Decision Making challenges for Children's Services Management and Practice. Contextual Safeguarding Network: Bedfordshire, Hanson, E, & Holmes, D., (2014). *That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence*. *Research in Practice / ADCS Leading Children's Services: London*

exploitation, violence and abuse can manifest. The approach supports the assertion that, '*We must move on from looking at individual children to looking at the toxic environment*'<sup>59</sup>.

Also advocating a contextual approach, Silvestri et al<sup>60</sup> assert that:

*'Focussing upon the weapons themselves may prove something of a distraction. A long-term and multi-faceted approach is needed to understand and tackle the conditions in which weapon carrying and use comes to be considered an option – or a necessity'.*

The eventual dissolving of the 'Scuttlers' gang in 1870s Manchester can be seen as a historic example of applying a contextual approach, driven by local communities. The Scuttlers were characterised by territorial violent males who used homemade weapons to claim public musical halls and communities, with young females, 'Scuttlerettes', said to incite the violence by flirting with and goading rival males. The media and authorities identified and shamed individuals and fuelled a national moral panic. Following an initial dependence on incarceration, the affected communities started to develop initiatives aimed at pro-socially fulfilling some of the hypothesised drivers of the criminality - the need (or want) for status and competition, redirecting members with alternatives such as sporting initiatives. The community's responsive interventions are said to have disrupted the next generation from being recruited<sup>61</sup>.

A call has been made for Premier League football clubs to intervene with current youth knife violence<sup>62</sup>. Implicit within the current 'desperate plea', appears an assumption that football clubs are relevant and influential in the lives of those it aims to target. Differing from the active engagement of young people in the historic Scuttlers strategy, this deterrent campaign led by Anti-Knife UK, amounts to football clubs endorsing campaign posters with slogans; 'Carry a knife and we'll give you some time to think about it' (over an image of prison bars and a lock), and 'Towards carry knives', neither assertion providing young people with a sense of what they can or should do to occupy their time, or to keep themselves safe.

Almost two centuries on from the successful dissipation of the Scuttlers, in 2012, the government initiated the Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme across targeted areas to tackle modern youth violence. A report examining its success across 20 of the participating areas identified the critical importance of developing trusting and supportive community relationships, of partnership working and identifying and sustaining 'passionate' local champions, in response to youth violence and exploitation<sup>63</sup>. Some international studies also note higher reductions of youth violence where the workers' experiences resonated with participants<sup>64</sup>. Munro et al<sup>65</sup> propose that to create positive social work practice, a 'whole system organisational change' is required 'that embeds the core disciplines and principles... in the organisation's culture and practices'.

Research consistently draws on the central importance of relationships in responding effectively to adolescent risk taking<sup>66</sup>, and compellingly this identifies young people (and their families) as the key stakeholders in the assessment and planning of responses to their own behaviour and attitudes, attributing active participation – working with and not to - as critical to the achievement of child outcomes<sup>67</sup>. Further, when young people's

59 Prothrow-Stith, D: Silvestri, A., Oldfield, M., Squires, P., & Grimshaw, R (2009). Young People, Knives and Guns: A comprehensive review, analysis and critique of gun and knife crime strategies. Accessed 14.04.17, Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications/young-people-knives-and-guns>, p61

60 Silvestri, A., Oldfield, M., Squires, P., & Grimshaw, R (2009). Young People, Knives and Guns: A comprehensive review, analysis and critique of gun and knife crime strategies. Accessed 14.04.17, Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications/young-people-knives-and-guns>, p7

61 Wainwright, M. (2019). Martin Wainwright on Victorian gang violence. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/oct/22/hoodies-victorian-manchester-gangs> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019]

62 Stevenson, S. (2019). STABBING EPIDEMIC sparks urgent plea for Premiership clubs to help combat CHAOS on streets. [online] Express.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1040227/UK-crime-stabbing-anti-knife-crime-campaign-premiership-football-club-anti-knife-uk-ONS>

63 Home Office. (2016). Assessment: An Independent Review of the Ending Gang and Youth Violence Programme. Home Officer: London. Accessed 23.06.17, Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/570476/egyv-assessment-programme-2012-15-full-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/570476/egyv-assessment-programme-2012-15-full-report.pdf)

64 Grimshaw, R., & Ford, M., (2018). Young People, Violence and Knives – revisiting the evidence and policy discussions. UK Justice Policy Review Focus (3). Centre for Crime and Justice Studies & The Hadley Trust: London. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Knife%20crime.%20November.pdf>

65 Munro, E., Turnell, A., & Murphy, T., (2016). You Can't Grow Roses in Concrete: Action Research Final Report Signs of Safety English Innovations Project. Munro, Turnell & Murphy Child Protection Consulting: Perth, p6

66 Humayun, S., Woolgar, M., & Scott, S., (2008). The Early Development of Offending and What Works to Stop It. London: Institute of Psychiatry, Prior, D., & Mason, P., (2010). A different kind of evidence? Looking for 'what works' in engaging young offenders. *Youth Justice Journal*. 10, 211-226., Hanson, E., and Holmes, D., (2014). *That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence*. Research in Practice / ADCS Leading Children's Services: London,

Woodman, J., Rafi, L., & de Lusignan, S., (2014). Editorials Child Maltreatment, time to rethink the role of General Practice. *British Journal of General Practice*. Vol (unknown), p444-445HM Inspectorate of Probation, (2016). *Desistance and young people*. HM Inspectorate of Probation: Manchester.

67 Jones, (2018). Youth Justice: Future Directions Participatory Youth Practice (PYP): co-developing youth justice practice through participation. The Manchester Centre for Youth Studies/Greatest Manchester Youth Justice University Partnership: Manchester.



agency and autonomy is developed, behavioural change is more likely<sup>68</sup>. Yet, young people tend to occupy the least powerful position in decisions made about them<sup>69</sup>.

A public health approach is emerging as a potentially effective mechanism to reduce youth violence; one which comprises multi-faceted interventions including universal, tertiary (for those considered at risk) and targeted (for those actively involved)<sup>70</sup>. Though growing in prominence internationally, a recent youth knife crime review finds that while promising, such approaches thus far have 'failed to fulfil their potential',<sup>71</sup>. Moreover, despite there being examples of historic and current youth justice policies and practices that feature components of the public health model (most notably, a reliance on partnership working), there lacks clear guidance for policy makers and practitioners about how to adopt such an approach or detail around how it differs from similar criminal justice driven tiered approaches. Nevertheless, the possibility that public health could hold solutions to traditional criminal justice driven social phenomena is gaining attention,<sup>72</sup>.

## ● Conclusions

Notwithstanding the incalculable impact for victims and communities of actual knife-related violence, and whilst acknowledging the detrimental effect that a fear of crime can have, the available data and literature convincingly demonstrate that the risk to the public at large of being a victim of youth related knife offending remains extremely low<sup>73</sup>. More influential appears to be a societal tendency to react to extreme events (in this case rising homicides) with what amounts to a moral panic. In these circumstances, the perceived prevalence of the issue is exaggerated; a perception that is reinforced (for a variety of reasons) by both traditional and online media, thereby increasing the pressure on government to be seen as pro-active in managing the risk. This in turn leads to particular individuals or groups being demonised – and to reactive, punitive responses that often defy the available evidence.

This paper suggests that this moral panic cumulatively challenges practitioners and policy makers to manage the inherent uncertainty associated with youth justice risk and decision-making. Notwithstanding contextual variances, responses to actual knife possession and violence are, consequently, more likely to become reactive, anxiety laden, risk-averse and discordant with theory<sup>74</sup>.

The evidence clearly shows that some responses to knife crime can do more harm than good<sup>75</sup>. Outcomes for children and young people in custody are particularly poor. Given the legal presumption of custody for children who offend repeatedly - and with increased use of immediate incarceration for these offence types - the stakes for young people, and thus arguably society, are high. In addition to the widely referenced principles likely to assist desistance and thus improve child outcomes<sup>76</sup>, this paper has attempted to highlight the critical value and importance of engendering genuineness, hope and care toward children and young people (thus avoiding

68 Ipsos MORI., (2010). A Review of Techniques for Effective Engagement and Participation Research study conducted for the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales. YJB: London,

Hart, D., & Thompson, C., (2009). Young People's Participation in the Youth Justice System. NCB: London. Accessed, 15.06.17, available at: <http://www.participationworks.org.uk/files/webfm/files/resources/k-items/ncb/Participationinyouthjusticereport/index.pdf>,

Hanson, E, & Holmes, D., (2014). *That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence*. Research in Practice / ADCS Leading Children's Services: London,

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HMI Probation, (2016). *Desistance and Young People: An inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation*. HMI Probation Manchester.

69 Healy, 1998: Cossar, J., Brandon, M., & Jordan, P., (2016). 'You've got to trust her and she's got to trust you': children's views on participation in the child protection system'. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21: p103–112. doi: 10.1111/cfs.12115

70 Grimshaw, R., & Ford, M., (2018). Young People, Violence and Knives – revisiting the evidence and policy discussions. UK Justice Policy Review Focus (3). Centre for Crime and Justice Studies & The Hadley Trust: London. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Knife%20crime.%20November.pdf>

71 Ibid

72 Ibid

73 Parliament, (2019). Parliament UK. [Online]. [14 February 2019]. Available from: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cm-haff/112/11206.htm>

74 Pitts, J., (2015). 'Youth Crime and Youth Justice 2015-2020'. Youth & Policy Special Edition: The Next Five Years: Prospects for Young People. 114, pp 31-42. Available at: <http://youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/pitts-yoht-crime-youth-justice-2015-2020.p>

75 Adler, J R., Edwards, S K., Scally, M., Gill, D., Puniskis, M J., Gekoski, A., & Horvath, M A H., (2016). *What Works in Managing Young People Who Offend? A Summary of the international evidence*. Middlesex University: Middlesex,

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76 McGuire, J., & Priestley, P., (1995). Reviewing 'What Works': Past, Present and Future. In: *What Works: Reducing Reoffending*. McGuire, J., ed. (1995). Chichester: Wiley. 1, p3-34,

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HMI Probation, (2016). *Desistance and Young People: An inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation*. HMI Probation Manchester.

contributing to their being labelled 'out of control'); of recognising and withstanding cultural and professional anxiety; and of being curious about the contexts and drivers within which the individual young person exists.

The more that adults model curiosity and critical thinking and apply the 'so what?' question when developing hypotheses and analyses of a situation, the more hope there is of propagating these qualities in future generations. Practice should not condone or minimise harmful attitudes and behaviours. But neither should it place full responsibility and blame on the young person for the often complex conditions within which unsafe

communities are created and 'knife crime' most commonly occurs. Expressions of unsafety and committing unsafe acts are issues of complex safeguarding (where the presenting risks extend beyond traditional familial child protection risk – see<sup>77</sup>). The more we apply approaches that attend to context, safety and collaboration, and that are evidentially informed, the more likely we are collectively to facilitate safe environments within which this generation of young people can develop beyond being feared and themselves identified as objects of concern.

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77 Firmin, C., Horan, J., Holmes, D., & Hopper, G., (2019). Safeguarding during Adolescence – the relationship between Contextual Safeguarding, Complex Safeguarding and Transitional Safeguarding. Research in Practice, University of Bedfordshire, Rochdale Borough Council and Contextual Safeguarding Network: online