

# KNIFE CRIME STORIES:

## KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY (JUNE 2019).

### INTRODUCTION.

In recent years knife crime has become an issue of urgency and importance. Knife-related injuries and deaths have risen most sharply amongst our young people, and increases in this type of have been recorded in 42 of 44 police forces across England. Though media on the issue often focuses on London, the pressing need to reduce knife crime, find solutions and ultimately protect young lives is felt acutely at a national level.

So far, a range of stakeholders, from victims' families to police and community groups, have shaped public debate about the issue. New policing measures and community interventions are getting off the ground. Yet one crucial groups' voice is absent from the picture: those with knife crime convictions. For User Voice, a charity led by ex-offenders with 10 years' experience in user-led research and action in the criminal justice system, we know that this group are essential to understanding the problem of knife crime - and to creating lasting change. In this context, User Voice was commissioned through the Home Office's 'Anti-knife crime community fund' to work on a peer research project that represented the reflections and ideas of young people with knife crime related convictions.

Though young people with knife crime convictions are the experts on how, and why, knife crime happens, their voices are routinely unheard in these conversations. Uniquely positioned to not only provide insight into the issue of knife crime, these individuals are also often best able to communicate their reflections to their peers who may be at risk of involvement in knife crime - and often those serving sentences related to knife crime are keen to make a contribution to stop the violence.

Driven by our user-led approach, the following is an interim summary of emerging reflections from young people in Youth Offending Institutions on knife crime. Participants were invited to take charge of this project. They shaped its design, methods and outcomes to give both personal experience and collective reflection on the causes and impacts of knife related violence, as well as their thoughts on how further tragedies can be prevented.

From a first exploration from User Voice, there are clear themes identified here that need further investigation and reflection. Issues of safety and fear, reflections on what young people would tell their younger selves, and involvement with drugs present a clear framework that needs further investigation. In particular, from User Voice's experience, there is more work to be done to uncover how young people can be empowered to make better choices within the environments in which they find themselves, and how they come to feel a complete lack of choice at these key moments in their lives.

In terms of solutions to the problem, the power of other young people, and adults, with lived experience in supporting young people away from knife crime emerged as a key need amongst all those interviewed. The last section of this report explores our next steps in terms of building on this need and designing interventions with young people in the driving seat.

## ABOUT USER VOICE.

User Voice is a charity led by ex-offenders. We are committed to making the criminal justice system work for everyone. We bring change for institutions, individuals and the agenda – by putting users at the heart:

- Change for institutions: **User Voice Councils** give decision-makers feedback and solutions from their service users.
- Change for individuals: with the right opportunity, encouragement and support, everyone can play an influential role in society through **User-Led Change**.
- Change in the agenda: bespoke consultations, **User Research** that give decision makers the opportunity to hear, and act upon, service user insights.

It is on the foundation of this work that User Voice is uniquely placed to facilitate this project led by young people with knife crime convictions, building on the trust our organisation has already won amongst young prisoners, and sticking to our user-led approach in designing and representing their thoughts to the world.

## WHAT WE DID AND HOW WE DID IT.

Aware that young prisoners are often either ignored on issues of importance to them, or that they are reluctant to speak up on key issues when they feel a deep sense of mistrust, User Voice put young prisoners in the driving seat of this project.

Encountering some access issues at the project's start, we were able to secure ongoing access to engage young people from two Young Offending Institutions (YOIs), HMPYOI Downview and HMPYOI Aylesbury on a longer term basis, allowing for greater participation and ownership of the project. This depth of engagement developed the project from our initial project bid. Chiefly, based on peer researchers' leadership and vision, User Voice have changed our plans for the content and dissemination of outputs. Though a key findings report and infographic are being produced, the Vox Pops we originally proposed were felt to not be relevant to young people, who argued for a more creative and peer-led intervention. At time of writing, User Voice is working with our peer researchers and music artists to produce a music-based intervention that utilises young people's existing communication networks. This will ensure learning from the project is shared peer-to-peer, and may be heard beyond schools, Pupil Referral Units and Youth Offending Teams - the settings where we first envisioned presenting this work.

Our key project goals around peer research training and facilitation were met: with a high level of interest for the project in YOIs, and young people taking ownership of the project. Our peer researchers ran questionnaires with their peers, recruited other young people to be involved, facilitated group discussions around knife crime, led the direction of semi-structured interviews and are designing a creative intervention. For all those who participated, their involvement has been a rehabilitative process: taking seriously their hard-won experiences and knowledge, developing their skills as researchers and leaders within their community and inviting them to give back to other young people in similar situations.

Overall:

- we spent three days at each YOI, conducting a) peer research training b) focus groups and c) semi structured interviews
- we engaged 30 young men and 30 young women in our initial project briefing and peer researcher outreach, a total of 60 young prisoners
- we received 20 written responses to our questionnaires, led by peer researchers on the project
- we held six peer-run focus group discussions
- we held fifteen one-to-one semi-structured interviews

Using our existing relationships within each prison, we invited young people with experience of knife crime to participate in the project. Participants were given initial questionnaires and a briefing on research design and interview questions, which they were then encouraged to design themselves. After this period of design, consultation and participant recruitment led by young people, User Voice staff then visited each YOI three times to help run peer-facilitated discussion groups and deep-dive one-to-one interviews.

The people in this project reflected some of the diversity of circumstances categorised as 'knife crime'. Young people (aged 18-25) participating included those imprisoned for carrying a bladed article to those imprisoned for murder, all of whose offences took place in a range of circumstances. Older prisoners (aged 25-45) who had committed knife-related offences in their youth also contributed to the project by providing crucial reflections and generational insights in discussion with younger people. The experiences of young people could also be categorised as the 'dos' - those young people who had previously engaged with support services before or whilst in prison; as well as the 'don'ts' - those who had not previously been in touch with community projects such as this. Opening up this range of life experiences, the project was able to paint a broader picture of knife crime, as reflected through the hard won lessons and life experiences of those who led the project for themselves and their peers: the young people.

## **WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAID ABOUT KNIFE CRIME.**

## **SAFETY, COERCION AND FEAR.**

Young people largely situated their decision to carry or use a knife within contexts when they feared for their own and others' safety. This was true for those who regularly carried knives, as well as for those who spontaneously picked up a knife in reaction to a particular circumstances.

*'No matter how big a man you are, the only reason anyone carries a knife is cos they're scared. It's cos you're scared something's going to happen to you'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

*'In my crime, I have to take responsibility for what I done because it was me ultimately that done that innit. But i felt like I had no choice. I felt like my life was at risk, and the people that I loved was at risk by not doing this thing.'* (HMP Downview)

*'It all comes down to - I'm going to get him or he's going to get me'*  
(HMP Aylesbury)

For several young women, this fear was developed within abusive relationships, often with romantic partners:

*'When we broke up, it wasn't physical violence but it was the whole stalking and harrassing...he was being violent but just not to me, it was to people that I care about. [...] I know my ex used to carry a knife on him, all the time. I know when he comes to my mum's house, he has a knife on him [...] So that's what led to my offence'. (HMP Downview)*

Young women also discussed growing afraid within abusive family relationships, or coercive relationships with partners or friends with whom they spent their time:

*"The relationship was so violent, in the end I was scared of him. [...] [After an argument] I turned my phone off, and he got somebody to shoot through my nan's door three times.'* (HMP Downview) *'My step dad hit my mum in front of me and I got a kitchen knife and tried stabbing him to stop him'* (HMP Downview)

For young men, though they also described carrying a knife as driven by the threat of physical attack, they mostly discussed this as happening between groups of friends and 'gangs'<sup>1</sup> rather than within families or romantic relationships. Most young men perceived

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the word 'gang' was a contentious term amongst young people. Though being 'in a gang' was often referred to offhand in interviews, most felt that 'gang' was an inaccurate term for a group of friends that did not reflect their experiences of friendships they had developed in school, at work and within their local areas.

that other people around them were routinely carrying weapons. All the young men we spoke to described carrying a knife as needed 'for protection'

*'If another person wants to get at you, they will get at you. It doesn't matter, if they don't have the same mentality as you, you will get got'*  
(HMPYOI Aylesbury)

*'Either you get with it or you get got'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

Overall, all the young people we spoke to carried and used knives in contexts where they felt that, if they did not protect themselves and their loved ones, they would be on the receiving end of fatal violence. The vast majority of participants had indeed either been beaten up and / or witnessed attacks in which knives were used. It was these experiences, and this fear, that led them to carry and/or use a knife: they become 'perpetrators' of knife violence in order to avoid becoming victims.

## CONSEQUENCES AND REFLECTION.

Some of the people we spoke to had been in prison for nearing 10 years, whilst others had only been sentenced a few months prior to involvement with the project. This allowed us to gather a variety of both young and older prisoners' reflections of the consequences of knife crime on their and others' lives.

In terms of personal consequences, 40% of those we spoke to said that the worst thing about being in prison was separation from friends, partners and family and 55% said that the worst thing about being in prison was having no control or freedom.

When asked, upon reflection, what they would have said to their younger selves that might have prevented their offence, most young people described not feeling they had any other choice:

*'I would say to my younger self, get help. You think you are OK but you are not OK'* (HMP Downview)

*'I would tell myself, this isn't the life you were destined to live'* (HMP Aylesbury)

*'I would say to my younger self, don't carry knives period. But 90% of youngers carry knives for protection. People are scared of being robbed and assaulted and people are robbing people because of money.'* (HMP Downview)

*'I wouldn't have listened to no one. I knew in that situation I had no choice, it's me or him'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

*'I would advise another young person not to, but if she doesn't feel safe without the protection and she started to carry a knife I would understand'* (HMP Downview)

Some felt that, had they known about services that could have supported them, they would encourage others to seek more appropriate support. For several young people, going to prison was the first time they felt aware and able to access these kinds of services:

*'Now [that I've been in prison] I know there are so many of these services that I could have gone to for help. But at the time I didn't know about them. Because unless you're in that sort of circle you're not told about those services.'* (HMP Downview)

*'Once I got caught, it was such a relief. I was just like 'thank f\*\*k'. [...] I thought maybe now I can get the help that I need to turn my life around. Because honestly, if I was still out there, I would have been dead.'* (HMP Downview)

Despite prison providing access to some services, every young person we asked said that, at the time of their offence, they were not thinking about prison. All said that longer sentences or harsher policing measures would not have deterred them at the time. Indeed, several of those we spoke to had previously been handed shorter sentences for other crimes. All of these individuals described these spells in prison, or contact with Youth Offending Teams, as ineffective in preventing them from committing later offences.

*'They will put you on an ASBO from your own area. You're gonna put me on ASBO from my own hood, and then put me somewhere else. Cool. That's just, I'm just gonna be an outsider, people will see me and be like 'who's this you?' 'where you from?' . But I know in my own area, I know I'm safe. At least there, I got people around. I can step out my house, and I know I'm good'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

*'The best thing they can do. When kids who are 12, 13 are getting nicked with knives don't send them to jail. That doesn't work. Send them on courses where people like yourself [an ex-offender] can get through to them'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

Overall, though young people felt strongly the negative impact of prison on their lives, none felt that criminal justice services had supported them away from crime in the past. Additionally, several mentioned that they did not feel confident to stay away from similar situations upon release:

*'I know when I get out, I'm going straight recall. They're going to put me in a hostel with someone I have a problem with and then what, I'll get into a fight, and bam - recall'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

*'When I get out, obviously at the moment I don't have anywhere to live, so what it's looking like to me is that I'm going to have to go back into those same circles that I was in, with all of those same friends that know him and all of that stuff and that, for me, that's putting me at risk.'* (HMP Downview)

## **ASPIRATION, DRUGS AND POVERTY.**

It is important to note that, for over half of the young people we spoke to, their lives were impacted by knife crime after involvement with either taking or selling drugs. Participants described poor mental health, poverty and neglect from adults around them as precipitating their involvement with drugs in the first place.

*'I was selling drugs. My environment was probably the worst and most negative place I could have been at 16 years old'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

*'I was using crack and heroin, my lifestyle was very chaotic. [...] I was in mental hospital at 16 but they just labelled me with things - Borderline Personality Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress. They never treated me like an addict, I didn't know about 12 steps'* (HMP Downview)

*'I was in a place of low self worth and low self esteem, just seeking approval. If those issues were brought up...it would have been different'* (HMP Downview)

For several young men and young women, selling drugs was an opportunity to provide for themselves and their family, as well as to access items they would not otherwise have been able to afford but that they felt pressure to acquire:

*"It's poverty, that's what it is. That's what it all comes down to. Not having what these other kids have got. Even growing up man, I know it sounds so stupid, but seeing someone with better sh\*t than you, you think 'I want that' [...]. My mum and dad don't have the money to get me that so I'm going to get that"* (HMP Aylesbury)

*'People have grown up with nothing, innit. When you get to an age where you can see other people making money in a certain way, and see your mum struggling, And the food that you're eating isn't even enough, and you've got younger siblings [...]. You're going to do what you can do. '* (HMP Downview)

*'I'm the oldest of ten. Looking at the food on the table - there was never enough. So when the mandem invited me into this new world and I can bring £700 a week to give to my mum, of course I'm going to do that'*  
(HMP Downview)

For young women, their involvement with drug taking often exposed them to violent situations:

*'I was locked up in a flat, held hostage for two days. Now I realise because of what I had been through before [a rape she had experienced], I reacted in the way I did and stabbed him'* (HMP Downview)

*'If you're the only girl in a gang, you're always a target'* (HMP Downview)

## **SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS.**

All the young people we engaged through the project wanted to contribute because they recognised that their voices, though crucial, were largely absent or unheard in wider discussions around knife crime.

Participants regularly commented that they did not relate to the mainstream narratives they heard about knife crime and all of them were keen to contribute thoughts and action to support other young people who might find themselves in similar situations.

As detailed in our initial project brief, young people were keen to devise solutions to the issue of knife crime that could support themselves and other people like them. Though access issues somewhat delayed the project, User Voice is currently working to deepen engagement with young people involved in the project to build on key needs they identified, namely:

- Youth programmes that directly invested in young people, particularly those that could provide concrete opportunities and gainful employment. This was seen as a key need for young people who had existing criminal records or were in difficult family circumstances.

*'If they went to a council estate, found the youts that always hang around and gave them money. Asked them what they want for their community with this money, I guarantee it would be better than anything else they can come up with. Because we know the lifestyle.'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

- Support networks and services that were able to identify at-risk young people and offer them mental health, domestic violence, substance misuse and conflict resolution support, particularly when these networks were informed by lived experience rather than adults whom young people felt mistrust towards.

*'If you recognise that a kid's got issues - say their dad's not there or their brother's in jail, stuff like that - that's trauma from a young age.[...] But if you make someone feel safe, make them realise they do have people who care about them and that they are safe where they are. I think that would help a lot'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

- Networks and places that were able to actively protect young people and their loved ones - particularly young women - from violent partners, family members and other associates of whom they were afraid were identified as crucial to reducing the fear that caused young people to carry knives.

*'They should look into when women call the police for domestic violence but don't press charges. I can think of about 10 women that are in prison for murder because they've called the police, the police haven't done anything, and they just end up killing him. Just to get him out of their lives.'* (HMP Downview)

- Several young people described lived experience as being particularly transformative. They felt that, at the time of their offence, they would not have listened to those who didn't truly understand their circumstances, around criminal convictions, the threat of violence, abusive relationships and substance misuse. Participants identified adults with lived experience as having the real potential to disrupt and change their thinking.

*'Real lived experiences. Not just ex-drug users. People who have been in prison for knives, and have come out, and turned their lives around and now they're part of the youth team. These kids don't have anyone like that.'* (HMPYOI Aylesbury)

## **PROJECT DEVELOPMENT.**

The intervention design section of the project, though initially delayed, is now being taken forward on this bases. For this, we are:

- Continuing interviews with core peer researchers from the project, getting past issues around fear and poverty to identify the key moments and drivers in decisions where themselves and others could be supported away from knife crime, to be completed in a fuller key findings report by early July 2019.
- Involving two young people who work on temporary licence as part of the User Voice team, and are soon due to be released from prison. These two young people will act as representatives of our knife crime work to schools

and service providers. This will ensure that the leadership with lived experience articulated as a key needed by young prisoners will be met, and these two young people will begin ambassador work for the project from July 2019.

- Developing themes from the report and the need for lived experience by follow up work with ex-offenders in the community who have been able to transition to living successfully. Involvement with this group will mark clear paths for those currently in prison to see a future modeled by those with lived experience, with data from the community to be gathered by September 2019.
- Use the power of young people's existing networks of communication and discussion, embodied so powerfully within the peer-research aspect of this project, to **communicate their own reflections through music and film**. User Voice is currently speaking to music producers and artists who are keen to amplify young people with knife crime convictions' reflections on the issue to their peers. This will result in a piece of music derived from young people's reflections, to be rolled out publicly for their peers to share and to promote discussion around the issue. The music and film release is due to coincide with the start of the school year, in early September 2019.

Overall, these final project stages, drawing together the intervention designs suggested by young people, are to be completed by the end of September 2019.

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