

# There is a determination at all levels to reduce the gun and knife crime problem, not least among children and young people themselves

Sir Al Aynsley-Green reports on a poll of more than 1,700 children and young people to gather their views on gun and knife crime.

There can be no question that gun and knife crime is a serious problem – the number of young people who have been fatally stabbed or shot in the last few months attests to that.

Of course, any such death devastates the victim's family and friends; but the wider communities where they take place are also deeply affected, and the fall-out ripples far beyond as well.

Perhaps the most obvious impact on children and young people directly affected is that it frightens them, makes them feel unsafe, and their responses are often based on that fear, real or otherwise.

Earlier this year I published a poll we conducted with YouGov, asking more than 1,700 children and young people aged eight to 17 for their views on gun and knife crime.

Some 15 per cent said they believed knife crime was a problem in their area; seven per cent stated that gun crime was a problem. There were variations by area – in higher risk areas, defined in the survey as those young people from lower socio-economic families living in seven of the ten urban areas where the Tackling Knives Action Programme is running, 26 per cent of young people said they believed knife crime was a problem where they lived. For gun crime, 18 per cent of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (or C2DE social classes) in Manchester said they believed it to be a problem, more than twice the national rate.

Often perception can be far removed from reality, especially around crime. But while the actual risk one may face is of course most important, perception still has enormous bearing on how one behaves, how one lives one's life and how one views one's environment.

Our survey indicated that those who feel that their area is not a good place for children and young people to be brought up, are more likely to feel that knife crime and/or gun crime is a problem there, are more likely to feel unsafe and are more



likely not to take part in youth activities in their area.

Children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (C2DE social classes) in Birmingham, for instance, told us they have a particularly negative opinion of where they live – 23 per cent said their local area was a bad place to grow up, compared with ten per cent nationally. 39 per cent of them said they did not participate in activities for young people, against 19 per cent nationally.

There are of course other issues involved here – appeal of activities to meet the views and interests of

young people, availability, cost, accessibility and individual motivation to become involved, all play a part in whether young people engage. But so, it appears, does a feeling of lack of safety.

For a very small number of young people, that sense that they live in an area where knife crime or gun crime is a problem can also lead to them deciding to carry weapons themselves.

Overall, two per cent of the 968 young people aged 12 to 17 in our poll said they carried a knife, the majority for fear or self-protection. Another two per cent said they had carried a knife in the past.

But of those that stated there was a problem with both gun crime and knife crime in their local area, 8 per cent said they either carried a knife now or had done in the past.

So the poll echoes previous research which says that not only does fear impact on the way children and young people live their lives, but also on levels of possession.

Without being complacent, we must at the same time keep these matters in perspective and be measured in our responses so children and young people are reassured about their safety – that duty falls on all adults, be they police; the media, in their portrayal of youth gun and knife crime stories; teachers, through raising awareness; or parents and carers, who can get information and advice to pass on to children through, for instance, It Doesn't Have to Happen ([www.itdoesnthavetohappen.co.uk](http://www.itdoesnthavetohappen.co.uk)).

I was especially heartened by our survey's figures around children and young people's attitudes to the police, as they showed that they broadly like the police, and feel that the police have such a key role to play in reassuring young people they are safe in their neighbourhoods; moreover, for the few who do carry weapons, they do not need to pick them up to protect themselves, not least because it will, in fact, make them less safe. Most young people told us they felt safer when they saw the police. However, they do not believe the police respect them as

much in return. The police are doing some excellent work in fostering good relations with young people – the new Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) business area for children and young people, under Ian McPherson, the chief constable in Norfolk, is just one example.

Above all, the YouGov survey encouraged me. Whilst no one can be in any doubt that gun and knife carrying is a long-term problem, and that it will require multi-layered, multi-agency long-term solutions, nonetheless, there is a determination at all levels to reduce the problem,

not least among children and young people themselves.

From the survey and from information gathered through qualitative research over more than 12 months, they have demonstrated, again, that they have valuable views and solutions to offer – and listening to them should be the starting-point when designing interventions to reduce gun and knife crime. ■

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**Sir Al Aynsley-Green** is Children's Commissioner for England.

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