

Young people and crime: busting the myths

A report by Jenny Jones - Green Party member of the London Assembly
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Young Londoners and crime: busting the myths

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In my role as a London Assembly Member I often come across negative rhetoric about today's young people, with notions of a youth crisis and a perceived decline in morality.

Such a mentality fails to recognise that young Londoners lead extremely varied lives and I therefore felt it was important to look at the wider picture and put things into perspective.

I have written this report to help demolish some of the myths about young people spread by other politicians, helped by the media.

I want to point out that the youth violence which hits the headlines stems from a very small proportion of young people growing up in London today.

We need to understand the complex issues facing our young people and find a way of moving forward that supports and nurtures them, rather than one that seeks to criminalise them.

Jenny Jones

Myth 1: Youth crime is accelerating

The Myth

There has been an explosion of youth crime in London

The media and some politicians paint a picture of youth crime spiralling out of control, with a wave of crime this country has never previously experienced.

The Reality

Whilst the murders of 27 young people in the capital in 2007 and 24 young people in the first eight months of 2008 are shocking and tragic, it is also important to look beyond these statistics and recognise that this should not form our only perception of young people in London.

Statistics from the Metropolitan Police show that youth violence (where the victim is aged 1-19) has fallen by over 10% between May 2007 and April 2008, gun crime has fallen by 8.6% in this period and knife crime by 15.5%.ⁱ Although the figures remain unacceptably high, and there are some concerns regarding the under-reporting of crime, the statistics nevertheless suggest that things are moving in the right direction.

It should also be recognised that violence from other young people is by no means the greatest threat young people today face. Suicide is actually the largest single cause of death amongst 15-25 year olds in the capitalⁱⁱ, but receives far less attention from media or politicians. Similarly, a teenager is killed or seriously injured every day on London's roadsⁱⁱⁱ, yet this is not cause for a widespread panic in the same way that deaths or injuries from gun and knife crime are.

Myth 2: Gang culture is everywhere

The Myth

Gang culture is rife among young people and is taking over our schools.

The Reality

The police have identified 169 separate gangs in London and it is estimated that 1,500 to 2,000 young people are involved in gangs.^{iv}

This represents a very small proportion of the 1.72 million young people under the age of 18 living in London - less than 0.12%.

An online consultation on crime, 'Step Inside our Shoes' by the children's charity National Children's Home, which involved over 800 young people, found that the main reason why they might consider carrying weapons is for self protection, due to fear of crime and not because they wished to cause trouble themselves.^v

Myth 3: Young people are out of control

The Myth

Many young people are simply out of control, jobs and trouble-makers.

The Reality

It is clear that some young people do engage in anti-social behaviour, which can make life unpleasant for those around them. However, we need to recognise that the majority of young people are well-behaved and responsible.

Young people under the age of 18 make up only 36% of those subject to an anti-social behaviour order in London^{vi}, reflecting that the majority of anti-social behaviour offences in the capital are actually committed by adults. Nevertheless, negative attitudes towards young people are widespread, with children often banned from loitering in public spaces or in some local shops, only two young people are allowed to enter at once. Many restaurants also restrict young people's access or fail to be welcoming towards them.

The media play an intrinsic role in shaping attitudes towards young people and their overwhelmingly negative coverage of this group helps contribute to the perceived youth crisis.

MORI research for Young People Now magazine analysed representations of young people in the media and found out of a total of 603 youth related items, 71% of the articles had a negative tone, whilst only 14% were positive and 15% neutral^{vii}.

Positive stories about young people, for example the way they have made an enormous contribution to campaigns such as Make Poverty History campaign and on environmental issues, are often overlooked.

Myth 4: Young people are lazy

The Myth

Young people these days are lazy and irresponsible, and won't work hard to succeed in life.

The Reality

Such statements overlook the multiple disadvantages faced by many young people in the capital, as well as their tremendous potential, given the right environment and resources.

London has one of the biggest populations of deprived children in the developed world, with 51% of children and young people in inner London living in poverty, in comparison to 39% in England as a whole. Ethnic minority children are more likely to be living in poverty for longer than any other group in London.^{viii}

London also has a high proportion of other groups with specific needs such as young people leaving care, refugees, young carers and disabled young people.^{ix} London's schoolchildren speak approximately 300 different languages and nearly a third of them have English as an additional language.^x

Despite the disadvantages many of them face, over sixty per cent of London school children go on to achieve at least 5 A* - C grades at GCSE, showing that they have the potential to achieve great things.^{xi}

However, young people often find it hard to access jobs and training, due to their lack of work experience. There is also a need for positive role models and mentors to help young people to overcome their disadvantaged backgrounds and realise their full potential. The point at which young people transfer from primary to secondary school has been identified by many as a crucial time, at which support is needed to keep them on the right path.

The response so far

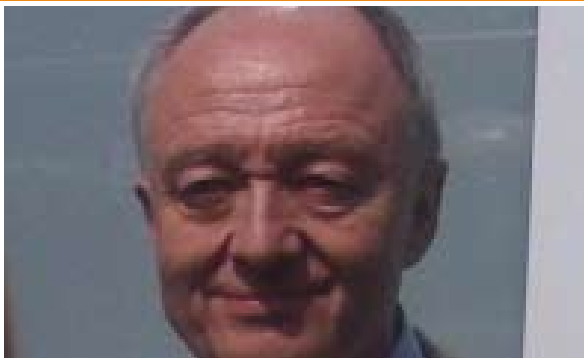
Youth crime and provision of activities for young people are currently high profile issues and a wide range of initiatives are taking place to try and tackle the perceived crisis.

Response from the Mayor of London

One of the key pledges on which Mayor Boris Johnson was elected was to tackle gun and knife crime and provide diversionary activities for young people.

The Mayor used the 2008 State of London debate to emphasise the need to spend money intelligently, on projects which will have a lasting impact and tackle the source of the problem.

Ken Livingstone



The previous London Mayor agreed a 'London Youth Offer' with the Government, which Boris Johnson has agreed to continue.

This will involve £79 million of spending on youth provision over the next 2- 3 years, to provide activities and services for young people aged 13-19 and help involve them in decisions about the provision of services.

He has highlighted the need for influential leaders and mentors for young people and to strengthen the concepts of discipline and punishment in schools.

The Mayor has pledged to hold discussions over the next 12 months with the Boroughs, the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the voluntary sector to determine effective and achievable methods to deliver youth programmes across London on a long-term and sustainable basis.^{xiii}

It is not clear whether the Mayor has undertaken a baseline assessment of current youth provision on offer and if he has concrete evidence to back up his assertion that this is the solution to the pockets of youth violence seen in London. It also remains to be seen whether the Mayor intends to distribute resources for youth provi-

sion evenly across all London Boroughs, or if provision will be targeted in areas with low levels of provision or high rates of youth offending.

The current Mayor's commitment to tackling youth violence and providing young people with diversionary activities is to be welcomed.

However, it is vital that he delivers on his funding promises and that he ensures young people are not alienated, nor made to feel criminalised by overly aggressive policing designed to stamp out youth crime.

Policing Response

The Metropolitan Police Service, in collaboration with Mayor Boris Johnson, has launched Operation Blunt 2, with the aim of reducing serious youth violence, particularly knife crime.

This is a long-term pan-London operation, involving use of stop and search powers in specific localities. Safer Schools Officers are being rolled-out to work in 185 priority schools and colleges, as well as all pupil referral units, on these issues.^{xiv}

Dedicated Police Community Support Officers are being introduced to patrol youth courts, in a pilot aimed at increasing the confidence of young victims and witnesses in the court process.

Knife arches and handheld weapons scanners are starting to be used at stations across the capital as part of the new Mayor's 'Safer Transport' agenda, and 440 extra officers will be dedicated to policing bus hubs and the immediate vicinity, to confront crime and anti-social behaviour.^{xv}

Boris Johnson



The new Mayor won May's election during a period of rising fear of youth violence and chose to focus on these issues in his campaigning.

Now elected, he has expressed commitment to continuing the £5m Young Londoners Fund as part of the youth funding package, which allows community and voluntary sector groups to apply for money to work with disadvantaged young people.^{xiii}

He has also set up a Mayor's Fund for London, designed to pull in finances from the city's wealth creators and use it to support voluntary groups working with young people at risk of getting involved in violent crime.

Stop and Search

The Metropolitan Police Authority's recently published Youth Scrutiny report raises some concerns about aggressive policing policies^{xvii}.

The report emphasises that stop and search remains a key concern for many young people, particularly regarding how individual officers implement the policy.

It recognises that individual encounters between young people and the police have a direct bearing on the perceptions that young people have of the police service as a whole, and a single negative encounter can result in an overall negative impression of the entire service.

British Transport Police have also announced new London Underground Neighbourhood Policing Teams, to provide a visible presence on the tube and DLR network.^{xvi}

Concerns have been raised about the potential of the measures for criminalising all young people. For example, Frances Lawrence, the wife of head teacher Philip Lawrence, who was stabbed to death outside his school in north London in 1995, has criticised calls to introduce knife arches into schools, on the grounds that all young people could be made to feel guilty.^{xviii}

Some black police officers have also expressed concerns about the impact of increased stop and search without any apparent reason, due to the detrimental impact it may have on community relations. A carefully planned, intelligence-

led approach to stop and search may therefore be more appropriate than a blanket approach.

However, the MPS is also investing more than £4 million in 2008-09 as part of its Youth Strategy, to fund a range of projects aimed at engaging young people, tackling youth violence and preventing crime and anti-social behaviour. £700,000 of this has been allocated for three youth projects, run by the From Boyhood to Manhood Foundation and the Kids Task Force, which aim to steer young people away from crime, by providing them with education and guidance.^{xix}

Government Response

The Government is taking various measures to try to improve the lives of children and young people:

The Department for Children, Schools and Families is developing an integrated approach to children's services, by linking initiatives on education, play and leisure provision and health. The Children's Plan, produced by the department in December 2007, sets out how the Government intends to make the UK the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up.^{xx}

One laudable promise is the Government's commitment to halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020. However, statistics on Households Below Average Income released in June 2008 show that numbers of children living in poverty have slightly increased in the last year, and 2008 is the second consecutive year without progress towards the child poverty goal.^{xxi} These figures therefore raise questions about the seriousness of the Government's commitment to eradicating child poverty.

The most important cause of child poverty is unemployment in households with dependent children, and nearly a quarter of households with children in London have no adult in work. In inner London this statistic rises to nearly a third, in comparison to a national average of 16%.^{xxii} More work on helping long-term unemployed into the labour market may therefore have a positive effect on child poverty levels.

The Government is investing in family learning, which encourages parents and carers to learn alongside their children. There is an aim that by 2015 all young people will stay in education until 18 or beyond, and Diplomas and Apprenticeships will increase the learning options available. A new programme is also being set up to re-engage 16 year olds who are not currently in learning.

Child poverty and work

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However, according to youth charity Fairbridge, the number of young people aged 16-24 in the UK who are not in employment, education or training has risen by 15% in the last ten years, suggesting the Government's strategies in this area have not been effective.^{xxiii}

The Government is also investing £160m over the next two years to improve the quality and range of positive activities for young people and develop an entitlement for all young people to participate in activities which develop their talents.^{xxiv}

The paper *'Aiming high for young people: a ten year strategy for positive activities'* produced by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in July 2007' pledges that by 2018 every constituency will have new and improved places for young people to go.

Services for young people will be fully integrated and young people will be fully equipped to access the help they need. They will be able to actively shape decisions on 25% of local authorities budgets for positive activities.^{xxv}

Whilst these are encouraging plans, it is yet to be seen whether they can be delivered. It can also be questioned as to whether £160m will be enough to have a significant impact once distributed across the country.



London Borough Response

Borough Councils across London are involved in a wide range of youth initiatives. One example of this is the London Summer Uni, which began in Tower Hamlets in 1995 and has now spread across the capital, with all Boroughs running a Summer Uni in 2008, offering a wide range of courses to young people aged between 8 and 25, on subjects such as filming & editing your own music video, learning to sail and business & office skills.^{xxvi}

However, there is currently no statutory obligation for local authorities to provide activities for young people and many authorities find themselves struggling for funding and lacking continuity of funding from year to year, which means that they cannot always provide for young people as effectively as they would like.

Investment in publicly funded local sports facilities is also vital in helping provide young people with cheap and accessible leisure activities.

But London is experiencing a decline in such facilities, with over 66,000 people currently competing for access to each of the capital's 112 publicly run swimming pools.^{xxvii}

This is a trend which should be reversed, through protection of all existing facilities and an audit of the gaps in provision to be addressed.

Youth service cuts

Budget cutting councils are currently reducing, not expanding, youth facilities.

Camden Council (run by a Conservative/LibDem coalition) has cut funding to four youth clubs in the most deprived areas of the borough in this year's budget.

Bexley Council (run by the Conservatives) has made spending cuts of £6 million in its 2008/9 budget, including social care for children, sport and leisure facilities and reduced opening hours at libraries.

Hammersmith and Fulham Council (run by the Conservatives) has sold off a large youth centre and not replaced it, leaving dozens of disadvantaged young people with nowhere to go in the evenings.

Criminal Justice System Response

Minister for Justice David Hanson has spoken of the need to reduce the number of young people going into the criminal justice system, by examining sentencing options and avoiding custody where possible.

The Government's Youth Taskforce Action Plan builds on the work of the Government's Respect Taskforce and sets out an approach to anti-social behaviour which is based on tough enforcement. The importance of stressing the responsibilities as well as the rights of young people is emphasised.^{xxviii}

Alternatives to custody

The Ministry of Justice has declared that one of its top priorities is to be able to offer suitable alternatives to custody where prison is not an effective solution.

Community sentences therefore need to command public confidence. The Youth Justice Board has developed an Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme, as a top end community sentence for young people who may otherwise have been remanded in custody.^{xxx}

This approach of aiming to keep young people out of custody wherever possible is to be welcomed, particularly given that there are currently 2,900 young people under the age of 18 who are locked up in England and Wales, at an average cost of £45,000 a place.^{xxxi}

The Government aims to establish a much closer working relationship between children's services and youth offending services.

A Youth Crime Action Plan jointly produced by the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Department for Children, Schools and Families was also published in summer 2008.

£66m is being allocated by the Home Office over the next three years, to target those most at risk of offending and a restorative approach to youth offenders is being piloted.^{xxix}

Response from young people

At the Mayor's State of London debate in June 2008, many young people raised the issue of youth violence and asked the Mayor how he intends to tackle this. The young people were very concerned by violence and criminality in their local communities and generally sought tough action from politicians. However, young people have also raised concerns about the policing tactics employed to tackle youth crime, citing the confrontational attitudes of police officers when carrying out stop and search, as a point of tension.

Young people were keen to be part of the solution, and asked for ways of making their voice heard by government and decision-makers.

They were eager to be consulted on the work of the Mayor and the GLA and they spoke of their experiences of tackling youth violence through initiatives they had set up in schools and colleges and as part of bodies such as the National Youth Parliament.

Lowering the voting age to 16 could be considered as a way of helping young people to feel that their voice is being heard by politicians.



Jenny Jones with staff from the Fairbridge Youth Centre in Kennington - one of the many projects working with siadvantaged young people in the capital

Case studies of successful projects

There are many successful voluntary organisations working with young people in need.

Fairbridge

One such example is Fairbridge, which is a national charity working with young people aged 13-25 who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) and live in deprived areas, where they are at risk of involvement in crime. The charity has two London bases – Hackney and Kennington.

Each young person who comes to Fairbridge is assigned an outreach worker who meets with them regularly throughout their time there. There are two programmes – one for under 16's and one for over 16's, both of which begin with an access course, providing young people with the opportunity to get out of London and participate in team-building and adventurous activities, which take them out of their normal comfort zone.

On returning to London, they sign up for their own programme of development activities, which include activities such as cooking and drama, as well as work based skills. The centre takes a holistic approach, aiming to change a young person's internal attitudes before tackling the more concrete problems in their lives. They have a successful track record in helping young people to move back into education or training, find a job or voluntary placement.

Kids Company

Another very successful charity working with disadvantaged young people is Kids Company, which was founded by Camila Batmanghelidjh in 1996.

The organisation specialises in helping the most disturbed young people, many of whom lack any parental support and are homeless, drug addicts or involved in criminal activities.

Approximately 12,000 young people access Kids Company's services each year, which include helping find accommodation, providing meals, therapeutic support and education and training.

A 2008 study found that the charity had helped 81% of its young people to re-integrate into education, training or employment and 89% to move away from a life of crime.

Recommendations

For the London Mayor

- Gain a clear overview of youth provision that already exists in London and establish a more closely joined up framework of activities and support, ensuring that there is sufficient funding to support these services.
- Advertise and promote facilities to young people, so they are fully aware of the activities which are on offer.
- Empower young people to get involved in organising and shaping youth provision, so that they feel valued as active citizens rather than passive recipients of services. This could be done through allowing them to decide how funding should be spent, which would also ensure the provision appeals to those it is targeted at.
- Take a strategic lead to ensure there is as much positive coverage of young Londoners as possible and that the panic about youth crime does not get blown out of proportion.

For the Metropolitan Police Service

- Protect the civil liberties of young people in Operation Blunt 2 and ensure that stop and search under s60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (thus not requiring grounds for 'reasonable suspicion', as needed for a stop and search under section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984) is used only as a temporary measure.
- Establish clear parameters to indicate how the success of Operation Blunt 2 is to be measured and when it will come to an end.
- Improve ongoing police training & dialogue with young people in order to ensure that stop & search is conducted in a sensitive and respectful way, taking cultural differences into account.

For the Government

- Provide all young people leaving school with a guarantee of a job or training place, by working with employers to encourage them to take on young people.
- Re-introduce the statutory obligation for local authorities to provide youth activities and provide funding for this, as well as funds for boroughs to build new sports facilities.
- Lower the voting age to 16 as a way of encouraging young people's participation in public life. Also raise the profile of the Youth Parliament and encourage more young people to become involved in it.
- Develop initiatives to make children and young people feel more welcome in public spaces such as restaurants.
- Provide more funding for JobCentre Plus to run programmes to help London parents who are seeking work into flexible employment.

For London Boroughs

- Provide stable, long-term funding for facilities and activities to set up lasting and effective schemes for young people
- Give much more help to young people transferring from primary to secondary school, as this is a common point at which young people may begin to experience difficulties.
- Ensure all young people have continuing access to mentoring and support schemes, which provide them with positive role models and practical advice.
- Build more publicly run local sports facilities such as swimming pools and football pitches.

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This report sets out the individual views of Jenny Jones as an Assembly Member and is not the agreed view of the full London Assembly.