

Safeguarding children and young people in education from knife crime: lessons from London

Introduction and background

In the 12 months to September 2018, knife crime had increased by 68.4 per cent across England and Wales (excluding the Greater Manchester Police area). The number of sharp instruments found on school property has also increased. Data from 21 police forces in England and Wales obtained through a freedom of information request showed that 363 sharp instruments were found on school property in 2017–18.

Research also shows that pupils who self-report as being a victim of knife crime are twice as likely to carry a knife themselves. Therefore, along with an increase in victims or fear of knife crime, we can expect to see an increase in perpetrators of knife-carrying and knife crime among adults and children.

There are many complexities involved in addressing the issue of knife crime. While this research report does not intend to address all the factors involved, it seeks to identify ways in which policy makers and school leaders in London can support practice in schools more effectively. The research was carried out in 29 self-selecting schools, colleges and pupil referral units (PRUs) in London. Ofsted visited each school and completed 29 in-depth interviews (approximately two hours each) with school leaders, including headteachers, principals and designated safeguarding leads. There were also focus groups with around 12 children per group.

Key points

Partnership work and strategic planning

- The Mayor's knife crime strategy sets out the need to have a local plan to address knife crime in every local authority (LA) area. The plan should be led by the Metropolitan Police Service and overseen by local community safety partnerships.
- However, some school leaders reported a lack of direction in their local area on tackling knife crime and they did not feel supported despite the Mayor's knife crime strategy. The schools in the sample felt that they were often acting in isolation in developing a curriculum response to the risk of knife crime, keeping children safe at school and managing children who are at risk of offending.
- The lack of a common approach meant that schools took different approaches in a number of key areas such as searching and screening and deciding when to report knife related incidents to the police. They also reported that the police were at times inconsistent in their decisions about charging.
- Some schools reported that there was no specific training being provided to staff on how to deal with knife related incidents. At other schools, staff had had extensive training funded by the school itself or by the LA.
- **Recommendation 1:** Local community safety partnerships should fully involve schools, colleges and PRUs in developing and implementing local strategies that aim to address knife crime and serious youth violence.

Exclusions and managed moves

- When asked about exclusions due to knife carrying, headteachers could be broadly divided into 2 groups: those who would consider the individual circumstances of the

pupil and consider support and intervention before excluding and those who tended to take a 'zero tolerance' approach, excluding children immediately without considering early intervention.

- It seems that some schools are not following practice as outlined in statutory guidance on school exclusions in terms of providing early help, assessing the wider needs of the child or giving sufficient consideration to the context in which the child lives.
- In the focus group with parents of children who have been both perpetrators and victims of knife crime, some reported that their children had been encouraged by adult gang members to carry weapons into school for the sole purpose of triggering an exclusion. Once excluded, children may have fewer protective factors, particularly if they are not admitted into another mainstream school or good-quality alternative provision.
- Information is collected by central government about the number of, and reasons for, permanent and fixed-term exclusions so that disruption to children's mainstream education can be monitored. However, school leaders spoke more often about using managed moves as a response to children's knife-carrying than they did about exclusions, in other words about moving children in a planned way to an alternative school rather than formally excluding them. Most often, these managed moves were permanent to another mainstream school, but sometimes they were to PRUs, and sometimes for only a limited or trial period.
- There is no clear picture of the number of children who are 'managed-moved' to different schools, how long for and where to or for what reason. Neither is it known what the

educational outcomes for those children are, or whether managed moves do in fact effectively safeguard those children or keep them in mainstream education in the long term. Furthermore, there is little evidence of the efficacy of managed moves.

- **Recommendation 2:** All schools and academies in London should ensure that their exclusion policy reflects the practice set out in the Department for Education's statutory guidance. Schools should be challenged when exclusions do not appear to be in line with statutory guidance.
- **Recommendation 3:** The Department for Education should collect data from schools about managed moves in the same way in which it collects information on permanent and fixed-term exclusions, or PRUs.

Early help and prevention

- There was a wide variation in the responses from school leaders as to the perceived quality of early support and intervention from LAs and other partners. Some schools felt that they had an excellent relationship with their LA, but others felt that the quality of early support from the LA is poor and that availability had decreased or become more difficult to access.
- **Recommendation 4:** Safeguarding partners should involve school leaders at a strategic level in assessing the needs of children and young people in their area, and in planning and delivering early help services in response to those needs. Schools need to participate actively in local arrangements as required under 'Keeping children safe in education' statutory guidance.
- **Recommendation 5:** Local safeguarding partnerships should facilitate all agencies including schools and colleges in challenging each other's practice if they believe any agency is failing to contribute to the local strategy to protect pupils from knife crime.

Improving information sharing

- The statutory guidance 'Keeping children safe in education' emphasises the importance of passing on full and accurate information promptly when a child changes school.
- School leaders expressed concerns about not being able to trust the information provided to them from other schools about a child, including when children transition from primary school, move between secondary schools, into PRUs and into college. Information about children's safeguarding and wider welfare needs is not always complete or received in good time.
- College leaders reported that they found it very difficult to get accurate and helpful information from secondary schools. Some reported that they often have to rely on what students choose to disclose. However, if a child makes no declaration, and the LA, previous school or the youth offending service does not inform the college then staff are not well placed to secure the support which the pupil needs.
- School leaders observed that it can be difficult to secure full-time education for a child, particularly when they are known to be affiliated to gangs or have been found carrying knives or drugs in the past.
- Senior leaders in PRUs reported that, although they receive information about the reasons for permanent exclusion, more detailed information about previous school history and the involvement of other agencies is not always received in a timely way.
- Schools, including academies, have a responsibility to appropriately share information with partner agencies for the purposes of safeguarding children or preventing crime

within the statutory guidelines. However, some schools may not have a full picture of the additional support which the student needs. They may, for example, be unaware that youth offending teams are working with particular children or that they belong to the 'Troubled Families' programme. School leaders also reported very different experiences of information-sharing with the police.

- **Recommendation 6:** Schools and colleges should share full information with one another when pupils and learners move schools, go to PRUs or alternative provision or move to further education.
- **Recommendation 7:** Pan-London safeguarding partners should provide challenge to schools and colleges and, when necessary, drive improvement in how well schools and colleges share information with others to promote children's safety when those children move school or begin further education.
- **Recommendation 8:** The Metropolitan Police Service needs to establish a clear and consistent protocol and memorandums of understanding with schools so that information sharing is more effective.

Teaching the curriculum

- Schools are educating children on the dangers of knife crime through the curriculum. This is done in a variety of ways including through the delivery of core subjects or in assemblies and tutorials.
- Some schools use outside agencies to educate children on the dangers of knife crime and find this highly effective, although it has to be balanced against the costs.
- There was a mixed picture as to how well parents are being engaged by schools and often a lack of work to educate parents about the dangers of gangs, knife crime and grooming.
- The parents in the focus group were unanimous in their call for policy-makers and local leaders to raise awareness among parents of grooming, gangs, child criminal exploitation and their links to knife crime for children. They all believed they would have been able to prevent their children perpetrating or becoming victims of knife crime if they had had more information about its causes and contexts.
- **Recommendation 9:** School leaders should consider how their personal, social, health and economic education (PHSE) curriculum reflects local safeguarding issues and trends, including knife crime.
- **Recommendation 10:** Pan-London bodies should consider ways in which they can support schools in ensuring that external organisations that are delivering anti-knife crime and gang affiliation sessions can provide a high-quality and impactful contribution to the school PHSE curriculum.
- **Recommendation 11:** Safeguarding partnerships and school leaders should raise awareness of the dangers of grooming and criminal exploitation among both parents and children.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/knife-crime-safeguarding-children-and-young-people-in-education>