

## No easy answers to knife crime

Public bodies should not have to be made to shoulder the responsibility for reporting gangs  
writes **Claire Fox**



A few weeks ago, on my way to buy late night provisions from Tesco, the staff stopped me entering. On the floor lay a young black man in a pool of blood. Emergency services arrived, but whizzed past us, to tend to another young injured man around the corner. They had stabbed each other.

The visceral reality of such futile violence, now too often a feature of London life, hit home. Both young men survived. I was useless and stood in tears watching, but the shop employees and ambulance paramedics saved lives that night. Heroes.

With those workers in mind, I was shocked when at a recent Downing Street summit on knife crime, home secretary Sajid Javid announced that those on the frontline, including health workers, police and teachers, could be held legally accountable for failing to prevent a young person getting involved in violence.

When a Home Office spokesman declared 'making it a legal duty will help stop this senseless violence and create long-term change', it implies that young blood on the streets is somehow due to the lack of intervention by those who work for public bodies.

Authorities and activists have named and shamed a multitude of factors: from drill music on YouTube, to fatherless families; from crack cocaine to cuts in police numbers. In one of the best commentaries I have read – *Why London's Teenagers Are Killing Each Other* – writer Max Daly baldly states the problem: 'It's a bloody time to be young and working class on the streets of London.' Shifting the responsibility for this on to frontline workers is a wrong-headed distraction.

But, let's not just aim blame at central Government. The Home Office's strategy

has partly emerged in response to those in local authorities lobbying for a 'public health, multi-agency approach'.

When public sector projects offer themselves up as part of the solution to knife crime – perhaps a covert plea for more resources to be made available for everything from youth clubs to school counsellors – it can switch to being used to point the finger.

The consequences of the Government's proposals could counterproductively drive the best staff away from frontline work.

### If staff become cowed for fear of being punished for none-reporting, how will they maintain any authority in the eyes of young people?

Chris Keates, general secretary of the NASUWT teaching union, warned that this is a complex issue which will not be resolved by 'threatening staff such as teachers, who already have a difficult and challenging job, that they will be held accountable for failing to spot any warning signs of violent crime', going on to note that this will 'add to the myriad of Government-driven factors which are causing teachers to leave the profession and deterring potential recruits from applying'.

Similarly problematic is the trend for pointing the finger at teachers, by linking increasing numbers of exclusions with gang violence. London Mayor Sadiq Khan claims that: 'It's no coincidence so many young people involved in knife crime have been excluded.' Ofsted points out that there is 'no

convincing evidence that exclusions lead to knife crime or gang violence.

What about the effect on special provision for children excluded from school by Mr Javid's 'public health duty' on staff to flag up concerns about teenagers they believe may be involved with violence?

Former local government minister Bob Neill wrote in *The MJ* that: 'With one in three local authorities having no vacancies in their pupil referral unit (PRU), finding new ways of managing those pupils who have been permanently excluded from schools should be a priority'.

Perhaps one positive aspect of the knife-crime exclusion linkage is that the Department for Education has announced funding for 37 new special provision schools. But, with the anti-exclusion lobby labelling these PRUs as 'gang grooming units' and the Government seeking to make reporting a statutory obligation, those working in alternative education risk being easy scapegoats in the blame game, just when we need our best educators to rise to the challenge and take on these difficult jobs.

If staff are robbed of their professional autonomy and become cowed for fear of being punished for non-reporting, how will they maintain any authority in the eyes of young people?

I have no easy answers, but some advice: councils should ensure they don't allow their willingness to offer up their community expertise and services as solutions to knife crime, to become a knee-jerk reaction that sacrifices frontline workers and their autonomy as fall-guys. ■

*Claire Fox is director of the Academy of Ideas*

Read the full article at [www.themj.co.uk](http://www.themj.co.uk)

## soapbox



By Paul Hackett

The recent case of children living in social housing in Lambeth not being allowed to play in a garden reserved for private homeowners caused public outrage, and rightly so.

Arguably, the greatest achievement of modern planning has been the increase in diverse communities. We've come a long way from the mono-tenure estates of the mid-20th century, thanks in part to a committed focus on mixed-income, tenure-blind developments.

It's an issue close to the heart of housing associations and local authorities alike and an area where we can be proud of what we have achieved. Nevertheless, stories of segregation across estates are too common and show that tackling social exclusion cannot end at the planning committee or once legal agreements are signed.

What end up being known as 'poor doors' – or in this case, 'poor playgrounds' – often start as well-intentioned efforts to simplify block management and reduce service charges. Without proper consideration, this approach can cause serious harm and segregation.

Part of the solution lies in innovative design and long-term planning, taking control of the design and development process, and factoring in inclusivity from day one and provide services and amenities that help all residents.

Where housing associations secure homes from private developers post-planning, there are fewer opportunities to influence the design. That is why the G15 group of housing associations is calling for closer and deeper relationships with our development partners from the outset.

Striking the right balance between affordability and commercial drivers has never been easy and continues to be one of the key challenges in place-making. Together, we must use the levers of regulation, planning policy and design to build sustainable, diverse communities that both work financially and provide a good home for the people who live in them.

The reaction to the Lambeth issue reminds us that stigmatisation and segregation are issues the whole country feels strongly about. We're pleased the Government recognised this in its social housing Green Paper and wants us all to tackle this head-on. ■

*Paul Hackett is chair of G15 group of housing associations and chief executive of Optivo*