



## **THE POWER OF CHOICE**

Young people's views on reducing youth violence

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**PUBLICFIRST** 

Public First is a global strategic consultancy that works to help organisations better understand public opinion, analyse economic trends, and craft new policy proposals.

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## Foreword

My son, Kiyán Prince, was a talented young footballer who played for Queens Park Rangers and was tipped for the very top. In May 2006, at the age of 15, Kiyán was stabbed to death outside his school while trying to break up a fight.

Kiyán's murder nearly destroyed me. As a champion boxer who had turned around my teenage life of homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse and criminal activity, I was used to battling against the odds. But now I was facing the fight of my life.

At first I was lost; I was paralysed; I realised that I had no control over whether my child would live or die. The only control I had was over what I would choose to do – what direction would I want. So to start with I chose to drink, to smoke, to do anything to blur out the pain. But then I decided that I didn't want that. I used my power of choice to decide what I could do to honour my son because, when I get to meet him again, what did I want to be able to say to him.

And so the Kiyán Prince Foundation was born, working to persuade young people to use their power of choice to value their lives and the lives of others and to break free from the gravitational pull of gang culture, youth violence and knife crime.

While we can't always control the circumstances we find ourselves in, we always have the power to choose how we react.

This report is so important because it deliberately places the voices of young people with direct experience of youth crime and violence front and centre. Listening to their voices is essential to understanding the complex and multi-layered drivers of youth violence and to identify the most effective interventions to tackle the causes and not just the consequences.

This report is not just a list of statistics or distant policy recommendations. It is a testament to the courage and resilience of the young people that organisations like KPF work with every day – showing them that there is a different path, a better path, that shuns criminal activity and instead allows them to own their power of choice and to make the decisions that will benefit them, their families and their communities.

It is my strong hope that their stories and these recommendations are a catalyst for meaningful action.

For Kiyán, and for all young people.

**Dr Mark Prince, OBE**



## About the Kiyon Prince Foundation

The Kiyon Prince Foundation (KPF) was established in 2008 and since then has worked with tens of thousands of young people. KPF's vision is for all children and young people involved in, and at risk from, crime and serious youth violence, to value their lives and the lives of others.

Working in schools, in the community and in young offenders' institutions, KPF uses boxing and life coaching to focus on self-discovery, self-discipline and self-coaching and to help young people use their power of choice to find their purpose and place in the world. This is delivered through:

- The *Future Champions* 12 week personal development and coaching programme.
- Motivational talks.
- Boxing and Life Coaching.
- Using KPF's authentic voice advocating for young people to publish research reports and to influence public policy.
- Community events which raise awareness, notably:
  - 'Future Champions Cup' celebrity football match.
  - 'Jabbing not Stabbing' celebrity boxing event.

For more information, visit the Kiyon Prince Foundation's [website](#).

*This report and research is the sole work of Public First, who maintained editorial control throughout the project.*

### About Public First

Public First is a global strategic consultancy that works to help organisations better understand public opinion, analyse economic trends and craft new policy proposals. It has worked directly with some of the world's biggest companies, government departments, top universities and major charities to produce bespoke, original policy proposals and reports derived from an evidence base of economic analysis and public opinion research. Public First is a member of the British Polling Council and is a Company Partner of the Market Research Society, whose rules and guidelines it adheres to. For more information, please visit [our website](#).

## With thanks to Focus Fitness UK – proud supporter of The Kiyon Prince Foundation

Focus Fitness UK was established in 2011 by ex-professional footballers Gavin Heeroo and Dougie Freedman, bringing to the table everything they learned from the top-flight of the beautiful game. With their centre open in London, they are the first choice for health and fitness qualifications in the capital with a vision to create successful and passionate fitness professionals who inspire and unlock their potential.

Initially, Focus Fitness UK was established to help adults retrain for a second career opportunity in the same way that founder, Gavin Heeroo, was helped by attending an accessible further educational course. Their strategy today retains that ethos and as a result, they have built several new courses that meet the spirit of those origins. Courses are funded through the government, via advanced learner loan funding to make a career in health and fitness more diverse and accessible.

Focus Fitness UK is an established Ofsted regulated (GOOD Provider), Active IQ centre which specialises in delivering blended learning courses of 4 to 10 weeks. The courses on offer are tailored for adult learners (19+) to support them into employment or further education via the following courses:

- Level 3 Diploma in Gym Instructing and Personal Training
- Level 3 Sports Massage Therapy
- Level 3 Diploma in Exercise Referral
- Level 4 Certificate in Sports Massage Therapy





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## Introduction

While the causes of youth crime in the UK are complex and multi-layered, the reality is that young people are feeling less safe in their communities and violence is a real and everyday concern.

The debate can too easily be dominated by statistics and figures and the vital perspectives of the young people most affected can often be overlooked. It is only through placing the voices of these young people front and centre that we will be able to understand the complex drivers of youth crime and work towards effective interventions to help them avoid criminality. It is only through listening to the diverse stories and real life experience of the young people for whom youth crime is more than a number on a spreadsheet that we can discover the factors that push young people to commit crime and work with them to develop the most effective routes out of it.

This research project set out with the following objectives:

- To understand the impact of youth crime on young people today.
- To identify some of the causes of youth crime.
- To understand what young people themselves consider are the most effective interventions.
- To outline a number of policy recommendations to help more young people make positive choices.

Working with the Kiyon Prince Foundation, Public First has engaged with over 1,000 young people from across the country in a range of different settings who have direct experience of youth crime and who have strong opinions on what needs to be done to solve this crisis. In this report, we explore the key themes that emerged from these discussions and have worked directly with young people to formulate the recommendations for policymakers on a way forward.

In this report we are focussed on the drivers that are pushing young people towards crime and providing recommendations for areas where these factors can be mitigated. The experience of young people who have been involved in the criminal justice system is a separate area that we have not sought to address here.

This report seeks to bridge the gap between abstract policy discussion and the lived experiences of young people. It is only by listening to and working directly with young people that we can chart a course to reducing youth crime and making young people across the UK feel safer.

# Executive Summary

## 1 Young people feel less safe.

A majority of young people we spoke to worry they will be threatened with a knife or mugged in their local area. In our poll 39% of respondents shared that they felt their hometown had become less safe in the past two years and 32% said they had personally witnessed youth crime. 56% of young people are worried they will be threatened with a knife, and 50% are worried they will be mugged. Feeling unsafe has been linked with increasing behaviours such as skipping school and a record number of young people are seeking mental health support.

## 2 The drivers towards youth crime are numerous and diverse.

On the other hand, fear of being a victim, peer pressure, mental health issues (and absence of mental health support), and a lack of legitimate routes to earn money, were repeatedly emphasised.

## 3 Young people feel there are fewer organised activities for them.

The absence of available constructive alternatives was consistently raised as a gateway to youth crime – “there is nowhere else to go and nothing else to do”. 44% of school-age young people spend less time undertaking extra-curricular activities than they did a few years ago.

## 4 To combat the lack of organised activities, young people want more youth centres, especially sports clubs and organised sport where they can spend their time constructively.

The vast majority of respondents (75%) believed that increasing structured sports programmes would reduce levels of youth crime. Young people felt this would give them life goals to work towards (60%) and help keep them off the street (59%).

## 5 Better mental health provision is needed in schools.

This was the most emphasised policy solution to stopping young people from becoming involved in youth crime, particularly among young people who were in the ‘at risk’ category.

**6 Increase the use of external speakers in schools as positive and relatable role models.**

As a way of combating peer pressure, providing positive and authentic role models who could provide guidance, inspiration and a sense of direction was a popular solution to help young people turn away from youth crime.

**7 Increase the number of good quality jobs available to young people.**

A major pull factor towards youth crime was that it is seen as an easy way to make quick money. A major push factor was that young people feel they have few legitimate alternative routes to earn money. Providing good quality workplace opportunities for young people is essential.

## Background and Wider Context

Young people say they feel less safe than two years ago. In our poll, 39% of respondents said they felt their hometown has become less safe in the past two years, whilst 32% said they had personally witnessed youth crime. A poll for Radio 5 Live and BBC Bitesize reported that a similar figure of 44% of young people did not feel safe while walking alone in the street.<sup>1</sup> 27% of female respondents to this poll said they have experienced sexual harassment in the street, such as wolf whistling, and 39% of young people said they had experienced verbal abuse on the street, such as name calling or being shouted at.<sup>2</sup>

Despite young people saying they feel less safe in their communities, statistics show that total crime against people aged 16 years and over in England and Wales decreased by 10% between June 2022 and June 2023.<sup>3</sup> This decrease follows the downward trend since the beginning of the pandemic and is driven by a decrease in criminal damage (28%), fraud (13%) and computer misuse (33%). The number of children who received a caution or sentence has fallen by 79% between 2012 and 2022. The number of children entering the justice system for the first time has seen a similar fall of 78% since March 2012.<sup>4</sup> However, young people continue to be overrepresented in these statistics with 18-25 year olds making up 20% of convictions and a third of all police cautions despite making up less than 10% of the UK population.<sup>5</sup>

Violence is still a real concern for young people. A Youth Endowment Fund survey found almost half of children (47%) reported that violence and the fear of violence impacted their day-to-day lives.<sup>6</sup> The same report highlighted that 1 in 5 children said they had skipped school due to feeling unsafe.

However, behaviours such as skipping school are projected to only exacerbate the prevalence of youth crime in the UK. The Centre for Social Justice claimed that soaring rates of school absence could risk creating an extra 9,000 young offenders by 2027 if unresolved, with an estimated cost to the taxpayer of up to £100 million a year.<sup>7</sup>

Outside of school, the number of opportunities for families – in particular young people – to access support have continued to decrease in recent years. Between 2010 and 2019, youth

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News, [Many teens feel unsafe and anxious, but are positive about future](#), September 2023

<sup>2</sup> Survation, [BBC Teen Survey](#), 20 September 2023

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics, [Crime in England and Wales: year ending June 2023](#), 19 October 2023

<sup>4</sup> Youth Justice Board, [Youth Justice Statistics: 2021 to 2022](#), 26 January 2023

<sup>5</sup> Revolving Doors Agency, [New Generation: Preventing young adults being caught in the revolving door](#), April 2020

<sup>6</sup> Youth Endowment Fund, [Children, violence and vulnerability 2023](#), 13 November 2023

<sup>7</sup> The Centre for Social Justice, [School absence risks tidal wave of youth crime](#), 26 July 2023

service expenditure saw real-terms cuts of 70%.<sup>8</sup> This has led to the closure of more than 760 youth centres and more than 4,500 youth work jobs being cut between 2012 and 2019.<sup>9</sup>

**"An extraordinary number of third sector organisations are being forced to compete for small pots of short-term project funding leading to the closure of many organisations and a toxic climate of inadequate and ineffective services."**

Youth Violence Commission<sup>10</sup>

Both young people and their parents have seen support slip away and their ability to access services has been continually impaired by ongoing defunding, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

**"The experience of parents [of at-risk children and teenagers] told a consistent tale of missed opportunities, unmet need, and a confused tangle of services. When there is contact with services, families say that they are too-often met with a conveyor belt of assessments, churn of professionals and early closure of cases."**

Hidden in Plain Sight, The Commission on Young Lives<sup>11</sup>

The pressure on young people and their families continues to build. A record number of young people are seeking mental health support through the NHS and the pressure on schools to support them is also growing. The Youth Coalition for Mental Health in Schools cites the increasing pressures on schools impacted by high thresholds for referral to CAMHS support and lengthy waiting times, with children on average waiting 21 weeks for their first appointment.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> YMCA England, Out of Service, January 2020

<sup>9</sup> UNISON, Youth services report, April 2019

<sup>10</sup> Parliamentary Commission on Youth Violence, Youth Violence Commission Final Report, July 2020

<sup>11</sup> Commission on Young Lives, Hidden in Plain Sight, November 2022

<sup>12</sup> The Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools, "Solutions for a crisis": Exploring best practice for tackling mental health in schools, December 2023

Whilst the number of young people reported to be involved with youth crime appears to be decreasing, exposure to acts of violence via social media is high. A report by the Youth Endowment Fund noted that 60% of children had witnessed acts of real-world violence on social media in the last year – with a quarter saying they had seen content promoting violence against women and girls.<sup>13</sup>

## Reducing Youth Crime

There are a number of approaches which have been shown<sup>14</sup> to reduce youth crime such as after school programmes (reducing crime by 8% on average), mentoring (reducing crime by 26% on average) and preventing school exclusions and suspensions (which has been seen to have a moderate effect).<sup>15</sup> However, interventions can vary in effectiveness and finding sustainable funding can be challenging.

Early intervention, prevention and diversion are all considered key tenets to the Child First approach adopted by the Youth Justice system in England and Wales.<sup>16</sup> This approach focuses on “work[ing] with children rather than doing to them”. Evidence suggests that children are more likely to engage in support when given the opportunity to engage.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, throughout this research we have looked to put the voices of young people front and centre. We have spoken to a broad range of young people to better understand their experiences of and exposure to violence. We hope this acts as a catalyst for further conversations about the important role that collaboration between young people and policymakers can play to develop effective interventions which in turn help more young people feel safe within their communities.

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<sup>13</sup> Jon Yates, [Violence on social media – the online fight for our children’s attention](#), 28 November 2023

<sup>14</sup> Research on youth crime often highlights that involvement is multifactorial and therefore the specific impact of interventions is difficult to ascertain

<sup>15</sup> HM Inspectorate of Probation, [Education, training and employment](#), 10 March 2023

<sup>16</sup> HM Inspectorate of Probation, [Child First](#), 10 March 2023.

<sup>17</sup> HM Inspectorate of Probation, [Child First](#), 10 March 2023.

## Methodology

This research project looked to understand young people's views on the causes of youth crime and what they think are the most effective interventions to reduce offending. We carried out the following research activities to hear more from young people – both in general and those who are more at risk of becoming involved in youth crime:

- A comprehensive poll of 1,003 young people (aged between 16 and 24) across the UK between 20 November and 4 December 2023. All results are weighted using Iterative Proportional Fitting, or 'Raking'. The results are weighted by interlocking age, gender and region to Nationally Representative Proportions. The sample also included 678 young people who were defined as being 'at risk', based on a definition provided by the Department for Education.<sup>18</sup>

### Definition of "at risk" used in polling

Respondents were defined as being "at risk" using the Department for Education's definition if they met any of the following requirements, based on responses provided in our survey:

- Low attainment: Young person did not gain any GCSEs, GNVQs or equivalent qualifications at grades A\*-C
  - Being Not in Employment Education or Training: Young person was not in education, employment or training (NEET) for at least 6 of the previous 12 months
  - Teenage parenthood: Young person was a parent and had at least one child living with them
  - Emotional health concerns: Young person had a score of 4 or more on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)
- 
- 6 focus groups reaching a total of 53 young people in a range of different settings, including schools and boxing clubs.
  - Individual interviews with at risk young people who have engaged with activities delivered by the Kiyon Prince Foundation.

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<sup>18</sup> Department for Education, [Understanding vulnerable young people: Analysis from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England](#)

- Desk research reviewing 35 resources focusing on:
  - The intervention landscape including organisations currently delivering interventions.
  - The effectiveness of said interventions.
- Opportunities for policy change to support and develop current and existing work with at risk young people.

All polling fieldwork took place between March 2023 and November 2023 and adhered to the rules and guidelines provided by the British Polling Council and Company Partners of the Market Research Society. We would like to thank all of the young people who took part in our focus groups and interviews for contributing to this important research.

## Drivers towards crime

Young people become involved with criminal activity for a wide range of reasons, but there are a number of areas that were repeatedly raised by the young people that we spoke to about the drivers behind youth crime. Often we found that these overlapped; for example, we found that for some young people, difficulty fitting in with their peers can exacerbate poor mental health. It is only through listening and exploring these reasons that we can work to create tailored recommendations that have young people's own concerns at their heart.

The main drivers raised consistently were:

- Having nowhere else to go
- Crime being perceived as an easy way of making money
- Self-defence and fear of becoming a victim
- Difficulties dealing with, and getting support for, mental health issues
- Impact of family upbringing
- Peer pressure
- Coercion and the influence of people already involved in crime

Below we explore our findings in each of the areas highlighted above. All of these themes were raised in almost every discussion with young people and are not reported in order of incidence.

### Having nowhere else to go

There are fewer constructive activities for young people to take part in outside of school hours compared to a decade ago. The young people we spoke to felt this absence of purposeful engagement leaves a void in their time that can lead to spending more time on the streets or to illegal activities. In 2020, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Knife Crime & Violence Reduction produced a report which suggested there was a strong negative association between the number of youth centre closures and the prevalence of knife crime in an area (i.e. every decline in the number of youth centres is associated with an increase in knife crime).<sup>19</sup>

In our survey, we found that on the whole young people believe there are fewer things to do now compared to before. Those in the youngest age bracket (16-18) were more likely to believe this than those in the two higher brackets (19-24). Young people in the Midlands and London were less likely to think there were less things to do than those in the North and South

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<sup>19</sup> APPG on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction, *Securing a brighter future: The role of youth services in tackling knife crime*, March 2020

of England. Among respondents who are still at school, 44% said they spend less time in activities outside of school than they did a few years ago.

The reasons for this will partly reflect different demands on the time of young people at different stages of education: the most common reason for young people saying they spend less time on activities than they did a few years ago was being too busy with school work, with 55% choosing this response. But the responses suggest financial barriers too. 27% of respondents said they cannot afford to take part in activities now and 24% said their parents are less willing to pay for activities than they used to be. Furthermore, 59% of the young people we asked said either that there were no free activities or that they were not aware of any free activities available to them in their local area.

In our group discussions and interviews, young people were keen to stress the impact of having too much time on their hands and nowhere to go.

**"We need people to get off the streets and into clubs and stuff. Because I feel a lot of people do stuff out of boredom, like they try drugs and alcohol, when they could be doing sports."**

Young person, Manchester

**"Teenagers don't understand the gravity of what they're doing. And they don't have anything to do with the time they have. They have too much free time which they spend with the wrong people and that leads to a life of crime."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

This concept of having nothing else to do leading young people to being involved in crime was consistently raised as the practical gateway that allowed the other drivers to take hold.

## Crime being perceived as an easy way of making money

Crime being seen as an easy way to make quick money was raised repeatedly among the young people that we spoke to. In our survey, 44% of young people identified this as a main factor that drives young people to become involved in crime. We conducted this research in the middle of the cost of living crisis, and financial concerns were tied into their view of youth crime. There were a number of drivers behind why young people were turning to crime to make money that we explore below.

For some of the individuals, becoming involved in youth crime was seen as a desperate measure that they were forced into due to dire financial straits. This was often combined with a need to help their families that were struggling due to a lack of money.

**"I know quite a few people who would go in for the money aspect. How bad the economy is. Those people are struggling. Those people want to help out their parents, those people want to do a lot. And they've seen the money that these people bring in. And they think they can bring the money in themselves."**

KPF Future Champions programme student

**"Sometimes if someone has a single mum and she gets fired then the kid will drift into road stuff and start selling drugs and it's not a good thing but I feel sometimes they do it for the money and the background that they have."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

For others, the financial element was seen more as an enticement than a measure that they needed to take due to financial desperation. Content posted on social media, from music videos to Instagram posts, that depict a luxury lifestyle of expensive cars and clothes paid for by criminal activities, were raised repeatedly as a reason for youth crime being appealing. In this way, crime is being presented as an aspirational lifestyle choice for young people.

**"These things look cool. And when you see them in the videos, the music videos, it's influencing them to copy them and idolise them."**

Young person, Manchester

**"When it comes to social media, seeing the life that everyone lives, nice cars, this whole persona about being a bad guy and how it's turned into a good thing."**

Student discussion group

**"People want to get rich. So they see the drug dealer and they see what their stuff costs. So they think it's a good thing, like it's an easy way to get money. And it's glamorising it I guess."**

Student discussion group

Drill music in particular was raised by a few individuals as explicitly tying financial gain to criminal acts.

**"People see these rappers and they want to live like that, they want to talk about drill because drill is the thing they rap about after they have done the criminal act. So a lot of these kids, I've seen a lot of kids hype up this music. A lot of these kids are still at school so they don't want to be involved in school anymore. They just want to go straight to that thing."**

KPF Future Champions programme student

**"Most of the records, especially with drill, they show how good the lifestyle is and the bad parts of the life of crime are swept under the carpet. It shows it makes them money and they live a happy life. But that's not really how it works."**

Student discussion group

Others identified a perceived inaccessibility of educational routes to financial stability as encouraging young people to turn to crime. For some, this manifested as a way of making money that did not require them to do well in school or get other forms of employment.

**"Low levels of education can lead to crime because for some people they feel that involving themselves in criminal activity is the only way they are going to make a way for themselves financially because they don't have good grades or they don't like school or don't want to go to school then it's an easy way to make quite a lot of money."**

Young person, Manchester

**"And I think a lot of people turn to it because they don't have the grades. So they revert back to the streets thinking I don't have the grades so I can't progress. And from there they end up in a bad spiral."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"The problem is we live in a generation that encourages people to do things outside of education. So violence or crime is increased because people are told you don't need to do well in school and some people don't value education."**

Student discussion group

One individual identified the way that a lack of success in school could combine with an impact on the individual's self-esteem, compounding the likelihood of engaging with illicit activities.

**"It comes down to education as well. So I think when they don't get good grades, they feel like a failure. And then they go back to the streets because they have nothing else."**

Student discussion group

## **Self-defence and fear of becoming a victim**

Many of the young people that we spoke to identified fear as a reason for why their peers were engaging with criminal activities. A fifth (20%) of young people said self-defence was one of the main factors that drives young people to become involved in crime. This is echoed by the related finding that roughly half of young people think the level of youth crime in their local area has become worse in recent years. Meanwhile, a majority of young people worry they will be threatened with a knife or mugged in their local area (56% and 50% respectively). This fear was identified repeatedly as a reason for young people feeling the need to defend themselves from others who may attack them.

This fear can manifest in some young people deciding to carry a knife. There was a sense from some of the young people we interviewed that not carrying a knife would leave them defenceless and could leave them open to being attacked or killed.

**"You don't want to be in a situation where someone may pull a knife on you and you are defenceless. So you're putting yourself out there essentially. That is the mindset they are dealing with."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

Strikingly, the young people we spoke to acknowledged the high stakes of carrying a knife. A number of people identified the fact that carrying a knife as a deterrent was not likely to be enough, with many referencing the fact that the knife would have to be used on another person.

**"It is for protection that people carry it usually because if they're in a scenario where someone pulls a knife on them then they've got that backup when someone pulls on you and the morals are out the window, as at that point it's life or death. So if you're not the one getting killed then you need to kill."**

Young person, Manchester

**"Crime has impacted people to carry a knife because other people do it and it makes you feel a little bit better if you know you can harm somebody if you need to. It does make some people feel a bit better knowing they've got that power over another person."**

Young person, Manchester

**"It's very normalised now to carry something to keep you safe. Even though it's not necessarily keeping you safe. I feel like it is a lot more normalised now to carry a knife of some sort, just in case anything potentially was to happen or even if you were in danger then you could use it against someone else."**

Young person, Manchester

Another driver towards crime was joining a gang as a means of protection. Some individuals felt that being part of a gang or turning to youth crime was a way of controlling the levels of violence and fear that they are experiencing.

**"It's a safety thing. Some people feel that if they're alone then they're a target for other people to attack them or something. And so if they've joined a gang then that protects them, they're safe because they have that name behind them. And carrying a weapon is part of that."**

Young person, Manchester

**"They all want to be the top dog. Of course, they aren't the top dog but they think if they can be then they can control the violence."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

## Difficulties dealing with, and getting support for, mental health issues

The young people that we spoke to raised a number of stressors they were experiencing through the challenges of adolescence and early adulthood. These ranged from academic pressure and difficult family dynamics to the desire to impress their friends through peer pressure. Similarly, in our survey, almost a third (31%) of young people identified low self-esteem as a main factor that drives young people to become involved in crime; almost two-thirds (61%) said peer pressure was a main driving factor. It is therefore unsurprising that many of the young people felt that mental health challenges were a major factor in turning young people towards crime.

This driver is exacerbated by the fact that young people feel that their mental health is not taken as seriously as it should be, due to their age.

**"I think it all comes back to mental health. These people might be criminals but in most cases they're mentally not alright in some way. In some cases, like if someone has a knife and is threatening people then you have to take action. But in a lot of situations they should just think maybe this guy's having a bad day, let's talk about his day and see what's going on in his life."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"I feel like some people think that because we are young we have no worries of our own. Like we don't have bills to pay or looking after a house or providing food. When actually we do have them. They might not be the biggest worries in the world but there are still things that might affect our mental health."**

Young person, Manchester

This lack of support was raised particularly in the way that schools approached mental health, with many of the young people feeling schools did not have adequate resources available to them. This spanned from mental health support for issues such as exam stress to more serious support that is needed for young people whose mental health was leading to behavioural issues.

**"I feel like schools don't take mental health as seriously as they should. When I was in school it wasn't really spoken about because it was just your hormones or just because you were stressed about exams. But mental health is a big thing. And it's a genuine thing that people struggle with. And it does need to be taken more seriously in schools to avoid people going down bad paths."**

Young person, Manchester

**"They definitely just punish you in secondary school, and they literally just say 'Don't come to school for a couple of days' and it's like a reward. And you come back to school and you're obviously just going to repeat the same behaviour. And then another thing they do is segregate you and put you in isolation and that's almost like a reward as well."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

It was not only at school where young people felt that they were being failed in their mental health. Many individuals raised the impact of the home situation and family upbringing on leading young people to develop mental health problems that could lead to youth crime.

"Some people have had problems in their childhood that lead to poor mental health. They could be more nonchalant and sociopathic and don't care about others so they see it as "Why should I follow social norms or do what society tells me to and work a job and do 9 to 5? The world hasn't been nice to me so why should I care what anyone thinks?" And that might lead them to do crimes that normally someone wouldn't do."

Young person, Manchester

"For some parents in African cultures, mental health is seen as the devil. Some parents need to understand they need to be more personal. They think that having food in the house is enough but it is more than that. Sometimes seeing how other people in the liberal society view this can make the children annoyed and then it can trigger depression. The parents need to understand that having food isn't enough, there is more to life than what you see."

KPF Boxing Club member, London

This need for mental health support was discussed in our groups as being especially important for young men, who often faced stigma for speaking about their emotions. It is interesting to note that in our survey the provision of additional mental health support as an intervention to stop youth crime had the highest positive response from female respondents, but was not seen as the most popular solution by male respondents.

**"Something that is very overlooked and stigmatised because men are supposed to be strong and not show emotions. When that's not the case at all. A lot of men do struggle with their mental health and that needs to be taken a lot more seriously."**

Young person, Manchester

## Impact of family upbringing

Following on from the impact of family upbringing raised in the context of mental health, we also heard views from young people about how someone's childhood environment can be a major driver in engaging in youth crime. Indeed, in our survey 64% of respondents believed that poor family relationships and a bad upbringing is a key driver for involvement in youth crime.

This sentiment was raised consistently in our group discussions and interviews. Many of the people in our focus groups noted that there could be a number of factors that could negatively affect a young person's relationship with their family. For instance, parental substance abuse or neglect. They felt that this, in turn, could negatively impact that young person's ability to avoid becoming involved in crime later on in life. Research suggests that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are strongly associated with 'problematic behaviours including aggression, violence and criminal behaviour'.<sup>20</sup>

**"There needs to be support for people who may have a tough upbringing, whether that's no parents or single parts or an abusive relationship with their parents or even alcoholism can affect a child's development."**

Young person, Manchester

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<sup>20</sup> Academic Insights 2021/13: Serious youth violence and its relationship with adverse childhood experiences

This concept was expanded upon by multiple individuals who felt strongly that a lack of parental guidance was a major driver affecting a child's development. This ranged from the impact of absent parental figures to parents who were a part of a child's life but who did not give enough guidance or support to prevent them from turning to crime.

**"Some people are raised differently in different neighbourhoods or households. So they don't have parents to guide them on the right path."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"Another thing is that sometimes parents are not helpful. It starts from very young, giving them something like television and not watching what the kids are watching on television."**

Student discussion group

**"I don't feel awareness is a problem because there is definitely awareness around knife crime and everyone knows it is bad. But when it comes from a personal thing like how a family household is built in a single parent family, there's not much you can really do to change that."**

Student discussion group

For a few of the young men that we spoke to, this was especially true for when the father was absent in the home. There was a strong feeling among these individuals that a lack of father figure led to a lack of guidance and also a sense that it left the child vulnerable.

**"Sometimes it begins with something as simple as not having your father in the home. So it's difficult when there isn't that male role model. You see young boys running around like headless chickens. And they see other boys like that so they are compelled or pushed to do the same thing. So for me, we need to address the actual home situation."**

Student discussion group

**"Knife crime is the tip of the iceberg. That's why the household is so important. The father should be in the home, it is so easy for a man to exploit a woman and run and leave a child vulnerable for a good 20 to 25 years. So I would say it's more about addressing these fundamental issues."**

Student discussion group

More directly, we were also told that being exposed to criminal activities perpetrated by family members at a young age was also a major driver of young people committing crime later in life. It was felt that seeing illicit activities in the home normalised the experience for young people and made it harder for them to make decisions about what is morally right later in life.

**"Family life can have something to do with it as well. People who have parents who are drug dealers or drug addicts or they've just had a rough upbringing, they think that is the only route in life to go down is the criminal side of things because they don't see anything outside of what they've been brought up in."**

Young person, Manchester

**"Some people are born into it if their father or their whole family or their uncles do that type of stuff. And if they've seen it from when they were young, it can influence them to think that's how it should be."**

Student discussion group

However, a few individuals who we spoke to who were training at the Kiyon Prince Foundation boxing gym strongly disputed this view. Instead they were keen to stress that although some individuals had more difficult starts in life than others, it fundamentally came down to a choice for young people to decide whether they wanted to turn to crime or not. These young people had also experienced difficult upbringings themselves and were speaking from a place of recognition of the challenges of overcoming these struggles to make a choice. They also pointed out that many individuals who had not experienced difficulties growing up still turned to crime, disputing that one automatically led to another.

**"I have some friends who have passed away but in the end some suffer from a narrative that everything is because of their mums and dads. From what I've seen, some of my friends have dads but they choose to smoke, they choose to drink, they choose to indulge in the violence. I don't believe the narrative that because you come from a bad home that you have to do these things."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

## Peer pressure

Adolescence is often the time when young people form their individual identity and work out how they fit in. The desire to fit in with their peers, compounded by the fear of rejection from the social group, can lead young people to be more susceptible to peer pressure. While the desire to engage successfully with peers can be a positive force in encouraging young people to understand how to be a valued and productive member of society, there is also the risk of being encouraged to take part in illicit activities in order to fit in.

Our survey found that after family upbringing, the next two most significant drivers of youth crime involvement were social factors including peer pressure and the desire to increase social standing by acting 'tough'. This desire to gain social standing with peers by committing crime was repeatedly raised. Many individuals we spoke to referenced how 'cool' young people felt it was to commit crime.

**"Peer pressure is quite a big part of it. Because people just think it's cool."**

Young person, Manchester

**"Most people think it's cool to carry a knife. Or it is cool to stab someone because they see it online. You can see some people coming from bad circumstances but I've seen people that have good homes and a lot of money. And they've still turned to the roads because it looks cool and they're trying to impress people."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

The idea of appearing cool in front of their friends is also compounded by the increased social standing that was achieved through the money that young people made through committing crimes.

**"In this day and age it's cool to be a badman. But the next thing you know you've got a gun to your head. And your whole life is very dull because one person will have a £500 jacket or a 20 grand car and you're thinking it's very cool to be that type of guy. But a lot of kids don't see it as being very dangerous."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"The battle between making money and impressing your friends. It is one way of impressing your friends by having money so if you give them an easier route to get the money then they would do that."**

Student discussion group

The other side of the coin of peer pressure is the fear of being ostracised if a young person refuses to join in. There was a strong sense in the groups and during our interviews of the need for young people to feel part of a group of friends, and their fear of having that sense of security taken away from them.

**"You see these people five days a week when you're in school and you think that they're your friends for life, and you think that you can't break away from that because you don't want to be alone because it is a lot if you don't have many other friends. I feel that it is because people want to feel secure in a group of friends and just do what they are doing to try to fit in and not lose their friends."**

Young person, Manchester

**"They're lost, it's like they have no purpose. So it's just like they want to fit in. So they act a certain way. They don't need to but it's the cool thing to do, the popular thing to do. And even me, when I was younger I was definitely following a crowd. And then it can really escalate and put you in certain situations you really shouldn't be in."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

As well as the superficial impacts of peer pressure, where individuals either gain or lose social standing, the young people we spoke to also identified a more insidious impact. They told us how being involved in a group that committed certain crimes or held certain views could subconsciously influence a young person's ability to make decisions on their own as to whether what they were doing was morally right.

**"Some people grow up around friends who are doing bad things. So they don't really know whether something is right or wrong."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"When you're younger, you're much more pressured and if you see other people doing things or saying things then you're likely to do the same thing. Because you don't know much else. Because you have no guidance."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"It is never going to change if people get into the wrong groups. And with things like that, people are always going to be influenced by others and those around them and get into wrong groups of people."**

Student discussion group

Some respondents explicitly drew out the link between negative peer pressure and being involved in criminal activities. This was raised by some who suggested that there was a slippery slope of spending time with people who were perpetrating crimes and ending up doing it themselves.

**"Whoever you hang around with is probably who you're going to be. If you hang around a lot of people that do drugs and carry stuff, you're probably going to end up, not the first day, maybe not the first week, but eventually you're going to have a knife and you're going to be doing drugs with them. So just surround yourself with better people."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"When I was 13/14 I was hanging around with people that were carrying knives, even I did a few times. And then you end up living in fear. But if all your friends are doing it then it is social. Being a sheep."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

However, the young people that we spoke to were keen to stress that not all peer pressure was negative. When discussing role models, some young people referenced the positive impact that spending time with friends who were following the right path could have on life choices.

**"I feel like people think role models have to be older than you but I think your friends are definitely role models. Because a role model is anyone that can affect your actions."**

Student discussion group

**"Friends are the ones who see you most day to day and know you like a brother. These types of friends would also have influence."**

Student discussion group

## **Coercion and the influence of people already involved in crime**

The final driver that was mentioned by the young people that we spoke to was coercion: not just peer pressure, but the explicit use of force or threats of force to make young people take part in criminal activities. Our poll found 34% of young people said that being directly threatened is one of the main factors that can drive young people to become involved in crime.

**"Sometimes they can't get out of a situation that the gang people have put them in. And once you go in then it's hard to get out of there."**

Young person, Manchester

**"Some people don't really have a choice. Sometimes they're put in scenarios and are being forced to do something and sometimes they can't get out of the situation they are in. They might do bad things because they owe people money or because they're scared of some people who might hurt their family members or do bad things to them."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

Some referenced the way that criminal gangs used a smaller initial crime as leverage to force young people to escalate their criminal activity in service to the gang.

**"It's very easy to get into the criminal side of things. At first it's just giving one of your mates some weed or some cocaine. And then you start selling it, and you get roped into things, but it's not intentional. It's just so easy to get into that. And once you get into it, you can't get out of it."**

Young person, Manchester

## Recommendations

This section explores a range of recommendations that seek to address the drivers of youth crime raised through our polling, discussion groups and interviews with young people. We also assess the work that the Kiyon Prince Foundation is doing each of these areas to combat the drivers towards crime.

### Giving young people somewhere to go and something to do

**Recommendation:** Increase the number of opportunities for young people to engage in subsidised out of school activities such as organised sport through sustainably funded programmes such as increasing the number of youth centres.

Consistently in our research, we were told by young people that they were spending time on the streets as they had nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. Organised activities play a crucial role in preventing young people from getting involved in youth crime by providing a structured and positive outlet for their energy and time.

Research from the Youth Endowment Fund has shown that prevention programmes which engage young people in organised sports or physical activity have a high estimated impact on preventing violent crime.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, an investigation by the National Youth Agency has linked youth centre closures with a greater risk of young people in a particular area entering the criminal justice system.<sup>22</sup>

The vast majority of respondents to our survey (75%) believed that increasing structured sports programmes would reduce levels of youth crime. There was also a consensus across young people from all demographic groups that providing free activities to young people would reduce involvement in youth crime. The most common reasons chosen were that it gives young people 'life goals' to work towards (60%) and that it helps to keep them off the streets (59%). Furthermore, when we directly asked respondents to prioritise several different options, we found that providing free structured sports activities for young people (for example, boxing or football clubs) was the third highest chosen solution, with only improving mental health support and providing more good jobs for young people being ranked more highly.

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<sup>21</sup> Youth Endowment Fund, Sports Programmes

<sup>22</sup> National Youth Agency, The social cost of youth work cuts: Preventing youth offending through youth work, 2023

We found an interesting difference by gender where the provision of structured sports was more highly ranked by male respondents than by female respondents, who ranked additional mental health support more highly.

### **The Role of Youth Centres**

Interestingly, many of the young people that we spoke to specifically wanted these interventions to be delivered through youth centres. Since 2010, youth services such as youth clubs and youth workers have been cut by 69%. More than 4,500 youth work jobs have been cut and 750 youth centres closed. This was as a result of funding to youth services by local authorities in England and Wales seeing a real terms decline of 70% between 2010/11 and 2018/19.<sup>23</sup>

Many young people raised the need for youth centres to be introduced as a way of combating crime, as well as discussing their awareness of the centres having been closed down and the need for new ones to be opened.

**"It's like the youth centres. So often they've been getting shut down. I got lucky, I got to go to one when I was young. And it kept me away from the streets."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"We need more youth centres and stuff. My friend used to go to one and it got closed down. And that was what he did when he came home from school. And now it's gone he has nowhere to go."**

Student discussion group

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<sup>23</sup> Local Government Association, Re-thinking local: youth services

**"The government should put more funding into community projects where young people can go and not have to be roaming the streets and putting themselves in harm's way."**

Young person, Manchester

In 2022, the government made a National Youth Guarantee (NYG) pledge that by 2025 every young person in England should have access to regular out of school activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer.<sup>24</sup> However despite this commitment, many charities and youth organisations still feel there is a way to go before the NYG's pledge is achieved for all young people and further investment in the youth workforce is needed.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Role of Organised Sport**

Providing more opportunities for organised activities was consistently popular with the young people we spoke to in our groups and interviews. Unprompted, many of them made the direct link between engaging in purposeful activity and therefore having less time or inclination to be pulled into illicit activities.

**"Any hobby, whether that's sports or art or music, or any activity that people can do as a group to make good relationships with other people and not get dragged into crime when they are bored."**

Young person, Manchester

**"Extracurricular activities. Cadets is amazing, boxing is amazing, literally any sport you can get into. And if you focus on it, then it's really hard to drift into a world where you going round and hurting people."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

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<sup>24</sup> GOV.UK, Government outlines ambitious plans to level up activities for young people, 1 February 2022

<sup>25</sup> UK Youth, National Youth Guarantee: One Year On, 3 February 2023

## **Mindset Change**

Another benefit of providing more organised activities for young people is the mindset change that has been reported as accompanying youth involvement. Participation in organised activities can foster a sense of belonging, discipline and teamwork that we were told can have a major impact on the way that young people view the world and the choices that they decide to make.

Many of the young people that we spoke to drew a clear link between organised physical activity and their mindset. Recent academic reports have shown a clear link between participation in sport and better mental health, including improved psychological well-being (higher self-esteem and life satisfaction) and lower psychological ill-health (reduced levels of depression, anxiety and stress).<sup>26</sup>

**“Especially at a young age, and you’re doing sports like basketball, football, boxing, you’re trying to do something, you’re trying to be better, you’re trying to make your body strong. So once you’re going through that experience, your mindset will change. And you won’t think about all the other things as much.”**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**“I agree with the power of sports, because it makes you realise your potential and your self-value because when you go to the gym or football then you have to push yourself. And when you actually do it you realise I’m actually doing good. Like I can do something else.”**

Student discussion group

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<sup>26</sup> Narelle Eather, The impact of sports participation on mental health and social outcomes in adults: a systematic review and the 'Mental Health through Sport' conceptual model, Systematic Reviews 12, 21 June 2023

**"Some of us are not big talkers or emotions or stuff. We don't like talking to people about emotion. But when I'm playing badminton, I'm just completely in it. All my emotions are just on that court."**

Student discussion group

Some young people had clearly seen a change in their behaviour and mindset since taking up a physical sport.

**"In primary school I used to always lash out. And then I took up exercising and it completely changed my mindset and I didn't lash out at people anymore."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

Learning teamwork through organised activities was also described by young people as key in helping them to avoid getting involved in youth crime. Sports and other organised activities that need young people to work as part of a group provide an opportunity for young people to foster collaboration, communication and empathetic skills which can help them to feel part of a wider group and help them to avoid becoming involved with criminal activities.

**"If they want to play football to get out of crime, then they need to be surrounded by people who are really good disciplined players because that is going to compel them to want to be like those people. You can't just tell someone to do sport, you need to think about their environment too."**

Student discussion group

**"Boxing gives you a passion to focus on and you learn from genuine people how to work together."**

Student discussion group

Another more practical benefit of organised activities is simply that it provides young people with something to do and to put their energy into, rather than becoming involved in youth crime.

**"I feel like after you do sports, your body's going to be tired and you're going to go home and do your studies and be tired, so you're less likely to do crimes and stuff like that."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"I swim daily. And the more you do what you like and what you love then the more you get into it, and if you don't then you feel almost empty. So linking it back to the crime thing, once people get so deep into it then if they don't do it then they feel empty inside and like they've lost a part of themselves. So if you give them something positive to do then they can stick to it, then it can become a lifestyle."**

Student discussion group

## Case Study: Role of the KPF Boxing Gym

As part of our research, we spoke to many young people who have been involved in the motivational boxing training sessions hosted by the Kiyon Prince Foundation. These sessions use boxing training as a way of positively engaging with young people to help to change their lives.

We found that many of the benefits of organised sport, and the desire for youth centre-style locations from young people to help them avoid crime, were reported back to us from the young people who attend KPF boxing sessions in Tottenham, North London.

One of the major benefits was the mindset change that the individuals reported after training at the gym. By combining the boxing training with the motivational leadership of Dr Mark Prince, we heard many stories of how young people had seen a major difference in their lives and mindset before and after coming to the gym.

**“When you come here, your mind is clear. You just focus on boxing for one or two hours a day and you come back home and feel accomplished. You go in the shower and your mind is all cleaned up”**

KPF Boxing Club member

**“Mark is good at motivating you and getting you to talk. Ultimately, I think boxing as a whole is a good thing to get your mind right. Development, better discipline, developing new skills. It’s an all round positive thing”**

KPF Boxing Club member

**“I started boxing at 16 and before I was always quiet and shy and wouldn’t get involved. After I was boxing, it moved me to some place better than before. It’s important to teach yourself and keep sight of your confidence as once you know what you can do then it is limitless”**

KPF Boxing Club member

## Mindset Change

Strikingly, combined with this mindset change was a sense from the young people that attending the motivational training at the gym was a good way of channelling their energy away from potential violence. Instead of lashing out at school or turning to violent crime, the young people described the motivational training as a constructive outlet for their energy.

**“Boys have a natural inclination to be competitive. When you suppress or reject that, it just makes us more violent. I think if we can control violence, like how we do when we box, then you can learn to respond to things in a civil way”**

KPF Boxing Club member

**“You build up the discipline to not lash out so much. Because if you lash out small then you start having street fights and then you might end up carrying stuff in the end”**

KPF Boxing Club member

**“But when you learn to defend yourself and fight, you don’t actually need it. I fight enough, I don’t want to fight on the streets and I know it’s no good to anyone”**

KPF Boxing Club member

## **Building Physicality**

Expanding on this sense of letting out energy in a constructive way, the young people we spoke to consistently raised the link that they experienced between working on building their physicality through boxing and the positive impact this had on their mental health.

**“When you’re boxing, when you’re training, you’re breaking down your body, you’re breaking all your muscles, and you need to let your brain process all the pain from your body. And you wouldn’t have time to focus on gang violence and all of that. You’re just focussing on building your brain”**

KPF Boxing Club member

**“It’s built me as a powerful person. Now I know I’m more than my muscles. I’m actually my own person and I think I found myself through boxing. It’s how a lot of us find ourselves”**

KPF Boxing Club member

**“Training is really good for mental health and everyone’s mind. And it gives kids the chance to burn off their energy”**

KPF Future Champions programme student

## Networking Opportunities

Some individuals also mentioned the wider opportunities that they have gained from being part of a network through training at the boxing gym.

**“Doing boxing with Mark has made me see a lot more opportunities. Since I have been going there are a lot of people who have been coming up to me saying ‘you should be taken seriously’. So that’s why Mark’s place has been good for me because boxing has become way more serious and I’m passionate about it now”**

KPF Future Champions programme student

## Impact of Motivation

However, the young people we spoke to stressed that the benefits of the KPF gym did not come from boxing alone. We heard that it was the combination of the physicality of boxing and the mental impact of Mark’s motivation that had the positive benefit on the young people’s lives. Indeed, we had some young people tell us about examples that showed that boxing alone would not be enough to encourage young people to stay away from criminal activities.

**“I know someone in my year, he’s really into drugs and violence and stuff like that. But at the same time he’s also a boxer and the only reason he’s doing boxing is to show he’s big and it just shows that sports aren’t the only thing they should be doing”**

KPF boxing member

**“I used to box in London at this particular gym but they didn’t care about the mindset so when I came here I pretty much started again and I find myself really improving”**

KPF boxing member

## Developing mental health support in schools

**Recommendation:** Increase the availability and accessibility of mental health support for young people in schools.

The young people that we spoke to were clear that prioritising mental health support is integral to preventing young people from becoming involved in crime. Many of the risk factors that increase a child's chances of becoming involved in offending are similar to risk factors for mental health problems, for example, high levels of social disadvantage, a higher likelihood of having been subject to trauma or severe neglect.<sup>27</sup> Creating a robust support system is vital in ensuring that young people have someone to talk to and can access the help they need when it comes to dealing with mental ill health.

A recent study by Waltham Forest Council found that the number of offences committed by young offenders with mental health needs was nearly twice as high as other young offenders – 3.6 offences per young person compared to only 1.8 for those showing no mental health issues.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is clear that the mental health support that is needed for vulnerable children and young people is not being provided. One in four 17 to 19-year-olds had a probable diagnosable mental health disorder in 2022, up from one in ten in 2017.<sup>29</sup> Despite the NHS providing mental health support for more children and young people than ever before<sup>30</sup> and commitments in the NHS Long Term Plan<sup>31</sup> to expand services to an extra 345,000 children and young people, it is clear that access and availability to these services is not adequate for the current challenge being faced. According to Amy Whitelock Gibbs, the Chair of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition "a perfect storm of the Covid-19 pandemic, deepening inequalities in society and decades of inaction have led to an untenable situation where demand far outstrips capacity – leaving babies, children, young people and their families without the support they desperately need."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mental health

<sup>28</sup> Waltham Forest Council, Analysis of young offenders shows stark need for a public health approach to tackling the causes of poor mental wellbeing that leads to violence on the streets, 4 January 2021

<sup>29</sup> The Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools, "Solutions for a crisis": Exploring best practice for tackling mental health in schools, December 2023

<sup>30</sup> NHS England » One in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023

<sup>31</sup> NHS Long Term Plan » Mental health

<sup>32</sup> Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, A manifesto for babies, children and young people's mental health, November 2023

## **More mental health provision in schools**

Our polling found the most popular policy option for reducing the number of young people becoming involved in crime was providing more mental health support in schools and the community, when compared to other potential policy solutions, with net prioritisation of (+19%).

As already highlighted, there was a gender split when it came to answering this question, with female respondents more likely to say this should be prioritised by the government than male respondents. Within our 'at risk' group of respondents, providing more mental health support was significantly more likely to be prioritised than it was among our 'not at risk' group, however it is important to note that this difference is driven by higher levels of ambivalence towards the policy among the 'not at risk' group, rather than outright negative polarisation.

The importance of more mental health support in schools was echoed in the focus groups and interviews that we conducted with young people. They identified the need for strong mental health support networks to allow them to make better choices and to lead better lives.

**"It should be compulsory because everyone has mental health issues. It might just be little things, but for some people it is big things. It's good to talk about things and should be compulsory in school. It should be a compulsory thing like a class or even one to one sessions."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"Learning about your psychology can be helpful. It might be too complex but you could dumb it down and make it quite simple. And it's ridiculous that it's not taught because it's a big part of everyone's life, in every situation."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

A recent report from the Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools explores what more needs to be done by the education sector and policymakers to strengthen their approach to mental health support in schools. Some of the coalition's recommendations include mandated national waiting time standards for all Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), including greater elements of mental health training in initial teacher training and a National Survey of Youth Mental Health.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools, "Solutions for a Crisis": Exploring best practice for tackling mental health in schools, December 2023

## Case Study: Impact of KPF Future Champions programme on mental health

We spoke to a number of individuals who were referred to KPF's Future Champions programme through their schools, with the aim of providing mental health support by building self-confidence, self-esteem, self-belief and life skills through a wide variety of mentoring and coaching activities. All the young people we spoke to who had completed the 12 week course described how their lives and mental health had benefited from it.

**"Your environment shapes your mindset. If you have guidance in your life or someone like Mark then you will develop a mindset of being confident and achieving. But if you don't have that then you fall victim to the environment"**

KPF Future Champions programme student

### Improved Mental Health and Decision Making

For many of the individuals who completed the course, there was a direct link between taking part, improving mental health and being better equipped to make decisions that did not involve criminal activities.

**"Mark talks about the noncriminal mindset. If you fix the mindset, you fix the problem and a lot of them are angry or upset so they express it in violence. If you fix where you think there was a time in your life when you had difficulties, then that's how you conquer it"**

KPF boxing member

**"When he came to our school there was a lot of people in class that might get involved in crime, like I knew a lot of these boys that would want to carry knives and that. And when Mark was speaking to them, I did see a change in them. So yeah, I think it was really beneficial to them"**

KPF Future Champions programme student

**"I think it's completely effective from what I've seen on social media, from the people around me. Those people who have been going into a better lifestyle and choosing to do better things than they have been. And they have been moving away from crime"**

KPF Future Champions programme student

## Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

More generally, we also spoke to young people about the positive benefits that completing the course had on their mental health, especially in relation to self-esteem and self-confidence.

**“There are people that have definitely been changed by Mark. People I know personally as well and people that I have heard about”**

KPF Future Champions programme student

**“I’ve been able to go out and use it in my everyday life. Like my self-confidence has improved since walking to him, I’m more physically active. I’ve been doing a lot more since I’ve had his sessions”**

KPF Future Champions programme student

It is clear that young people are very supportive of more routes to better mental health support to be provided through schools, whether that is through external organisations like KPF helping young people with motivational coaching programmes, through internal work that is led by the schools themselves or, perhaps most effectively, through a combination of the two.

## Enabling young people to develop positive relationships

**Recommendation:** Support and expand programmes that bring effective and positive role models into schools.

One of the biggest reasons that young people gave for becoming involved in youth crime was peer pressure from other young people, whether this was through the desire to achieve social standing or through a fear of being ostracised by the group. Instead, many individuals expressed the importance of having positive role models who could provide guidance, inspiration and a sense of direction, helping young people to turn away from the path of criminal activities.

Indeed, the Youth Select Committee's 2019 report on knife crime specifically draws out the importance of positive role models in young people's lives to deter them from crime. They are clear that these advocates need to have "lived experience of knife crime, poverty or exclusion".<sup>34</sup> Although their research is focussed on knife crime in particular, there is a wider implication around the impact that a positive role model can have on crime deterrence in general. The Children's Society has reported that without the availability of positive role models, many of the young people they work with end up turning to each other for support.<sup>35</sup> While many of these relationships may be positive, there is a risk of negative peer pressure being exerted on individuals lacking a positive role model.

### External Speakers in Schools

One way in which the young people we spoke to suggested combating the influence of peer pressure was through inviting external speakers to schools: people they can relate to as having come through similar experiences to their own and who they respect, who could act as positive role models in place of the pressure they may experience from their peers to become involved in crime.

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<sup>34</sup> British Youth Council, *Our Generation's Epidemic: Knife Crime, 2019*

<sup>35</sup> The Children's Society, *Written evidence submitted to the Youth Select Committee on Knife Crime, 2019*

**"Schools need to make the younger generation more aware of how crime can impact not just your life, but everybody's life or your family's life if you were to go down that path of carrying a knife, and then stabbing somebody or killing somebody."**

Young person, Manchester

**"I feel like schools should have an assembly once a month or once a week to say that people are doing with knife crime or drugs is just wrong and explain to them from young that it is not the right thing to do and you shouldn't go on that path."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

While the concept of external speakers who can fill the position of positive role models was roundly popular with the young people we spoke to, there were some caveats. Firstly, some individuals felt this type of intervention would be more helpful for younger children who were not yet embedded in criminal activities rather than for older individuals.

**"It's more likely to work on primary school kids than secondary school kids because in secondary school it is cool to get in trouble or teachers telling you off. So I don't think it works on that kind of mindset. So it would be better to do it for the younger kids, to get them out of that direction in the first place."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

The second caveat that was raised consistently was that only a specific type of person would be effective in speaking to young people about not being involved in crime. In the first instance, this individual needs to be someone that the young people feel that they can relate to. The urban music outlet Mixtape Madness, in their submission to the Youth Select Committee's 2019 report on knife crime, echoed this argument by emphasising the need for real and relatable role models.<sup>36</sup>

**"People who come and speak who are relatable are much more impressive."**

KPF Boxing Club member, London

**"It depends on the person speaking because they need to be mentored by a type of person that they see as a cool person. If they don't think it is someone they would look up to, then it wouldn't make much difference."**

Student discussion group

The other aspect that we were told was needed was a direct experience of crime. Indeed, the Youth Select Committee stressed the importance of the government amending their approach on role models to "focus on people with lived experiences, or people from troubled areas who have been successful in their own lives, who may be best able to inspire vulnerable young people"<sup>37</sup>

**"An assembly could actually mean something if the person had actually been there, and witnessed a crime. So we can see it from his perspective."**

Student discussion group

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<sup>36</sup> Mixtape Madness, Written evidence submitted to the Youth Select Committee on Knife Crime, 2019

<sup>37</sup> British Youth Council, Our Generation's Epidemic: Knife Crime, 2019

"I think people need a personal insight or to see the real insight of what actually goes down with crime. Because on their own, assemblies are not enough when the person does not have real experience."

Student discussion group

"Maybe have the victims, if they're willing to come in, and tell the story because many times we just hear the regrets of the person who did it but we never hear from the opposite side of someone who has actually experienced it."

Young person, Manchester

## Case Study: Impact of KPF external speakers

We also conducted interviews with some individuals who had attended sessions where the Kiyon Prince Foundation had been the external speaker at a school. The feedback we received from this was positive. The young people we spoke to explained how having the session with someone relatable with direct experience of the devastating impact of crime made a bigger difference to their lives and viewpoints than another external speaker.

**"We should have more people that go out and talk to them and to be honest with them. Because Mark, he tells us what teachers should be telling us. He gives us honest statements and shows us why we shouldn't go into crime, rather than just outright stating it"**

KPF Future Champions programme student

## Connecting young people with good quality careers advice and opportunities to earn while they learn

**Recommendation:** Support young people to access more good quality jobs, including by expanding the work of the Careers and Enterprise Company to ensure that more young people are able to access relevant and effective career information, advice and guidance as early as possible.

The pull factor of crime being seen as an easy way to make money quickly is an aspect that we have explored earlier in this report when investigating the factors that encourage young people to commit youth crime. This is compounded by the way that many young people told us that they felt their peers turned to crime due to lack of educational attainment, meaning they feared not being able to find constructive employment in the future. Helping young people secure good quality job opportunities – through better careers information, advice and guidance, skills support and training, especially for those most at risk – can provide them with a more fulfilling pathway to a stable future. The [Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index](#) highlights that among the top responses for desired support for young people to develop their careers were: securing better qualifications, training or work experience (30%), help with building confidence (29%) and guidance on what jobs are available to me (26%).

Indeed, a number of youth charities including Movement to Work and London Youth have been calling on more employers to provide workplace opportunities for young people who may otherwise turn to crime.<sup>38</sup> Gaining meaningful work can be a major long-term factor in helping to address the current youth crime situation.

### Importance of Finding Employment

Many of the young people that we spoke to described how difficult the job market was for people their age, leaving them feeling that they did not have established routes to earn money.

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<sup>38</sup> [Movement to Work, Employment is key to addressing knife crime, say three youth organisations, 21 March 2019](#)

**“No one wants to hire young people. Everyone goes to job interviews over and over but nobody even wants to call back to them. And it’s probably because they are young, inexperienced.”**

Student discussion group

Among the 16–24 year olds we surveyed, we found that improving the availability of good jobs for young people to earn money was the solution with the joint highest level of net support (+19%) alongside providing mental health support for young people in schools and in the community.

This desire for constructive and good quality jobs was reflected in the groups and interviews that we conducted.

**“I would say an issue is the availability of jobs for young people. Because I feel if there is an easy solution to get money, I feel a job would really take someone’s attention because dealing is long. People think it is an easy way to make money but they don’t actually want to be travelling up and down the country.”**

Student discussion group

Other individuals highlighted the notion that the reality of youth crime, particularly in the context of county lines drug trafficking where young people are frequently exploited as drug couriers, are less glamorous than portrayed in online materials.

**“If you do drug dealing and stuff, they think it is fast money. But it’s not because you have to travel around the country and the long term effects mean that it isn’t even worth it.”**

Student discussion group

Although many of the young people that we interviewed were too young to be able to look retrospectively at the impact of being supported by the Kiyani Prince Foundation, we spoke to one individual who was in his late 20s. He explicitly referenced the fact that working with KPF helped him to reevaluate the priorities in his life and, importantly, to find a quality job that allowed him to earn money without turning to crime.

**"I met Mark when I was 14. He came to my school and I was one of those kids who was acting out. I didn't spend enough time with him because I got moved to another school. But it definitely did have an impact on me at the time, maybe not enough for me to make a difference because I hadn't spent much time training with him. Then, years later I reached out to him and he helped me find a job, helped me basically reevaluate my life and set things up again."**

KPF Future Champions student

## Conclusions

We are grateful to all the young people who gave up their time to speak to us as part of this research report. Their insights into the drivers of youth crime and what needs to change is at the heart of the recommendations that we have made.

The breadth and variation of the drivers towards crime demonstrate a compelling need for multifaceted interventions to help prevent young people from becoming involved in youth crime. These vary from peer pressure and mental health drivers to young people simply having nowhere else to go. All these recommendations have been crafted to facilitate their effective integration into the policy platform for all political parties who are keen to reduce youth crime through their political interventions.

Our recommendations for areas where improvements need to be made are:

- Increase the number of opportunities for young people to engage in subsidised out of school activities such as organised sport through sustainably funded programmes such as increasing the number of youth centres.
- Increase the availability and accessibility of mental health support for young people in schools.
- Support and expand programmes which bring effective and positive role models into schools.
- Support young people to access more good quality jobs, including by expanding the work of the Careers and Enterprise Company to ensure that more young people are able to access relevant and effective career information, advice and guidance as early as possible.

The stories and examples given in this report are a testament to the ingenuity, bravery and diligence of the young people that we have spoken to. The time has come for politicians and policymakers to turn their recommendations into action to prevent youth crime.

