

Knife Crime Awareness Youth Tour Reflection



Always An Alternative
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Executive Summary

The Tree of Opportunity shows the efforts that making an attempt to decrease knife crime looks like; preventing over 300 weapons from reaching the streets of South Yorkshire. This beautiful piece of art work showcased with other pieces of art and words from those affected by knife crime makes a positive entry into schools to spread awareness of knife crime, which is often associated with negative feelings. The report shows that knife crime is not taken serious enough in schools and more needs to be done, both by the school and support for the school. Two categories of students were found, low risk: where general awareness of knife crime and teaching students' soft skills such as managing conflict and de-escalation techniques are necessary. The second, high risk; schools should work together to create a true and robust way to find students that may be at risk of being involved in knife crime. Once created, schools must ensure that they have the correct support to support these students. Acknowledging that there is a problem is not good enough although, it is a step in the right direction.

Background

In February 2022 I established a first of its kind art exhibition to raise awareness of knife crime. The exhibition was created around a center-piece of artwork; The Tree of Opportunity. The sculpture was constructed with 300 weapons that were prevented from reaching the streets of South Yorkshire. Each weapon was individually cut and forged into shape, creating a unique piece of art. The exhibition also showcased pieces of artwork from local artists including custom trainers, drawings and

graffiti. Letters, poems and advice from people that have felt the devastation of knife crime first hand had been written and a portable weapon amnesty bin that is eye catching by being graffitied to show the impact of knife crime.

The exhibition was a great success; around 500 people viewed the exhibition over the 5 days it was open, gaining national coverage from the news. As my work is so heavily focused around prevention of young people becoming involved with serious youth violence, I kept a day of the exhibition free to focus on them. The young people experienced significantly different work to enable higher rates of engagement in the hope that they pay attention to the dangers associated to knife crime. There were free books, merchandise, refreshments and a free meal from McDonald's as a reward for engaging with the event. The event was great but unfortunately the amount of young people that attended was extremely poor, being lesser than 20 young people. The whole point in the exhibition was to raise awareness of knife crime, aimed more at young people as this issue is affecting them directly. My tough process was clear, if young people could not come to the exhibition, the exhibition would go to them. I then redesigned the exhibition into a portable version that could travel around Sheffield.

I pitched this very idea via video to Theatre Deli and was awarded funding to visit 6 educational facilities across Sheffield. The exhibition stayed within the school building Monday – Friday. And I provided discussions about the exhibition and knife crime. Additionally, a drama teacher delivered role play sessions around difficult conversations with friends; would they feel confident to have a difficult conversation? How they would approach it? Could they have a difficult conversation around a friend carrying a knife? The sessions were created in a way that the

young people had the confidence and ability to talk to their friends about any difficult subject may it arise.

The youth tour visited the following educational facilities:

- Sheffield Springs Academy
- Tapton Secondary School
- Woodlands Primary School
- Sheffield College
- Notre Dame High School
- Firth Park Academy

The exhibition reached around 20,000 people, 17,000 of which being students

The tour raised £866.20 towards Always an Alternative Mobile Youth Club. This mobile unit will be used to travel to hard-to-reach young people and engage them in discussions around staying safe. It will include other professionals offering opportunities to engage in services such as health, substance misuse, Education, Training and Employment plus much more.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a collection of findings during the tour of the exhibition. I will cover what was discussed in each of the educational facilities, summaries of the key finding and add a hypothesis around what must be done to make another tour even more successful. Please note that the discussions are heavily led by the young people and the audience was different every time so different topics may have been discussed from visit to visit. However, all discussions were based around the exhibition and knife crime awareness.



CUTTING-EDGE: KNIFE CRIME AWARENESS ART EXHIBITION

THE YOUTH TOUR!

OUR EXHIBITION IS COMING TO YOU FOR A WEEK TO RAISE AWARENESS OF KNIFE CRIME. HERE ARE SOME OF THE REASONS FOR YOU TO GET INVOLVED:

GUIDED TOUR
HEAR THE STORY BEHIND THE EXHIBITION AND SEE SOME OF ITS EXCELLENT PIECES

PERFORMING ARTS WORKSHOP
BUILD CONFIDENCE ON HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS (A MIND APART).

KNIFE CRIME DISCUSSIONS
HAVE A TALK WITH ANTHONY 'BIG ANT' OLASEINDE ABOUT KNIFE CRIME AND HIS FIGHT AGAINST IT.

FREE ENTRY TO THE YOUTH TOUR COMPETITION
GET YOUR ARTWORK PUT IN AN EXHIBITION AND BE IN WITH THE CHANCE OF WINNING AN AWARD.

Exhibition includes:
The Tree of Opportunity - Exclusive custom trainers
Emotional letters, poems, advice and much more.

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THEATRE DELI SYMCA NATIONAL COMMERCE AUTHORITY




CUTTING-EDGE: KNIFE CRIME AWARENESS ART EXHIBITION

THE YOUTH TOUR DATES!

SHEFFIELD COLLEGE
09-13/05/22

NOTRE DAME HIGH SCHOOL
16-20/05/22

TAPTON SCHOOL
23-27/05/22

SPRINGS ACADEMY
06-10/06/22

FIRTH PARK ACADEMY
13-17/06/22

WOODLANDS PRIMARY
20-24/06/22

Exhibition includes:
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The Tour

This section looks at each educational establishment individually and covers the topics discussed. Where possible I attempted to ask the same questions. However, this was not always possible as the discussions were led by the understanding of the students. This was to allow maximum engagement and understanding of basic principles of knife crime etc. For the purpose of anonymity, I have not mentioned the facility and not put them in order.

Visit 1

The first group of young people were quiet and didn't open up to start with; maybe a little dubious and didn't know what to expect. After a short time they opened up, two young people disclosed they had been involved in incidents where a knife was present. One attempted robbery at an arcade and the other incident was where the student lived and the student did not know the motive.

Some students in the class had the opinion that it was certain areas were bad (Darnall) and wouldn't go there. However, the student that was chased with the knife in his own area did not see his own area as dangerous despite this incident occurring at their local shops.

All of the students understood the dangers of carrying knives and that the knife would not protect them. There was no sense of any of the group aspiring to be Alpha; they were all pretty focused on their futures. Group 2: This group consisted of students with learning difficulties. They had a difficult time understanding the dangers of knife crime. The discussion was tailored to their learning needs to ensure that all students understood what was being said and could ask all the questions that they needed and wanted to. One student explained that they actively carried a knife. When the student was asked if they could tell us if they knew the reasons for carrying a knife, the student explained it was for protection. An in-depth conversation was held to ensure all of the students understood the dangers and consequences of carrying knives. We spoke about the students thinking



about their options around not going to any places that they felt unsafe, which would reduce the need for protection and instead, to call the police if they felt scared.

Visit 2

Y8 year group: This group was confident to talk about knife crime and wanted to know more about why I do what I do; the risks involved; the types of knives that I collect. The group showed a good understanding

around stereotypes; it was not just a certain type of person from a certain area that would and does carry a knife.



A lot of the students explained a fear to go outside of their area as they did not want to converse with older children. Saying that older children are currently in that area and they feel intimidated by them. However, the older children were not necessarily doing anything wrong. I

talked to them about the mobile youth club and they were very interested. The students felt that seeing police around their area would make them feel safer and want to go to public areas.

- 15% knew someone that carried a knife
- 40% had seen someone on social media carrying a knife
- 80% felt that young people carry weapons for protection

Visit 3

This visit consisted of two groups of 10-15 students. When discussing knife crime especially the involvement around it, the students looked at each other to see who would speak first, almost like there was a known truth in the room to be told but nobody appeared to be wanting to start the conversation. It took some time to get past this stage, but once engaged

- 20% of the young people knew someone that carried a knife
- 60% had seen someone on social media carrying a knife
- 90% felt that young people carry weapons for protection

All of the students felt that if you walk away from an argument, you are seen to be the weaker one and they would do all in their power to prevent it from happening.

Visit 4

This session consisted of younger students of primary school age, I was mindful of this as I did not want to cause or create a trigger/traumatize them in any way. Therefore, I steered away from talking about the topics and did not talk directly about any topics that might cause this to happen; knives, stabbings, murders, as with the older students. Instead, we



discussed objects that were sharp, where can these be found and how can they be kept safe? We showed each other emotions on our faces to allow understanding of the interpretation of feelings being shown by body language and facial expressions. We also talked about why people might want

to feel protected and what consequences we may face when acting out our actions when we are angry. The metaphors use were relatable to the age group.

Visit 5

This was the only school where the discussion was so heavily influenced by gangs. The discussion was held with a small focus group of students that were involved in an incident involving a knife; believed to be a result of two groups from different areas who were not getting along with each other. This rivalry started many years ago. However, responsibilities and the gang approach to life has now trickled down to the younger people within each area. This has left a lot of students feeling unsafe consequently increasing the chance of young people in these areas, carrying a knife for protection. Discussions with the students showed that they did not understand the risks associated with being involved in a gang. I sensed it made them feel cool and receive kudos, but as were

looking into the reality of being in a gang, what this means and the consequences, both short and long term; the students became quieter and considered our conversation around creating a sense of belonging, a family and the confidence the students showed at the beginning of the discussion soon withered away after I shared my experiences of what gang life is about.

Ultimately, the students did not know nor understand why they had trouble; an ongoing feud with the youths from the other (opposing) area and wished that the older members of the area intervened and help to stop the feud.

Visit 6

The students at this visit felt that people who carried knives did so for protection. There was a general buzz, a heightened sense of hysteria around violence. Young people involved in the discussion were trying to make sure that they were not made fools of in any way shape or form in front of their peers. When introducing knives in to the mix of the

violence that they talked about, a “rather them than me” mentality. One student shared their story of an issue that they had experienced which involved young people known to carry knives within their area. The only way the student stated that he felt he could



stay safe was by staying at home outside of school times – he wouldn't go out and socialise which led us onto speaking about positive mental health – it's not healthy to remain indoors and isolated.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Students felt that others carried weapons for protection, or to “act hard/ fit in” with their friendship group. The stats show that you are 3 times more likely to get injured if you carry a knife. This fact should be shared heavily to young people. Along with the impact of consequences if you are arrested by the police.
2. Around 80% of the students felt that they could be impacted by knife crime because it happens regular in communities and there are regular stories on news media and on social media.

The remaining 20%, felt that they wouldn't be impacted by knife crime was because they are “nice people, or they don't get involved in it”. These thoughts are fair to think from a young person's perspective and, in general this will prevent young people from choosing to become involved in violence and give them a mindset that will keep themselves to steer away from negative behaviours and may also prevent young people from harming somebody else. Unfortunately, this way of thinking cannot them from becoming a victim of knife. We always share that a victim's name is never inscribed onto a blade, therefore it can harm anybody.

3. When delivering to the smaller groups of Young People, at risk of becoming involved in youth violence, they all had first-hand experience of violence and knife crime. They talked about their experiences freely and spoke openly about what was going on in their area; to them it was seen as normal daily life. Therefore, this group of young people are more at risk of being involved in an incident involving a knife. This can be put down due to the resilience they have created due to being desensitised to violence and knives, as they

have been or are currently around these kinds of acts and behaviours. So....How do we support our future generations to take a different path and create opportunities for themselves and their communities and prevent them becoming part of the revolving door syndrome?

4. When delivering in a class where no young people were identified as being at risk, at least 35% had some experience or could recall an incident regarding knife crime. This may be via a friend carrying a knife; being threatened by a knife; in two cases students were robbed at knife point. In one of the sessions a student was close to tears about an incident that occurred involving knife crime. He did not go into much detail as he was still having difficulties in recalling events that took place. It was clear that he had some form of PTSD and lack of support to vocalise his experiences. He shared that he felt like he had no support and felt like he had to battle his experiences by himself. I called him back at the end of the session and ensured that he got in touch with me or the service I offer if he needed any further support.
5. Fewer than 20% of students have seen someone with a knife in person. However, almost all of the students have seen someone with a knife on social media, for example: someone that they know posting an image or a video online with a knife, posing or handling it in a way which would be classed as "showing off". Although the impact of seeing something first hand is known to be traumatic in this context, there is also secondary traumatic stress (STS) to be mindful of when discussing these events with young people. This is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about or sees something traumatic. STS can cause the same symptoms of PTSD: flashbacks, nightmares, repetitive and distressing images or sensations. This could lead to a student carrying a knife for

protection. One young person had experienced seeing another person being hurt with a knife. This young person admitted that they actively carried a knife because they were scared of something like what they had witnessed, happening to them.

6. There was no clear link to knife crime and areas where the youth tour visited. There was no clear link to race when talking about experience regarding knife crime – kids were worried about older kids primarily in areas such as parks/recreational areas.
7. Where there were discussions around gangs/areas it was said by some young people that being involved in this activity is seen and felt a positive thing for them.
8. Young people with learning difficulties may be at a higher risk of carrying knives as they do not understand the consequences to doing so. These young people may slip through the net so to speak for being identified as at risk by professionals and older people who are around them, this includes police regarding stop and search.
9. There did not appear to be an integrated sense of belonging between older kids and younger kids; leaving the younger kids anxious. This is where community based initiatives such as youth clubs, community activities, school activities/clubs could be something put in place to bring them together.
10. Knife crime may scare/worry and affect young people's mental health (Primary school). There are sessions that can be delivered to the student that could teach the skills that they need and as a result would decrease the chances of them being involved in knife crime.
11. Young people do not feel safe on the streets. There for reform with regards to sense of communities; whether it be from the police, a

project or the community; funding can be pooled and made best use of.

12. Some students were labelled as high risk but showed no signs of potentially being involved in knife crime
13. Some places felt that there was no reason for low-risk children to be educated on knife crime.
14. I asked 10 educational facilities to take part in the tour, 4 out of the 10 did not respond to let me know if they would participate. Like it or not we do have a problem with knife crime, not only in Sheffield but the whole of the UK. Educational establishments ignoring it will not make it go away, in fact it is putting their students at risk. This was a free offering that for the schools who took part, made a huge impact on developing their young people's education around keeping themselves safe and knowing where to go to access resources should they need to.
15. 5 Out of the 6 establishments provided artwork as agreed. This made me feel like the exhibition was partially being used by some schools as a box ticking exercise and not actually for the benefit of the students.
16. 2 5 establishments attended the awards ceremony. This was an event provided to give students the chance to go somewhere new and meet some very inspirational people. It appeared easy for establishments to pick out those at risk of knife crime but did not appear to put the resource or effort to support their young people to attend the event that may have changed their whole thought process.

CONCLUSION



The Cutting Edge Youth Tour Exhibition – the first of its kind was a success in terms that it positively triggered discussions around knife crime that is usually seen as a taboo subject; due to it not being in the curriculum as I deliver it. I allowed discussions around knife crime and its affects in open forums to young people who were in need of someone to reach out to as well as those who didn't think it can affect them due to their opinion that they are not in a gang, therefore they feel that they are safe.

The students really engaged in discussions around what they thought of the exhibition and knife crime. This reinforced what I already knew; that knife crime is alive and amongst our young people and as time goes on, they will become increasingly desensitised to it.

I have personally seen the increase of serious violence in schools over the years and I believe we are near to breaking point.

To support intervention and prevention, Schools require appropriate amounts of funding, resources and support to enable them to play a fundamental part in tackling these issues, not only with their young

There is a clear case for Education around knife crime to be delivered in all educational facilities. Understandably this is largely untested territory in terms of delivery in a primary school. However, as I have

evidenced, the workshops can be altered to suit the audience and young people can learn given the right approach and materials.

Schools can think about how they deliver education around youth violence in a different way; this can be looking at how young people react in a conflicting situation or exploring how they feel outside of school – are they feeling safe? Do they know who they can confide in if they need to talk to someone about how they're feeling? What are their wishes and feelings around being educated around youth violence? There are many unanswered questions which I can't help but feel this wouldn't be the case if the same questions were being asked about a Maths lesson!

We need to build stronger, safer communities, ones where we are able to let our young people live without fear of being in a fight; the possibility of being stabbed or seeing someone being stabbed.

There is a strong yet unfounded belief amongst school aged children that knife crime and gang culture come hand in hand. Most of my sessions with young people evidenced this train of thought. Again, unfortunately this opinion is one to be challenged as untrue and unsafe. Teachers appear to underestimate the impact they can have on educating our young people around such issues. I have previously delivered training to professionals in education and its useful to know that they don't always understand the impact that knife crime has amongst the young people they see daily; within school and their communities. A solution to this issue would be to develop a rolling training programme for teaching professionals to enable them to address knife crime related issues directly with their students; to enable students to have confidence in a trusted adult who knows where to find

further support and advice around knife crime and challenging their peers mindsets.

There is a clear need for better partnership working, in most schools, between them, their local community initiatives and specialised services, including youth services. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that some teachers in some schools weren't aware of support for young people in the local vicinity; such as youth clubs, specialist services, including my service which has been established for 4 years. Teachers' feedback was that if they had known, they would share the information with their students to ensure they had meaningful activities outside of school and were able to keep themselves safe in their communities.

I was lucky enough that my exhibition was facilitated in 6 schools across Sheffield, this reached around 20,000 people, 17,000 of which being students. I was blown away by the number of people I was able to reach! Considering there's over 550,000 people (<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/your-city-council/population-in-sheffield>) living in Sheffield, we still have a long way to go in terms of educating our City. I am fortunate enough to have been requested to broaden the audience of the exhibition and will be delivering sessions and visiting 10 more educational facilities over the next few months; focusing on schools. However, there are universities, youth groups, statutory organisations and academics who want to be involved in terms of research, findings and ensuring these topics continue to be driven forward to make our young people safer.

I do believe we can make our young people safer, through education, support, working together and engaging to ensure initiatives like the Youth Tour are delivered to as many young people as is possible.

THE NEXT STEPS

Create a clear and consistent message regarding knife crime where all agencies can be singing from the same hymn sheet.

Work with schools to create a way to enable students to be viewed as high risk.

Find out what support is there for students that are at high risk of being involved with knife crime.

Teach young people how to manage conflict correctly and de-escalation skills.

More support to/from school for those students at risk of becoming involved in knife crime.

Continue with the mobile youth club as it can play a major part in engaging with hard-to-reach young people, bridge the gap between police and other agencies and support communities

Attach a financial penalty to schools if they do not adhere to fully supporting young people to fulfil the agreement with free projects.

Teacher training in line with Safeguarding requirements should be rolled out in all schools to ensure they can support students appropriately.

Include young people in all initiatives moving forward. "The Young Persons Voice".