



# Knife crime: the wrong question

52 people have been killed in London already in 2018, almost all stabbed.

Invariably, discussions seem to turn to the police and the criminal justice system, such as the use of 'stop and search' or sentencing: are the prison sentences for using knives sufficiently high to deter future criminals?

And these are relevant to the situation, but my sense is that they are relatively insignificant. Once gang warfare has started up, and once young people find the rules of gangs part of the social geography of where they live, then policing is almost impossible. Typically, loads of people know who committed X or Y's murder; typically, nobody will tell the police, either out of fear, or just out of the desire not to be a snitch. And, unlike guns, it's hard to get knives 'off the streets'. Every kitchen has several knives that can be used as weapons by people who choose to do so.

Rather, I'd suggest, the answer is much more prosaic; it lies in something that might be termed 'youth services'. Since 2011, the average spend in London Councils on youth services has gone down by 35%.

On the surface, it's a relatively easy budget saving to make. For who complains?

Six years ago, I was running a football project for young people in Vauxhall. It wasn't especially grand: a dozen teenagers playing football and then baking cakes (believe it or not) in the church hall. We'd use

one of the local parks to play on.

But then, literally, someone turned out the lights. What had been a flood-lit 5-a-side pitch was now no longer lit.

I tried writing to the Council but got nowhere. And, of course, the young people didn't write to anyone. When you're that age, you don't. You just put up with stuff. So the project struggled.

In many ways, I don't think young males are that complex. They've got energy to burn and that energy has to go somewhere. Give them something absorbing, and they will throw themselves into it: football projects are good across the class and ethnic divide, but it can be anything: scouts, rock climbing, bicycle repair, karate, snooker... Young men will spend phenomenal amounts of time on activities that everyone else would find pretty boring.

Cut out the routes into those activities, though, and they've still got energy: it just goes into less healthy pursuits. The devil makes works for idle hands, as the saying goes.

It's easy to ignore: if the rubbish collection stops, the Council will receive heaps of letters and phone calls; ditto school places. Forget to change the light bulbs on a 5-a-side pitch, or cut the youth provision, and the Council won't hear a thing. That doesn't mean it doesn't matter or make a difference. It makes all the difference. We're seeing that now.

*April 2018. for the Train is a short column by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*