Street crime and teenagers - what can research tell us?

Knife crime and other types of street violence are in the headlines nearly every day. Are the media stirring up anxiety unnecessarily? In this series we look at three studies, two about the present and one historical. There are both overlaps and contradictions to be found in these findings, as well as parallels and contrasts with Victorian times.

The facts

Statistics from the British Crime Survey show that crimes involving knives have remained stable over the past decade – around six to seven per cent of all crime. In London the Metropolitan Police’s most recent survey showed that knife crime had actually dropped over the past two years, from 12,122 to 10,220 incidents.

That is only part of the story for young people. As The Guardian reported in May 2008, knife crime affects young people disproportionately. Teenagers between 17 and 20 are the most likely victims, and there has been an increase in violent crimes committed by 15 and 16 year olds.

Gun crime is also decreasing nationally, down 14 per cent in 2006-07. But nine young people lost their lives in shootings in 2007, including 11 year old Rhys Jones.

The issues

Teenagers are arming themselves for protection, according to newspaper reports, but also for status. A 17 year old boy told The Telegraph: “It used to be that you only worried about getting into a fight with someone, but now you worry about someone pulling a knife on you. So it’s catching, isn’t it? I reckon that for a lot of people my age, it’s not really about violence, it’s just the cool thing to do.”

David Lammy MP, the Minister of State for Higher Education and Intellectual Property, is worried about the link between knives and status. Lammy, described as Britain’s most senior black MP, wrote in the New Statesman: “In the warped world of gang culture, carrying a weapon has come to be associated with being a man. Rather than being seen as a risk, the knife confers ‘respect’.”

He writes of the need for male role models and the pressures of consumerism. “In a ‘bling’ culture, criminality becomes a short cut to symbols of wealth and power…” he says.

In 2002, The Observer estimated that about 30,000 young people were in gangs.

What do gang members themselves have to say about street crime? Are we making assumptions that do not stand up to scrutiny? How does street crime today differ from in the past, and how have attitudes to it changed? Research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) helps to illuminate such questions.

Further information

http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk
http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/may/13/uk.crime.boris

STATISTICS

- 11.3 million crimes were committed in 2006-07. This is a fall of eight million since 1995
- Crimes involving firearms have increased in recent years
- Two in three people believe that crime nationally has increased in the last two years (even though it hasn’t)
- Theft and handling, burglaries and criminal damage account for three quarters of all crimes
- Sexual offences, violence against the person and robbery account for less than one quarter

(Britain at a Glance 2008)