



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Gangs and youth crime](#), HC 199

Tuesday 10 June 2014

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair), Ian Austin, Nicola Blackwood, Mr James Clappison, Michael Ellis, Paul Flynn, Dr Julian Huppert, Mark Reckless, Mr David Winnick.

Questions 1 - 74

Witness: **Edward Boyd**, Deputy Policy Director, Centre for Social Justice, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: I call the Committee to order, and ask any member to declare any matters that are of interest to them in respect of the Register of Members' Interests that are not declared in the register.

I welcome Edward Boyd, the Deputy Policy Director for the Centre for Social Justice. You are our very first witness in what we hope will be a major inquiry into gangs, and we are delighted to have you here today. You produced a report, in 2012, entitled *Time to Wake Up*. Have the Government and the relevant authorities now woken up to the issues that you raised during that inquiry?

Edward Boyd: In some areas, yes; in some areas I think there is still a bit more to do. Can I start by just setting the context for that report? We had a later one that came out as well—*Girls and Gangs*. All the reports that we do are from the experts that the CSJ works with but we rely heavily on voluntary organisations, 350 of them who are part of our alliance. When we did *Time to Wake Up*, *Girls and Gangs* and these other reports, we spent a lot of time with current gang members, former gang members and organisations working with them. So while we would love to claim all the wisdom is CSJ's, a lot of it is garnered from people working in that front line experiencing this day to day.

Q2 Chair: Of course. We read the relevant reports and we will be asking you questions about them as we proceed during the session. I think most people would be shocked to know that 20 young people a week are either stabbed or shot in London—at least that was the figure for last year—and that last year the A&E services were called out through the Ambulance Service to treat 973 victims under the age of 25. Those are very serious figures: 20 a week and 900 young people being the subject of either gun or knife attacks.

Edward Boyd: Yes.

Chair: Is this on the increase? Do we have cause for concern about what is happening? We read regularly in newspapers like the *Evening Standard* about the issues of gang and gun crime. Is this on the increase?

Edward Boyd: Since the Ending Gang and Youth Violence strategy came out a year before our *Time to Wake Up* paper came out, we surveyed our alliance members and asked them exactly this question. More felt it had got worse than better in that year, although only marginally so. Since then, in doing our *Girls and Gangs* piece most recently, we asked this question naturally as we met up with people. What we heard from them was a worry that there was increasing fragmentation within gangs. Normally you get a pyramid structure within gang hierarchies and as the enforcement approach, Trident in the Met, Excalibur in the Greater Manchester Police and in other gang affected areas, took out the oldies—the top people at the top of the gang—what happened in quite a few areas was an increase in violence, so we were told, as people fought within a gang to get to the top of it but also that kind of control at the top, which actually limited some of that violence, went away. So, from what we have heard, it is definitely not getting better and potentially getting worse.

Q3 Chair: You talked a little about the structure of gangs. They seem highly organised in the way in which they conduct their work. Is that what you found, that when you talk about gangs you are talking about an organised structure rather than an ad hoc get together of a few individuals at the end of the day?

Edward Boyd: You cannot say one or the other. I think it varies hugely. We came across highly organised criminal enterprises based on drugs trades. Others are loosely gangs where it is friends who meet up, who get involved in anti-social behaviour and it is far more ad hoc, so I am not sure there is one way you can typify them.

Q4 Chair: But you are telling this Committee that you are concerned that this might be on the increase.

Edward Boyd: That is what we have heard.

Q5 Chair: Is this something that is peculiar to London—because the figures I gave you were for London—or is this happening in other parts of the country?

Edward Boyd: I think it is undeniable that the biggest issue is within London, but we have found with certainty that it is not just London where there is a problem. There are issues within places like Luton, Greater Manchester Police have problems and there are issues in the West Midlands as well. The biggest part of the problem is here but it is definitely not the only place.

Q6 Chair: As far as the numbers are concerned, could you give this Committee a rough estimate of the numbers of gangs there are operating, even if it is just for London?

Edward Boyd: I would go so far as to say there are no really reliable estimates, and the reason is that we still do not, across each police force area, properly say, “This is what a gang is and this is what a gang isn’t”. What we might call a gang in one area you might not call a gang in another area, so it is not hugely reliable out there. You are looking at around 50,000 individuals, but that is a very rough estimate.

Q7 Chair: So 50,000 individuals involved in gang-related activity, whatever that might be?

Edward Boyd: Yes.

Q8 Chair: No figure as to how many gangs they might be part of?

Edward Boyd: I can come back to you with that. I am not aware that there is one that is wholly accurate.

Chair: That would be very helpful.

Edward Boyd: Sure.

Q9 Chair: Give us examples of the type of gangs that people might join. Some of us are old enough to remember *West Side Story*, so we know those kind of gangs.

Edward Boyd: Well, we did not come across too many dancing gangs.

Chair: Make it relevant to us today. What kind of gangs do they join? Is it on religious lines? Is it on race lines? Is it age related? Give us some examples.

Edward Boyd: What we have seen in going out—and bear in mind this is anecdotal from people that we spoke to in London and elsewhere—is people will join a gang largely on the basis of the geographic location that they come from and the people that they grew up with. It is quite interesting that some of the people that we speak to, who used to head up gangs, or are currently involved, will describe themselves as being in a gang and some will say, “Look, these are just my friends”. A lot of them come from quite deprived communities, broken homes, and they will look for a family that can support them, that can build them up, that they can feel part of. They see a gang as being, first and foremost, a set of relationships, a family they can belong to, and the type of gang is one where you build up this family base together within a geographic location.

They will quite often find other people will do so in similar locations round their area and there will be animosity between those groups as they look to protect their location, their geography, their postcode, and look to commit crime in order to fund things that they want to do, be it things along the line of drugs but also to buy cars or something on those lines. So the criminal activity is almost a means to an end from those that we are speaking to.

Q10 Chair: As far as you are concerned, have the Home Office programmes been successful? The latest one is the Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme. Have they been successful? Is this the end to the drift that you were talking about in 2012?

Edward Boyd: We were delighted when the Ending Gang and Youth Violence strategy came out. We did a report prior to *Time to Wake Up* called *Dying to Belong* in 2009 and, along with many other people pushing for this, tried to make sure that gangs were at the centre of public policymaking. I think that, combined with the riots, led for the first time to the Ending Gang and Youth Violence strategy or programme that said, “We have an issue here”. The first and most important thing it did was it said, “Look, we have an issue. Let’s look to deal with it”. So we were very impressed with that. I think it was right that that programme led to the beefing up of Trident within the Metropolitan Police and other areas to make sure there is a strong enforcement approach.

One area where I do not think we have fully done what we need to is make sure that, alongside that enforcement, there is a strong voluntary sector presence and strong support, not just to prevent people from getting into gangs but to help people to exit. We have copied parts of a model, from Boston Police originally, called Operation Ceasefire, and parts of that are working well. I think we still need to find a way of working better between the voluntary statutory services to make that work. That is a strong area for improvement and the other main area is with girls associated with gangs as well.

Chair: Yes, we will come on to all those areas.

Q11 Mr Winnick: The rather unfortunate phrase “black on black” has been mentioned by witnesses at previous inquiries in which we have looked into gangs. In other words, the offenders are black and the culprits, the casualties, are black. Do you think there is any substance to using that phrase to the extent that the casualties as well as the offenders in the main are black?

Edward Boyd: That is not an area that we have looked at in detail. The one point that might be worth making is that of the number of current and former gang members we have spoken to as a result of our research, there are people from a number of ethnic backgrounds. So from what we have seen it does not substantiate that.

Q12 Mark Reckless: What would be a typical size of a gang? How many members might the average gang have?

Edward Boyd: It can vary hugely from three or four to far more than that. It is quite difficult to answer that question. We have a definition of what a gang is, but it is not used widely across every different police force area so it is very difficult to typify what a gang is let alone what size it is. But I think from three or four upwards is about the size that would constitute a gang.

Q13 Mark Reckless: Will you write to us, because if we had that number we could then clearly infer the number of gangs from your 50,000 number? If you were able to give us a written estimate, I think with any basis, that would be very useful to the Committee.

Edward Boyd: Yes, I am happy to do so.

Q14 Mark Reckless: The CSJ has argued, “It is important that there are effective partnerships between schools with gang problems and their voluntary and statutory partners, with the resources and expertise to help them tackle the problem”. What does that mean?

Edward Boyd: A number of the people that we spoke to—this is in our *Girls and Gangs* research and *Time to Wake Up*—said that some schools were open to support from the voluntary sector, charities who work with gang members, to help exit people from these cultures and these gangs, but there were a number of schools where there were gang problems and they were not admitting it because they were worried, first and foremost, “What does that do for the reputation of the school if you say that you have a gang problem?” The first thing I think is the recognition within the schools where there is a problem that there is a problem so that you can bring in people who are experts, who are skilled in mentoring people. That is a very important part of getting people out, but also linking people up with statutory services and other things that they need to help exit gang life.

Q15 Mark Reckless: What about the police?

Edward Boyd: In what context, sorry?

Mark Reckless: In dealing with these gangs, shouldn’t this be a key role for the police? If we are talking about voluntary agencies and charitable support and perhaps not publicising in case that affects the reputation of the school, isn’t this a problem and an issue that the police need to be tackling and the schools should be supporting the police in their work? Is the problem that that is not happening at the moment?

Edward Boyd: Yes. In our paper we suggest that the police and crime commissioners are the ones that should take the lead in identifying, if somebody has a gang problem, first, is it being enforced properly and, second, are people being supported to leave? I cannot make the point enough that the two need to go hand in hand, the enforcement side and the support to leave, otherwise you end up with quite toxic situations within gang life.

Q16 Mark Reckless: You see the PCCs as the point people, being the link between the police and these other agencies and the schools?

Edward Boyd: I do.

Mark Reckless: Thank you.

Q17 Nicola Blackwood: You touched quite a lot, Mr Boyd, on the problem facing girls in gangs and the fact that this is one of the areas of the Government strategy that is significantly in need of improvement. You have also stated in your report *Girls and Gangs* that, “The suffering of girls goes largely unnoticed. They live in a parallel world where rape is used as a weapon and carrying drugs and guns is seen as normal”. I know that in the Government’s Ending Gang and Youth Violence strategy they did allocate £1.2 million to improving

services for sectoral violence, particularly focused in urban areas and with a focus on women and girls, but what else do you think needs to be done to try to improve the situation?

Edward Boyd: The first thing that needs to be done is we need to understand it better. What we did in our work was scratched the surface of a problem, combined with the work the Children's Commissioner had already done, to show there were at least, 2,409 girls who were sexually exploited by gangs and groups in 2010-11 and possibly 16,500 more.¹ In scratching the surface, we heard the stories from some people there.

One of the shocking things at the moment is, while the Ending Gang and Youth Violence strategy sets out, "We need to understand this problem better. We need to map it. We need to know which females are connected with which male gang members", I think our criticism would be that not enough has been done. There has not been enough urgency in order to understand this better.

One of the things we identified in our paper is that the Ending Gang and Youth Violence annual report at the end of last year marked out that Greater Manchester Police were leading the effort to identify which females were connected with which male gang nominals and would set up the best practice way that other forces could copy and do this. We spoke to Greater Manchester Police and found out that all they had done was one conference back in 2012 and used three days and one researcher's time, and that was all they had done to map it. So the language is right, the ambition is right, but there needs to be far more urgency on the ground to understand it.

A second thing we believe needs to be done is the need to scale and replicate what we believe are some good programmes happening in St Thomas' Hospital and King's College Hospital, where voluntary organisations are embedded within those hospitals. Given the lifestyle many girls in gangs lead, where there are high levels of domestic violence and sexual exploitation, girls are quite often coming into A&E departments. It is a great window of opportunity to identify victims of sexual exploitation and domestic violence, make sure very quickly that a voluntary organisation gets support to them, and if they are embedded they can get access to medical records as well so they can have a complete picture of the person. That has proved remarkably effective because it is quite a teachable moment for those individuals. It needs to be expanded and scaled as well.

Q18 Nicola Blackwood: You have mentioned the fact that girls would be exposed probably to sexual exploitation and domestic violence. We already have strategies for ending violence against women and girls that is largely focused on domestic abuse but also includes child sexual exploitation as well, and there is also coming a new national action plan to tackle child sexual exploitation. How well integrated are all of these disparate action plans and how well targeted are they for this specific group of young girls who are dealing with perhaps more difficult to access challenges?

Edward Boyd: The piece of work we did was a 30-page piece of research, not a 200-page research document, that looked at all of those elements and we did look at that integration part. What we can say from the work we have done is that this is a huge problem and scratching the surface we see just how, to be honest, terrifying it is. When you speak to

¹ Note by witness: In this I said 2,409 girls were sexually exploited. The Children's Commissioner figure was actually for both genders, although the overwhelming majority were girls.

many of these girls it is very difficult to see how any action plan at the moment is tackling it because many of them are not reporting it, either out of fear of retribution or, to be frank, the sense that people go into a relationship expecting that to take place. It is very normalised. Many of them we spoke to said they came from broken homes where either their parents did not have a healthy relationship or they were being looked after by one parent, so they got their idea of what relationships looked like from their peers. They included issues of sexual exploitation, domestic violence, so they assumed that that was the norm. Unless you start to understand that in some cases it is not seen as wrong but it is almost, “What are you going to do? This is how it is”, it is very difficult to see, if these things are not being reported, the statutory sector are not being brought into these situations, how an action plan could tackle that.

Q19 Nicola Blackwood: You have already made the point of targeting A&E as a good point for intervention, and obviously that could be included within an action plan and normalised throughout the three different plans. But what about MASHs or colocated units? They have proved extremely effective for child sexual exploitation and a very good way of identifying victims much earlier in the process and making sure that if a victim is identified by health or education or police or social services, that information can be very quickly shared between all the different agencies. It is a much more effective way of making sure the intelligence doesn't slip between the agencies, which is what was regularly happening with girls who are not necessarily involved with gangs in the formal sense but it is a very similar dynamic. Is that the sort of end you are after?

Edward Boyd: It is part of the answer. We definitely support them. One thing that we found, though, is the reluctance to share; take A&E as an example. One of the reasons why the voluntary organisations there—Redthread and the Oasis Trust—say it makes such a big difference is because they are voluntary organisations. They do not have minimum standards before they work with somebody. If someone is reporting something that would not meet the threshold for statutory services to get involved, they can still choose to work with them. What they are finding is someone might say something small, like, “Oh yes, I was raped. Something did happen to me but it is not that serious. It is okay”. As they start to work with them with that standard of evidence, more comes out over time.

We spoke to one girl, for example, who said, “Do you know, it wasn't until seven months of being in a mentoring relationship with someone with whom I built a relationship on that basis that I told them what was actually going on”. So I think, yes, that is part of the answer but you also need the voluntary sector involved because they can work in a far more relational, flexible manner.

Nicola Blackwood: I think most of the MASHs are at least referring to the voluntary sector, if not involving them directly, which I think is the ideal formula, but thank you.

Q20 Chair: Did you give Nicola Blackwood a figure as to how many of the 50,000 you estimate are girls? You gave us a figure of 50,000.

Edward Boyd: The Children's Commissioner came up with an estimate of 12,500 girls involved in gangs. From our research into it, I think we need a far more robust estimate. I

don't think it is accurate enough. For example, we don't know where those girls are. We don't know how robust that is, and one of the biggest things we are calling for is a better understanding of this issue at the moment because the numbers are so vague.

Q21 Chair: Are there any examples you have come across of girl gangs, gangs just consisting of girls; they won't let boys in?

Edward Boyd: Yes, we came across a couple of examples of people who used to lead girls gangs or who were involved in them. On the whole, though, we found that they were rare rather than the norm. In general, the way that girls get involved in gangs is typically through relationships with male gang members. That is by far the majority way that people seem to be getting involved in gangs, and their relationship is very different. Their role within a gang is very different, typically, than male gang members.

Q22 Paul Flynn: You said things are getting worse. Why is that?

Edward Boyd: What I said was, from speaking with our alliance charities and those working with them, it is either not getting better or it is potentially getting worse.

Q23 Paul Flynn: One gang member in London, one leader of a gang, went before a court, then a prison sentence and then was strongly recommended for deportation to his own country by the judge. The Home Office couldn't do this because they could not identify his home country, and he has been sent now to Wales to a city that has no gang culture. Do you think this is a legitimate cure for solving London's problems by dumping them in Wales?

Edward Boyd: I don't think sending all gang members to Wales would work. We did not look at that case.

Q24 Paul Flynn: Another little problem is that the Government, in their wisdom or otherwise, have just decided to criminalise a drug, khat, that has been used for decades as a legal drug in Yemeni and Somali communities. As you say, many of the gangs are built around the illegal drug trade. Will this be a new opportunity for new gangs to form to deal in what is now an illegal khat business?

Edward Boyd: I am afraid our research didn't look into that. I am happy to have a look into it and perhaps write back in but I cannot answer that one now.

Q25 Paul Flynn: Are you on mission impossible? Would you agree that a gang is group of people with a common background, common interests, from a community uniting in a common purpose?

Edward Boyd: I would suggest, yes, those are all characteristics of gangs.

Q26 Paul Flynn: That is a definition of the big society. Isn't it true that, whether they unite in leafy villages to do floral arranging or dance around the maypole, people will group

together in organisations of this kind, and that the failure of throwing money at it—which is what we seem to be doing in the last few years—means that it is a problem, the extent of which is underestimated by the Government or not understood?

Edward Boyd: If I understand you right, what I think we need to be careful not to conflate is it is fine for people to have strong communities and groups that gather together, but what separates gangs out from everything else is you have a huge level of sexual exploitation, criminality ranging from anti-social behaviour to knife crime to people being killed and shot. I think those are the things that separate out gangs from everybody else and the reason why we want to tackle them.

Q27 Paul Flynn: Yes. The Government took an interest in this when the riots took place in London. It was said at the time that one of the main causes for the riots was a sense of injustice among many of the gang members, and there is great evidence that the way that members of black and Asian communities are stopped and searched is wholly disproportionate to the offences they might cause or the number of convictions made. Is that sense of injustice one of the great causes of the spread of gangs and the problems that we have with gangs?

Edward Boyd: So is the question around stop and search and what effect that has?

Paul Flynn: Yes.

Edward Boyd: There are a couple of things we found on stop and search. I think there is definitely a feeling from those in gangs and also in the private communities that stop and search is used too frequently. A corollary to this—which we found in our *Girls and Gangs* work, which I think we put forward as evidence rather than any conclusion—is that in the eight police forces that cover the 33 priority areas of the Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme, 95% of stop and searches happen on men, 5% on women. What we were hearing from former gang members, from voluntary organisations working with them, is that that incentivised the girls and the women to be the ones to carry the guns and the drugs because they are far less likely to get caught. If nothing else, that serves to highlight that this is an incredibly complex problem.

Q28 Paul Flynn: Yes, I read that in your evidence. Have you read the report—not by the police, who are not the most reliable people on this, almost disinterested—by Release, the drugs charity, on how excessive stop and searches on black and Asian people are, particularly in London?

Edward Boyd: I haven't read that, I am afraid.

Q29 Mr Clappison: I am getting the feeling, from what you are telling us, that there has been too much acceptance of a certain amount of gang activity taking place. It has been compartmentalised by the public and perhaps by the media who accept that it is taking place, when it is really something that is deeply depressing and awful for the people concerned, for the girls and for the boys, often leading to violence and death. Do you think there has been too much acceptance of this, perhaps occasionally—as during the riots—people blaming the

gangs for other things that have happened, but too much acceptance that this is going on in some quarters when it is not acceptable at all?

Edward Boyd: I am not sure I would use the word “acceptance”. I think “hidden” is the best word we can use here.

Mr Clappison: Yes. That is a good word.

Edward Boyd: It is almost a parallel world.

Mr Clappison: That is very good. I like it.

Edward Boyd: Can I paint an example of that, which might highlight it?

Mr Clappison: Yes.

Edward Boyd: When we were doing the *Girls and Gangs* work there was a good friend in the Centre for Social Justice who was advising us. He used to be involved in gangs and is now working to try to tackle issues within gangs. While he was advising us in a local area—I live in London—one of his good friends was stabbed in the heart and died, and it was his funeral last week. This person was killed within half a mile of where I live and I would not have heard about it if it wasn’t for my friend. This is happening all around us. I was struck by that poignant example. If I am so involved in trying to develop research in this area to try to help tackle the issue, and I do not know about something happening half a mile away from me, how on earth does everybody else, and actually making sure that this is an issue that people realise is happening, despite it not being right in front of our faces? That is one of the things we want to get across.

Mr Clappison: Can I say I accept that your word “hidden” is a much better word than the word I used. I think it is a very good description you have just given us. Thank you.

Q30 Ian Austin: I am interested to know whether there has ever been any research done to establish whether there is any correlation between educational standards in an area and the prevalence of gang crime in an area? It would seem to me that if people are doing well at school, going on to college, planning to go to university, they are ambitious for their future, they have all sorts of ideas and aspirations of what they want to achieve, they are less likely to become involved in this sort of gang-related activity. Is there any evidence for that or not?

Edward Boyd: There is evidence of a few things surrounding that, which maybe you could piece together to something like that. The Centre for Mental Health did a study and found that those who were part of a gang were three times more likely to fail in their studies than regular entrants to the criminal justice system. We spoke to a number of head teachers and people referral units and the constant message that we got back was someone can be very bright, they can be following their dreams—and this is mainly related to girls because that is the context of this part of the conversations we had with them—some of the brightest people were doing very well in exams and then they would suddenly see them get involved in gangs. Their behaviour would change. They would start coming in and they would be very aware they were potentially taking drugs and legal highs, khats, those sorts of things on them, and their grades would just plummet because, in the words of a couple

of the girls that we spoke to, their ambition had changed. Now they wanted to be going out with this bad boy that they had met. It was very exciting. There were lots of financial benefits from going out with a gang member, and they saw that as ambition rather than their studies.

I think what I would draw from that is that education is extremely important, if not the most important thing, to try to give people a route out of gang life. Making sure that there are good schools in the most deprived areas, where there are far more gangs, is extremely important in tackling this.

Q31 Ian Austin: Very quickly, what is your assessment of the police's response to gang-related crime?

Edward Boyd: I think since the Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme came in there has been a greater awareness from the police; there has been a greater focus on it. They have found evidence for and arrested more gang members than previously, and that is a very good thing. However, I think what is crucial is that that does not happen in isolation. At the same time as you are taking out the high honchos of a gang, you are saying to people in the gangs, "Look, the same thing will happen to you unless you exit this kind of life. Here is the support to do so. Here is the voluntary organisation you can partner up with. Here is the route into education or employment or rehousing if you need to get out of that area, because if you stay there you are likely to be stabbed or shot". So, good on the enforcement side but it needs to be combined with a far stronger connection with the voluntary sector and others supporting people to exit gang life.

Q32 Mr Winnick: Mr Boyd, you have mentioned that there was a programme where 188 young people were on the verge of exclusion from school, and after 12 months the good news was that 70% of those people were in education. What was done during that time to persuade them to return to education?

Edward Boyd: You are referring to the XLP mentoring scheme, I think, from those numbers. XLP, like a number of voluntary organisations, work with what is best described as mentoring. I am aware that that is quite a broad term. They work very relationally with a person, catching up regularly with them, helping them realise an ambition that is separate from gang life, and potentially criminality, and saying, "Here is how you can advance your studies. Let me help you with this. Here is how you can advance in your job. Let me help you with this". It would be worth speaking to them if you are interested in detail, but what they basically did is they formed a positive relationship with individuals who were in gangs or at risk of being involved in gangs, and helped support them into another and better life and that is what helps keep them in education.

Q33 Mr Winnick: One of my colleagues has asked you about education. The Home Affairs Committee were shown a film—this was in the closing stages of the last Parliament and I think the Chair will remember it—given at schools with a youngster feeling very angry. The end result is he stabbed somebody with the result, of course, that he is brought to court, found guilty and will spend a great deal of time in prison. It is a fictional account. How far do you think these sorts of educational films—if you like to call them such—would persuade school pupils to disengage, if they are engaged, from gangs of various kinds?

Edward Boyd: I think they have a role to play. We found in our *Girls and Gangs* work that one of the things that led to getting involved in carrying guns, carrying drugs, the criminal side of a gang, was a complete lack of awareness of what the consequences were. The more that can be done to make people realise, “Do you know what you are getting involved in?” especially around the issues of joint enterprise, which can be quite complex, making sure people understand that, is extremely important.

But I think we cannot stop it just by showing videos in classrooms. One of the things we found to be really effective—going back to your first question—is mentoring and making sure that with people who are in gangs and at risk of joining gangs, you can build strong relationships that lead them away from that kind of lifestyle as well.

Q34 Mr Winnick: Do you feel that the Government, whichever Government happens to be in office at any given time, can be more effective in trying to deal with what is often—as the Chair said at the beginning—the deaths of so many in a given year, youngsters often, what are they, 14, 15, 16, certainly, in many instances under 20? Do you think Governments can do more?

Edward Boyd: I think Governments probably can always do more. It is very tricky to do so but, as an example, one area I might look at where we can improve things slightly is the manner in which we use the money we have set aside to help voluntary organisations. For example, at the moment we give out a certain sum of money and it is generally for a year. I was speaking to one voluntary organisation this morning who said they got money for six weeks for a programme to help build the self-esteem of people so that they wouldn’t join gangs. I don’t know about you, but I find six weeks is probably not enough to tackle self-esteem issues and actually turn someone’s life around. I think the length of funding, not solely the amount, is really important to make sure that people can build long-term relationships with people to discourage them from joining gangs.

Q35 Mr Winnick: Obviously gangs will continue and no one imagines for one moment they will be eliminated as such, but how optimistic are you that there will be a reduction in gangs and particularly in gang warfare often leading to serious injuries and deaths?

Edward Boyd: I am an eternal optimist and I think what needs to happen to make sure that is the case is we need to map what is happening with girls with gangs more and, as well as increasingly strong enforcement approach from the police, we need to make sure that there is better support for people to exit gang life. If we do those two things then I think we are likely to see that kind of result.

Q36 Mr Winnick: Finally do you think the Metropolitan Police are doing an effective job, considering what has been happening on the London streets for some time?

Edward Boyd: I think we have been encouraged that they have made gangs a central issue for them and that they have had a strong enforcement approach. As I said before, we would encourage them to work more hand in hand with the voluntary sector to make sure that the two are going along side by side.

Q37 Michael Ellis: The crime rate in the Metropolitan Police area has dropped significantly, and I noted some figures where shooting incidents are down dramatically in the Metropolitan Police area. That must be something of an achievement perhaps you will give the Metropolitan Police.

Edward Boyd: Yes.

Q38 Michael Ellis: Can I ask you a bit about stop and search and expand a little on what you have already said and what is in your report about this issue of pressure on perhaps the girls in gangs carrying contraband items because it is less likely that they will be stopped and searched? I would suggest that might also apply to some of the younger members who might be considered less likely to be stopped, including people below the age of 10 who are not legally culpable for criminal offences in this country. Is that something that relates to your experience and research?

Edward Boyd: As I said before, I think this is an issue. Almost purposely we haven't mapped out a solution because in a short research paper we felt we couldn't give it justice. We were aware that when HMIC did their review of stop and search this was not a big thing that went into their consideration around recommendations for reform. One of our recommendations is to look at it again in the light of the evidence that we have come out with as a result of our study and ask how we can mitigate that incentive for girls to carry. I think it is important to say it does not necessarily lead to a call for more girls to be stopped and searched. Actually it could lead to fewer men being stopped and searched, but what is important is that we think about how we can tackle this in the light of the other reforms I know are taking place around stop and search.

A second thing to say is the reflections that we got back on stop and search on the whole were that, yes, it does have a part to play but it does need reform to make sure that it is more effectively targeted at those most likely to be holding guns, drugs and other contraband items.

Q39 Michael Ellis: Yes. Of course, it is not an easy equation for police officers on the beat to make necessarily. You mention the most likely people to be carrying items, but that has to be reflected at street level as well in terms of the experience of a police officer. Can I ask you briefly about sentencing? Is there any observation that you would want to make about the issue of sentencing relating to crime and criminal conduct within a gang? Clearly many of the individuals who have been involved in criminal activity and are in gangs are themselves, as individuals, perhaps quite vulnerable and, as you say, have very low self-esteem, may have themselves a very unhappy background in terms of their own history of perhaps physical or sexual abuse. Do you think there is anything that the courts can do about how they have been dealing with offences once they are discovered and prosecuted?

Edward Boyd: In the work that we have done across the two reports recently we haven't looked at that aspect of it. So, at the moment, no comment on that.

Michael Ellis: All right, I will leave it at that. Thank you.

Q40 Chair: Mr Boyd, thank you very much for giving evidence today. We are extremely grateful. If there is anything that you have missed out in terms of the evidence you have given us, we would be very pleased to hear from you. The inquiry commenced today will take about four months. It is our plan to visit another part of the United Kingdom, possibly Merseyside, but if you have suggestions of other areas that the Committee can visit then please do let us know, and if there are any potential witnesses you think would be of interest to us then please let us know. We are keen to speak to not just people like yourself, experts in this area, but also to gang members and former gang members who might be able to enlighten the Committee better on these issues.

Edward Boyd: Yes, I am very happy to do that.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are glad you were able to commence this inquiry for us.

Edward Boyd: Good. Thanks for having me in.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Sheldon Thomas**, Chief Executive Officer, Gangsline, gave evidence.

Q41 Chair: Mr Thomas, thank you very much for coming to give evidence to the Select Committee. As I said, we have just commenced our inquiry. You are our second witness, so we are at the very early stages. You have been the founder and the Chief Executive Officer of Gangsline. Can you tell us at the start roughly how many people telephone Gangsline on a weekly or monthly basis?

Sheldon Thomas: Gangsline first started out as an outreach many years ago when we decided that there were not enough organisations or individuals going on to estates, especially deprived no-go area estates in London and other parts of the country. So we started out as an outreach outfit going out into those communities and engaging with hardcore gang leaders and gang members. In fact, our employees are all ex-gang members.

Chair: Sorry, somebody has got a recording device on or a telephone that is playing back in the audience. Could you please switch off all those devices because it interferes with the broadcasting of this Committee? Thank you. Sorry, I apologise. Please continue.

Sheldon Thomas: So, what I am doing is just going back to the beginning of how we started. Basically, we are all ex-gang members ourselves.

Chair: Sorry, could I just ask who is the person responsible for that? Could you please leave the gallery and finish your call outside or whatever you are doing? When it is completed come back in. Thank you.

Sheldon Thomas: As I was saying, we are all ex-gang members ourselves and we felt at the time there were quite a lot of shootings, a lot of stabbings that were going on at the time that I believe could have been prevented with more direct outreach approach.

Q42 Chair: Indeed. Roughly how many people would ring Gangsline every week or every month?

Sheldon Thomas: At that time it was quite a lot. We got about perhaps 15 to 20 phone calls on average. Now it is a lot more.

Q43 Chair: An average every week?

Sheldon Thomas: Every week.

Chair: Every week?

Sheldon Thomas: Yes, at that time it was quite a lot because of—

Chair: But now?

Sheldon Thomas: Now it has most probably tapered off. It is most probably about, again, perhaps 15 to 20 phone calls a week on average. People phoning us up, either gang members phoning us up themselves or their parents or their mothers phone us up saying that they are quite scared, they don't know what to do. Some parents find guns in the house, "We're not sure what to do". So there are various reasons why, a lot of the time, people phone us.

Q44 Chair: Sure. We will explore some of these issues with other members of the Committee. You recently said that gang life is worse now than it has ever been, and you have criticised the bureaucrats and public sector workers who you say are driven by statistics and targets. That is pretty strong stuff. Why did you make those statements? Why do you think it is the case that it is worse than ever before?

Sheldon Thomas: I started gang life in 1976. I was 12 years old when I started my first gang in Brixton. At that time we started for a particular reason, which was to fight oppression, which was racist police officers and the National Front. We didn't feel safe from them, so we started gangs. That is how it started. We got involved in criminality when we found that there was no justice for us as black men in London. We turned to criminality because we believed that the way to get society back was to rebel against society by doing crimes, i.e. selling of drugs. As time went on, we imploded. We then began to turn in on ourselves, so what started out as a social response then became a criminal response, then became an implosion of young black men turning against each other in the battle for the drugs and the profit from drugs.

Obviously what we didn't know as young men at the time was that the actual real people that were making drugs didn't come from Brixton, Ensworth, Moss Side, Toxteth They lived in nice houses in areas where there were £2 million houses and they didn't look like us, and those were the real people that were making money in the drugs game. But what

happens is we get caught up thinking that we are making money because we are making more money than we would get if we were doing the nine to five jobs or anything like that.

As time went on, we began to realise that no one was really taking an interest in the killings that were happening in the black community. I am not suggesting for one second that killings didn't take place in the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets or in Tooting Bec or in parts of Ensworth. I am not suggesting that white young kids in Liverpool didn't kill each other. What I am saying is that there was a disproportionate amount of young black men that were dying at the hands of other black men, and we believed that this country—or at that time—did not care enough about us dying.

As we got older, some of us left that lifestyle; some of us died. I managed to get out of that lifestyle in 1986 after somebody was shot in the head next to me. So that was my turning point. Having seen that and come out of that lifestyle and going around the country myself into places like Moss Side, Toxteth, Norris Green, and seeing gangs from a different aspect, I began to realise that this was a bigger problem because the local council, the local authorities, didn't really understand gangs, didn't really care too much because the people involved were either black, some Asians or white working class.

Q45 Chair: So you think that the issue of black-on-black crime prevented others from being interested because they did not really care. That is why it went on for so long?

Sheldon Thomas: Yes. At the time that is what I solely believed. When the riots took place in 2011 in this country, in London, many gang members said to me, "How come that they're interested in businesses that were burnt down but so many black kids died during those years before that, previously, and no one raised any campaign?" In fact, the only time they seemed—and this is what gang members have said—to raise any notice is when a white person actually died, Rhys Jones being the recent one. He died in Liverpool at the hands of another gang member from Liverpool. He was a young kid that wasn't involved in gang life. Another one was Mizen. He died at the hands of a gang member.

I am not suggesting that this country is promoting that they become interested in what is going on in the streets only when white people get killed, but if you look at it from a gang member's point of view, especially if you are young and black, it would seem that there is some justification for why they felt during those times that you only seemed to be interested when something happens to another race.

Q46 Chair: We understand that point. Do you think that the figure that we have been given—we have been given figures of about 50,000 who are involved in gangs—is an accurate figure?

Sheldon Thomas: There may be more. In London alone there are 11,000 individual gang members. We refute what the police say because we do not believe that the police have a full understanding of who is in a gang from who isn't in a gang. In fact, one of the things we have been trying to get the police to understand is that gangs are one unit today and tomorrow they are three different gangs fighting against each other. They are not like organised crime or organised criminal networks. They splinter very easily; they are very fragile; they are very vulnerable. What is a 30-man gang today becomes a 15-man gang tomorrow because they split into two by—

Q47 Chair: But you are putting the figure at about 11,000 people.

Sheldon Thomas: It is quite simple. If you look at the boroughs of east London and south London alone, in several boroughs in east London it is ranging from 700 to about 800 gang members in different areas. I won't say the areas because they don't like to hear that. The fact is that is what those figures are. So you can't really say that there are only 3,000 gang members in London.

Q48 Chair: This is an assertion by the Metropolitan Police.

Sheldon Thomas: This is their belief.

Chair: Their figures, but you put it at three times higher?

Sheldon Thomas: I put it a lot higher in London. When you talk about outside of London, Birmingham, Sheffield, Nottingham, Liverpool, Oldham, places like that that are entrenched in gangs as well, the figure goes up to more than 50,000.

Q49 Chair: Do you think the situation is getting worse?

Sheldon Thomas: I think the situation is getting worse because there are more younger people involved. An example was when I started my gang in 1976 it was unheard of for a 27 year-old gang member to give me a gun. Today, a 27 year-old gang member will give a 10 year-old a gun. Right now in certain boroughs in east London and south London we have young kids in primary schools who are not only selling drugs but holding weapons for them, one of the reasons being because they don't get stopped and searched as regularly as a 13 or 14 year-old black and ethnic minority kid.

What we are finding is that the local authorities and Government are always five years behind everything that is happening on the streets. One of the reasons why is that they don't have people like myself on a regular basis giving them the right advice, because the people that give these Ministers and the Metropolitan Police advice normally don't come from those kinds of communities. They have never had their life in those communities. Somebody like me has grown up in oppression, in social exclusion, as a marginalised young, black kid, and I have not only seen it for myself but have experienced murders, kidnaps, torture. So when you talk about those things from a different perspective, you put a different picture on it.

Q50 Chair: Indeed. That is why you are here. One final question from me on prevention: if there was one thing that you could do to prevent people joining gangs that we are not doing at the moment, what would that be?

Sheldon Thomas: I would go to the primary schools and the secondary schools. Unfortunately, the schools have become a law unto themselves. They have totally rejected gangs. They have not owned up to accepting that their schools have gangs. For instance, we have 23 boroughs that have gang activity in them.

Chair: In schools?

Sheldon Thomas: No, 23 boroughs. But within those boroughs we have several primary schools and secondary schools that have gang members in those schools. Yet the schools refuse to have organisations like ours and others go into the schools to educate them. The best time to change a young person or to give them that resilience, that skill to stop them from getting involved in gangs, is between the ages of seven and 11. Once they are entrenched, like some of the kids in the primary school now who are earning £40 a week selling drugs, if they don't get caught the money goes up. If they don't get caught again by the time they're 15 they're earning more than £400-£500. It is very difficult to pull them out of that cycle because that money becomes—

Chair: You would start it at primary school then.

Sheldon Thomas: I would start definitely in the primary schools.

Q51 Mr Winnick: I did mention to the previous witness the phrase “black on black”, which is unfortunate to say the least. Do you feel that the situation has somewhat changed? Perhaps previously, as you were explaining, less concern was expressed where the victim was black and the person who was causing the offence was black. Do you think that has now changed, so that there is not the what you would perhaps describe as indifference when it is black people apart from others who are involved in gangs, Asians or whites?

Sheldon Thomas: I think things have changed; it is a little bit better in the sense that they are now dealing with the gang issue on a wider scale. That is partly due to the ending gang violence strategy, which I am also a part of. But if I am to be honest with you, there has been a massive increase in African gang members in London, which has been completely underestimated, again because local authorities do not understand culturally what the situation is. A child who is from Congo, who is used to seeing civil unrest, villages being burnt down, comes here as a small child and for him to be involved in gangs is nothing. Countries such as Somalia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone have wars, civil unrest that has been going on for decades.

What I think is missing is that perhaps, whereas before they didn't pay much attention to black-on-black violence, they are paying a little more attention but they still don't understand the cultural differences. That is the biggest problem there because they don't understand that we have a different dynamic involved in gangs. We have young men that don't care anymore about the society that they are in because of where they are coming from. Most of these young men have no fathers. That has not been taken into consideration. We have a massive increase in the black community and in some of the white working class

Mr Winnick: In the black?

Sheldon Thomas: In the black community where 61% of fathers are missing. If you look at the white working class communities, in some of the deprived areas in Norris Green, Toxteth, Moss Side and Newham, we have a very high percentage of white men who are also missing, and I don't think people understand that if kids do not have a proper role model, people won't then understand the dynamics. Gangs is not just about whether it is

black and black anymore. It is now about cultural differences. It is about understanding the cultural makeup of gangs and it is about understanding the social groups within these gangs, the difference it can make if you have a father who is in the house or a father who is not in the house.

Q52 Mr Winnick: In our communities it is quite common for fathers to be absent, in fact never appearing on the scene perhaps. Could more be done within those communities to try to change that situation, to try to encourage a very different social and parental responsibility?

Sheldon Thomas: I think local communities should be doing a lot more. Unfortunately, the local communities have a blame culture. They tend to blame the police. They tend to blame everybody else rather than look at what they are doing in society. When I was in a gang and I came out of gang life, I was made to look at myself and understand the part that I played in the way I was living my lifestyle. I think that local communities, unfortunately, are still in that kind of blame culture because they don't want to accept what is happening.

To a larger extent, a lot of the local communities have become desensitised to violence. In fact, we have some working class communities that would rather live with a guy that has committed murder, a guy that has committed rape, than turn them into the police. That is the level they will go to. So we are talking about communities that don't face up to their own responsibilities, and the reason is because I don't believe that many of them have the education or the moral fibre. I think what has happened is that when you have generation upon generation of worklessness, lawlessness, then what that just breeds is more lawlessness.

Q53 Mr Winnick: You have been very frank, Mr Thomas, in explaining how you became involved at a very early age in gang warfare and the circumstances that prevailed at the time, and the feeling of resentment and the racism that undoubtedly existed. There is no doubt about that whatsoever. How far are you able to impress upon others—the sort of people at the age you were when you became involved—that this is not the path to take, that it doesn't lead anywhere except prison and then prison again?

Sheldon Thomas: One of the things we found is that when you are an ex-gang member you are likely to have more credibility than anyone else to impress upon young men and young women. Unfortunately, not everybody agrees with that form of mentoring or that form of work because people tend to think that the best person is somebody who has gone to university, studied youth work. Unfortunately, youth work doesn't understand or take into account the experiences of gangs, the experience of what it means to live on an estate where your next door neighbour has no father, the next door neighbour doesn't work, the next door neighbour is into drugs. They don't take into account that kind of lifestyle, and I believe that when you are a gang member and you leave that lifestyle after a certain amount of years you are best placed to come down into local communities, hence why we started out as an outreach outfit, going into local communities as ex-gang members to educate those young men, to say to them, "This lifestyle doesn't really work".

One of the examples I use is my own friends. I started out with a 25-man deep. That means I had 25 young men involved in my gang. This was in 1976, and the example that I give is that most of them are dead. One example I give is that one young man who refused to leave that lifestyle got shot 57 times. When I tell that story to young men they become

horrified because they then begin to realise that what starts out and may look good, with the money, the car and the flash clothes, actually ends in tears. It doesn't only end in tears but it ends with your family in tears. I think when you can paint those kinds of pictures you are more likely to reach hard core, hard to reach young men involved in this lifestyle.

Mr Winnick: Thank you.

Q54 Chair: Is it correct that you have employed ex-gang members in outreach work and mentoring work?

Sheldon Thomas: That is right.

Q55 Chair: Have they been an asset in doing so, almost like yourself?

Sheldon Thomas: They have been more than an asset, because they understand what some of the young people are going through. When you have a young man who has gone through a situation where he owes money to drug dealers and the drug dealer is going to shoot him or going to shoot his mum, we have workers who understand that because they have lived it themselves. So I think they are more than an asset.

Q56 Michael Ellis: Mr Thomas, thank you very much for the evidence you are giving today, and thank you for the work that you are doing in the community because it is clearly very valuable work. We appreciate it. Gangsline have been delivering interactive gang awareness workshops to schools. That is right, isn't it?

Sheldon Thomas: Yes.

Q57 Michael Ellis: I am interested about that as well as the similar work that you have been doing with prisons, youth centres and the like, with the aim of prevention and intervention and deterrence, particularly the prevention issue. How can early intervention prevent gang membership? How would you recommend schools, for example, conduct themselves in educating young people? Is it bringing in people such as yourself to talk to classes? Is it some other mechanism? What would you recommend?

Sheldon Thomas: There are two ways of doing it. We offer a service of a gang mentor who can go into any school in any part of the country on a weekly basis. It is not a free service but we can offer that service. We also offer it as part of one of the lessons that they take every week, and it is a lesson that talks about life itself, life experiences. So we can implement within that. Also, we believe that by educating every year 7, year 8, for three or four years, we will see a real reduction in young men and women wanting to join because they are at that impressionable age. But what happens is they live on certain parts of estates, they live in certain areas where they are not getting a balance. What they are getting is every day they go home and they see a young man on the corner who is selling drugs. He is wearing the nice clothes and they get influenced by that. When they go in the home, because there is no dad and the mum may be struggling because she may have another child with another father, her attention on that young man or woman becomes very limited. He then looks for somebody else to be his father.

Q58 Michael Ellis: Can I just stop you there? I realise it is extremely complicated, but if you had to put one element of this as to the root issue of what causes these very young people—you are talking about 12, 13-year-olds—is it low self-esteem? Does it boil down to low self-esteem, for whatever reason, lack of parental guidance or absence?

Sheldon Thomas: I think that there is a combination. It is hard to put it down to one factor. I think it comes down to low self-esteem and vulnerability. Young children are very vulnerable now on these estates. They are so vulnerable it is untrue. I would say this as well—and I know people may not like this—that the music that some of these young people are listening to is promoting violence and sexual violence. I don't think people understand the influence that music has on a 10 year-old, who is listening to a rapper who is actually saying to him, "It's okay to smoke drugs. It's okay to rebel against society". I am not saying every rapper does that but there are a minority of rappers who sell millions of records who go around promoting this negative music, grime music, reggae MC and whatever they want to call it, bashment. They are promoting violence and sexually explicit lyrics that young people believe is life. They believe that.

Michael Ellis: They think it is cool.

Sheldon Thomas: Yes. They think it is not only cool; they think this is life itself. They build a world that runs parallel to your world and the world that you are in is far different to the world they are in. They are in a world that says, "You go against the grain. You go against society". I know this because I did it myself and I know what it means to be a vulnerable child, even though I had my dad.

Q59 Michael Ellis: Do you think along the same lines that the violence in some computer games can be a negative influence as well?

Sheldon Thomas: I think any of those games that promote violence. There is a lot of games out there that young kids are playing such as Call of Duty 1, and anything that is against society should not be allowed. I know that is strong, because how can you stop games? How can you stop music? What we have to look at is, do we want to save the next generation or do we want to see them come up and be worse? I tell you this now, when I was in the gangs the killings that are happening today were not happening at my time, so the killings are getting worse.

It tells me, as time goes on, violence is becoming worse because people are becoming more desensitised. As they become more desensitised their esteem becomes lower. They have low expectations of life itself. They have no purpose. They don't see what you saw at 11 years old, that you are maybe going to be an MP or a councillor; they don't see that. What they see is outside their block everybody is unemployed. They see that this estate doesn't look good, so they feel this is their lot in life. When you compound that with media music that is negative and with no role model in their lives that gives them a balanced view, we have got a problem on our hands. I think the resources that the Government has put towards this problem are nowhere near scratching the surface of what the resources should be.

Q60 Mark Reckless: Mr Thomas, you say that the murders are getting worse and you paint a very bleak picture. We can speak of statistics but whether we look at the British Crime Survey or whether we look at police-recorded crime, both have shown sharp falls. They are measures of young people that show that drug and alcohol consumption are sharply lower. Why is it that things are so much worse in your field?

Sheldon Thomas: We don't have a political agenda and people who do statistics normally have a political agenda. We know that next year, May, is coming up and so it is in the Government's interest to let everybody believe that crime is going down. When you work on the streets like me and many other organisations you see a different picture. You see crime going unreported. You see young people who get stabbed and who are not going to the hospitals any more. Why? Because if they go to the hospital the nurse has a duty to call the police if it is a stabbing or a shooting. They are not going to go.

We have young girls who are raped. They don't even realise they have been raped. The ones who do realise they have been raped don't go to victim support or to organisations to report that. They don't go to anyone. We had several girls who have come to us—I'm not an expert on rape but they would rather come to us—and told me not to report it to the police. You have to understand that they don't trust the police. They don't trust society. I am not attacking the police, by the way. I am just telling you that the distrust that young people have from these communities towards establishment is severe. What we are not taking into account is that many of these young people who are not involved in this lifestyle are also caught up in it because they live in fear.

Q61 Mark Reckless: Mr Thomas, you mentioned underfunding, you allege. The sort of activities you do in terms of some outreach work and so on, is that something you are appealing for more money for, whether through local authorities and schools to the point—

Sheldon Thomas: Yes, that is something that we have always been appealing for because there is nothing better. When you speak to the gangs, one of the things they like about our service is that we came into their area that is considered a no-go area and they like that. But when there is no funding it is a bit difficult to continue that piece of work.

Q62 Mark Reckless: Finally, you said that as politicians we have a vested interest in playing down the level of crime. Do you not have a vested interest in playing up the level of gang violence?

Sheldon Thomas: Not necessarily, because I don't have an agenda. My agenda is quite clear: I just want to stop young people doing what I did many years ago and saving their lives and to live a purpose-filled life. My direction and my focus is quite straightforward. I will work with anyone who has an interest in saving lives but what I won't do is sit here and say how great things are, because they are not great. I work on the front line and, unfortunately, the picture I've painted here is just touching on the surface. I didn't want to scare you.

Q63 Paul Flynn: We are very grateful to you, Mr Thomas. You have given insights that none of us have had. You have had experiences that we have not shared and your evidence is

extremely valuable. Can I go back to the time when you were a 13 year-old and imagine a 13 year-old in Brixton now? He is told that, "Your family life is not good. You can join a new family that are like you, that will look after you. You are going into danger. All young people love danger, they know they are all immortal. You will have wonderful people around you and your only chance of getting a Porsche by the time you are 18 is not to bother with this education rubbish but to join a gang". They will see around—they are not all being shot—there are very successful gang dealers who are very prosperous. How do you counteract a view like that when it is an appeal into their own community, their new family? Is that not an irresistible invitation even now?

Sheldon Thomas: It is irresistible, but one thing that is not happening is no one is telling these young people that the gang members lie. Most gang members lie through their front teeth. We have a very small number of gang members who make money, the money that we are talking about. This is where the police have done really well in shutting down places where drugs are coming in. These young men who are claiming they make a lot of money go on the YouTube videos and pretend. What happens is young people who cannot differentiate between what is a lie or what is fact or fiction end up believing the fiction.

When I speak to gang members it is very hard for them to tell me how much money they make because they know that I will know that they are lying. The first thing we will notice is that, "If you were making that kind of money why do you still have the same trainers that you had on last year that have big holes in them?" It is a case of we have to begin to see through the lies, but it is hard for anybody to do that because you have to have the credibility on the street to be able to talk to a gang leader like that because in most cases you could get hurt.

Q64 Paul Flynn: Can you give us an example of any anti-drug education programme in the world or any anti-gang campaign in the world that has reduced crime and reduced drug use?

Sheldon Thomas: The Boston Ceasefire.

Paul Flynn: Fine. Could you tell us about it?

Sheldon Thomas: The Boston Ceasefire was done by a man called Dr David Kennedy who came up with this idea of seconding different organisations and agencies for one year and their whole purpose will be to tackle gangs from a different point of view. The point of view would be that they would get faith groups, local organisations, ex-gang members and police officers involved. What they would do is target particular gangs in Boston. At that time Boston had the highest homicide rate in America. Within the first year of doing that he reduced it by 50% and no one has ever done that. The only reason why that didn't continue was, again, because of funding. The Federal Government decided, "We're not going to fund this project anymore". You have to ask yourself: why would you stop funding a project that was so successful in saving the lives of many young men?

Q65 Paul Flynn: A final question, if the Government gave you a big bag of money tomorrow, millions and millions, how would you spend it?

Sheldon Thomas: Prevention in the primary schools, prevention in the secondary schools, and I would look at the estates where we would go out and engage with them, like you do in outreach. Those are the most important things right now and training statutory organisations to understand gangs from a different perspective.

Paul Flynn: Thank you very much, Mr Thomas.

Q66 Mr Clappison: So as to get the full picture on this, you have seen the scene for a while but I am curious, what happens when gang members get a bit older, when they get to their 30s and 40s? How do they come to leave the gangs and what happens then?

Sheldon Thomas: Many of them leave because, like music, they become not respected because there is a word that goes around on the streets called wasteman. In other words, you are seen as a joke if you are still on the street selling drugs at 30 years old. They don't respect that because what they are saying is, "You should have made enough money to come out of that lifestyle altogether". That is one. The other thing is many of them end up broke. If you look at the average 30 year-old guy who was maybe a main man 15, 20 years ago, he has no money to his name now. We deal with a lot of them. They have no money. Most of them end up coming out of that lifestyle because they have no money. Everything has been taken from them. Their liberty has been taken. They have gone in and out of jail and so they just come out of gang life themselves.

There are two ways of looking at that, normally. What do they bring to society? Do they bring anything to this society? Not necessarily. They will most probably end up signing on. If they are not signing on, they end up doing bits and bobs, hustling, that means doing little things on the streets, maybe not in the same way they were doing it before. For them life is kind of pretty over because unless they radically change before that or during that time they end up to be seen as a joke within their own community, and that happens to quite a lot of older guys who don't change when the time is right.

Q67 Nicola Blackwood: If I understand you correctly, what you are essentially saying is that if you survive until 30 you then manage to escape the gang, more or less, by the nature of the gang structure. One of the pieces of evidence that we have here is about mental health and a study that was done by Professor Coid who found that 85.8% had an antisocial personality disorder, 25.1% had psychosis, 58.9% had anxiety disorder and 34.2% had attempted suicide. A lot of this was to do with the trauma experience, and you mentioned a lot of this when you said that many were stabbed but didn't go to seek assistance, shot, many were raped but didn't recognise it as rape. In your experience, do you think that many gang members are experiencing this level of mental illness?

Sheldon Thomas: Definitely.

Q68 Nicola Blackwood: Do you think there are any statutory agencies that are even coming close to addressing that?

Sheldon Thomas: I would say, first, that study, that research, that report that you are reading is 100% correct. I would even go as far as this, that the figures are most probably worse, especially in the black community. I would also say that we are struggling to have any one organisation deal with that in a way because, again, it is part of the work of gangs

that no one has explored: how do we help those young men or those adults who end up in this particular situation?

Unfortunately, again, it comes down to what I was saying before about resources. People are finding that there are no resources to do that piece of work. The statutory sector would struggle to do it because most statutory workers—and I hope I don't sound like I am generalising—don't come from the background of understanding gangs or that mentality. You would need somebody who understands it and has that kind of therapeutic understanding of how to deal with it from a mental issue side. We are a long way off from ironing that out or from managing that situation.

Q69 Nicola Blackwood: You have already spoken a lot about suspicion of establishment within gang members. What would be your assessment of gang members' attitudes to recognising mental illness within themselves and seeking any help for it if they did recognise it?

Sheldon Thomas: Gang members, for the most part, are young men who are scared. I say that because I was one of those young men who was scared and we put on a bravado image so that we lock people out from knowing who we are or from people understanding that we are vulnerable. Gang members have the same mentality when it comes to dealing with those kind of issues. They don't deal with it. They don't talk about it because for them it is about locking everybody out of that little world within themselves. They don't have the coping strategies to dealing with that kind of understanding.

I can tell you a story of a gang member who went to his gang leader and the gang leader asked him what was wrong. When he began to tell him what was wrong, which were all these issues that you are talking about, the gang leader had a fit and then he passed out. It was just like he didn't want to deal with it. He didn't want to know. This is a gang leader who is working with this young man to make money and he just didn't want to know. We are a long way off from dealing with it. Any one organisation, whether it be voluntary or statutory, is a long way off from dealing with that.

Q70 Nicola Blackwood: The second area relates to this distrust of establishment. There has been lots of debate about stop and search and about the problems it causes in terms of distrust with the disproportionate targeting of young black men in particular and also the problems with gangs perhaps choosing to use women and younger gang members to carry, simply because they are less likely to be targeted for stop and search. The Home Office has announced its intention to reform stop and search. It said it is going to consider the issue of girls being used. What is your response to that? Do you think that those proposals will address it and do you think that there are other concerns that need to be considered?

Sheldon Thomas: I was 12 when I started a gang in 1976 under the sus law, one of the worst things that ever happened in this country that specifically just targeted black men. How many black men feel today is how black men felt back then; things have not changed in that time period. People need to understand that the black community has been waiting for the Metropolitan Police to change for some time. They haven't seen that change. They haven't seen a sustainable approach to recruiting black men. They haven't seen an approach where black men get into very top senior positions. They haven't seen a change in the way young black men are targeted on the streets in terms of stop and search.

If they hear their older brothers or their older, older brothers talk about the 1970s and 1980s and then they talk about what is happening now, in their estimation they would say, "Well, nothing has changed". We all know that things have changed within the police. I would say that things have changed but they haven't changed fast enough and they haven't changed anywhere near the level they should have changed. For many young black men today there is no faith in the police because they say to themselves, "How can you believe in something that can't recruit black men and bring them into position for a decision-making role where the community can respect that?"

Q71 Nicola Blackwood: Even though the Metropolitan Police can demonstrate that they have reduced their stop and search and they are improving their figures and the Home Office has announced that they are reforming specifically to address some of these issues because they are concerned about the disproportionate targeting of black men with stop and search—they are not stopping the stop and search, they are going to review all legislation to root out where these problems are occurring—do you think that recruitment of BME candidates into the Metropolitan Police is going to be the clearest demonstration of commitment to the community?

Sheldon Thomas: If the black community saw over the last 10 years a serious recruitment of black men in the police and moving up the ladder, reaching top positions, that would do more than all of this talk about we are going to review the stop and search. It is because everything goes by what they see. We can talk all the statistics we want but young men, and especially young black men that we are talking about, go by what they see. If they can't see black men in the police force in top positions they will never have faith in the police because in their eyes nothing has changed since the 1970s, so that is the way we have to look at it.

Q72 Chair: The idea of role models, which you have just mentioned to Nicola Blackwood, is extremely important, isn't it, for people to identify that there are no barriers to prevent young black men and young black girls reaching the very top? But is there a specific policing area that you think should change in respect to dealing with gangs, a specific power that they are using? You have mentioned stop and search but is there anything else they can do? You have been an adviser to Trident and also to New Scotland Yard. You have advised a number of London boroughs. Our next witness is the Deputy Commissioner who is coming to talk about other things but I am sure we will want to explore some of these issues with him. If you were giving advice, how can the police change the way in which they police London or other cities to make it easier for us to break up this gang culture?

Sheldon Thomas: In 1976 we had a policeman called PC White. He was the only policeman that never said a racist word to us on the Angell Town Estate, never spoke one racist word. He treated us with such respect and we never got more respect like that ever. The day when he left Angell Town is when everything fell apart. Unless police begin to understand cultures, the different cultures, what we are about, more friendly, nothing is going to change. PC White demonstrated in 1976 that there is nothing wrong with just being nice to young men.

Chair: You have given us a Home Office initiative that requires no money, a change of attitude; it is just attitude.

Sheldon Thomas: Yes. It is just the attitude has to change. Police need to understand that there is nothing wrong in being friendly. I remember the time we were smoking a spliff and PC White came up and he said, "Come on, come on, lads, you know you can't do that" and we threw it away.

Q73 Chair: What has become of this paragon of virtue? Where is PC White now? He didn't make it to Commissioner.

Sheldon Thomas: No, he didn't make it to Commissioner. But the point of what I'm saying is this—

Chair: Do you know where he is?

Sheldon Thomas: No, I was so young. The point I am making is that I don't understand why police just cannot be friendly, go down to certain areas in Hackney or Newham and just have a conversation. You don't need to look at everyone as a gangster, everyone as, "Oh well, you're in this gang". Okay, so what if they are in a gang? You can have a conversation with them. I just think if the police's attitude changed, which doesn't cost any money, we can begin to see inroads in trust being built.

Q74 Chair: Indeed. Just one question on schools. You mentioned that it should start at primary school level and you talked about the critical age group of seven to 11. Do you think that it is worth doing work at preschool level as well or do you think we can—

Sheldon Thomas: I think seven is the best age because of their level of understanding and stuff is slightly different. I think seven is about the right age to start working with them. I am not just talking about gangs, I am talking about what it is like to be an adult. We have many young men who are fathering children at 14 years old who have no understanding what it means to go and have sex with a young girl, and then she gets pregnant and he just goes off with another girl and does the same thing.

I think that the whole structure of school has to change because we are in a climate of media throwing these images to them of bad parenting, and we have to say bad parenting. There is no point pretending otherwise, and there are some parents who are trying to do their best but are struggling. We need to look at how we can impact the lives of these young men and women so that they don't make mistakes at 14, 15 of having a child. What happens is that having a child at 14 with no external family to look after them, to help you to raise that child, not only becomes a burden on society but the child's chances of being successful is so limited. I don't think we understand that.

It isn't just about me or other organisations going in and talking about gangs. It is about what happens if you do have sex at 14 and you don't have the right necessary precautions: what happens when that girl gets pregnant or what are you going to do? These are important issues that people have to look at because in our neighbourhoods teenage pregnancy is rife. These kids grow up to be the gangsters, not every child but they grow up to be the gangsters. As we change the way young people think, unless we change the way we teach in schools about life itself we are not going to change the culture of gangs or violence.

Chair: Mr Thomas, thank you very much for giving evidence to us today. It has been extremely helpful and we may well come back to you during the course of our inquiry to ask you further questions or for help in the way in which we conduct our inquiry. We are most grateful. Thank you very much.