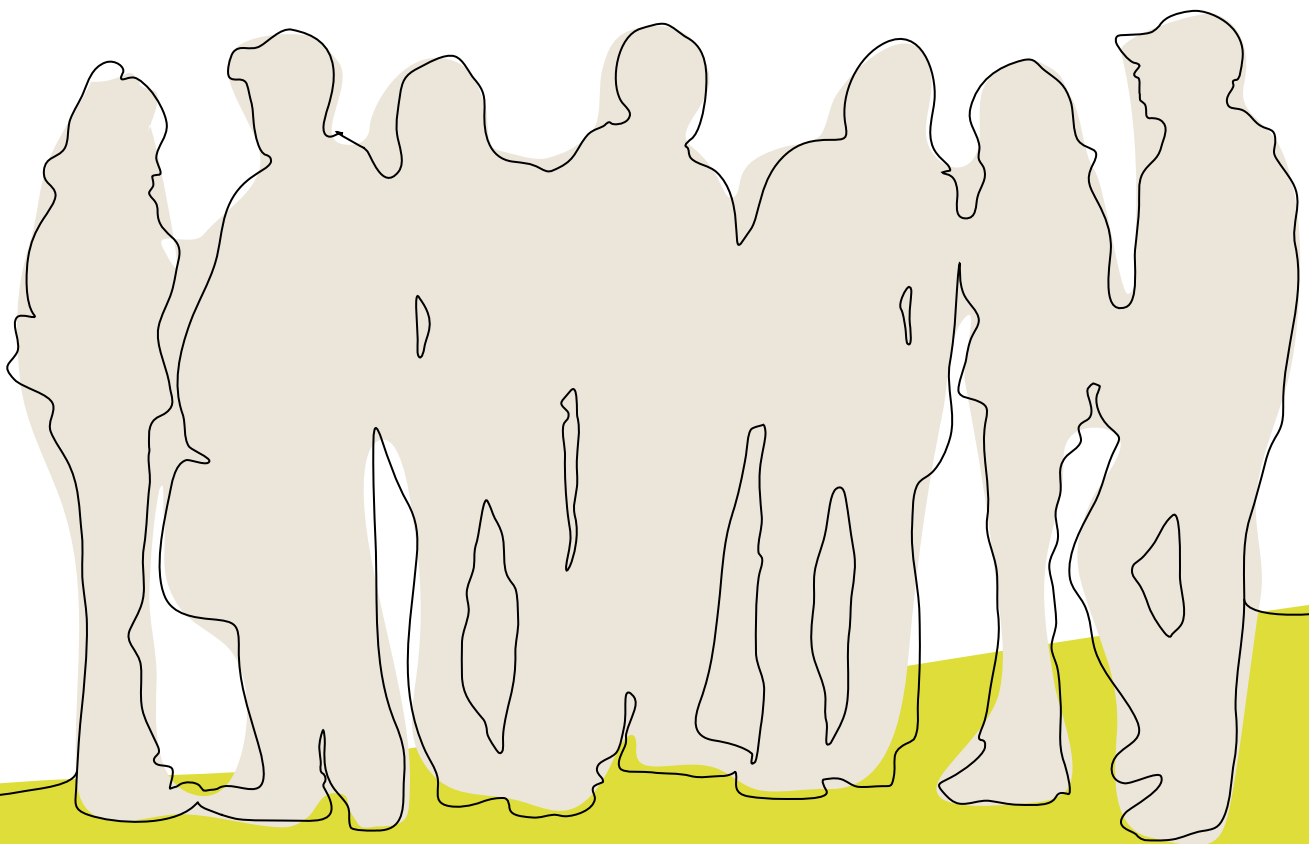


# ‘Step inside our shoes’

Young people’s views on  
gun and knife crime



## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the young people who took the time and trouble to respond to the questionnaire, with special thanks to Action for Children Rightfully Yours

At Action for Children, we know that children's emotional wellbeing is key to their social mobility and to breaking the cycle of deprivation. That's why, as one of the UK's largest children's charities, we've launched a campaign to highlight the importance of children's emotional wellbeing – please join us by visiting our website

[www.actionforchildren.org.uk](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk)



# ‘Step inside our shoes’

## Young people’s views on gun and knife crime

### Executive summary

#### Why Action for Children is concerned about gun and knife crime

*‘I feel gun crime should come to a stop so more people stop dying.’ (14 year old, Trafford)*

*‘I think [politicians] need to hear why we think it has risen, and listen to how we feel about it.’ (14 year old, North West London)*

This consultation, which ran from October 2007 until March 2008, is part of Action for Children’s Growing Strong campaign, which aims to improve the emotional wellbeing of children and young people in the UK. Emotional wellbeing has a huge impact on young people’s futures. We want to ensure that every child and young person has the self-esteem, resilience and social skills they need to succeed in life. We want the most disadvantaged children in the UK to have the inner strength to overcome the difficulties they face.

At Action for Children, the child is at the centre of all that we do, meaning that participation runs throughout all our work. We involve service users in the design and delivery of our services, and we provide children and young people with opportunities to speak directly to policy makers about the issues that concern them.

This sense of empowerment and self-efficacy is a crucial part of young people’s emotional health and wellbeing. Without a voice that is heard, young people suffer worse emotional health. Therefore as a children’s charity, Action for Children has both an obligation and responsibility to do all we can to open up and develop the interests of the young people who use our services, in both a local, national and UK-wide setting.

The idea for this consultation came from an Action for Children children’s rights project, Rightfully Yours, and reflects the fact that participation is a central aspect of our Growing Strong campaign. Action for Children believes that young people have a lot to teach society about solving the problems of gun and knife crime, so last year we asked them to provide us with ‘youth intelligence’.

#### Action for Children Rightfully Yours

Action for Children Rightfully Yours is a children’s rights and participation project operating in South London. The project offers advocacy services, case work and group work to children and young people, including those in the care system, care leavers and children in need. They also organise events to promote children’s rights and participation. Rightfully Yours are experts in developing creative ways to involve children and young people in decision-making processes, as well as empowering children and young people to influence the work of key professionals. For example, Rightfully Yours project staff support young people in the care system to organise ‘Total Respect’ training for social workers and other professionals.

In designing their services, Rightfully Yours listens to children and young people to make sure that they are addressing the issues that really matter to them. Last year, prompted by concerns about the killing of young people by young people in London, the project developed its ‘Youth Intelligence’ questionnaire. This questionnaire provided young people with the opportunity to air their thoughts on gun and knife crime and offer ideas and solutions to policy makers. Following the success of the survey in London, Action for Children decided to roll it out across the UK.

## How did we listen to young people?

This consultation offers a unique insight into the issue of gun and knife crime. Over 800 young people decided to take part in our online consultation, which explored the impact of gun and knife crime on young people and their local communities. We received responses from across the UK, with roughly an equal number of males and females responding. Anybody (under 25) who wanted to take part in the survey could. As the consultation is self-selecting, the percentages do not indicate the views of all young people in the UK. However, we believe our results are particularly important because we have heard from many young people who have been directly affected by the issue, as well as a significant number of young people who are not in education, those who are in care and are care leavers.<sup>1</sup>

## Key findings

Urgent action is needed to address young people's fear of gun and knife crime:

- ▶ 29% of the young people who completed the survey told us they had been affected by gun and knife crime
- ▶ 36% of respondents were worried about gangs in their area
- ▶ 41% know somebody who has been personally affected

Children and young people feel demonised by negative public perceptions and believe that their fears are not taken seriously:

*'Not all of us are idiots, the Government just need to listen for once. Step inside our shoes.'* (20 year old, Liverpool)

- ▶ 63% of respondents stated a main reason they felt young people get involved in gun and knife crime was to protect themselves

Children and young people's lives are being restricted by how unsafe they feel:

- ▶ only 28% of respondents feel very safe in their community, while 45% could not claim to feel safe at any time
- ▶ 1 in 5 respondents said they sometimes – or often – feel in danger

Young people want an active voice in their communities so that they can play a part in addressing society's problems:

- ▶ 4 out of 5 young people welcomed the idea of a Youth Forum where they could meet local decision makers to discuss the issue of gun and knife crime

<sup>1</sup> 10% of respondents were in care or were care leavers; 21% of survey respondents aged 18 or under were not in education.

## Action for Children is calling for:

- ▶ Government to recognise the extent to which young people are the victims of crime, and to understand the true extent of the issue; as a start, children under the age of 16 should be included in official Crime Survey data across the UK.
- ▶ Children and young people to have real choices and opportunities to use services that really make a difference in their lives. We want to improve every young person's access to structured activities each week and ensure that there is a guaranteed offer available to all.
- ▶ Young people to have a say in shaping their local communities, and be consulted on the issues that affect their whole community (including health, housing, policing and even the building of a shopping centre). We need to share learning from across the UK on how this can be done most effectively, and in particular we must support young people in shaping communities.
- ▶ Young people to have a specific role in building the safer communities we all want to live in. Critical in doing so is making sure that there is a clear emphasis on safety planning when designing and developing youth services. We can do this by sharing best practice from across the UK.
- ▶ Sustainable funding to be put in place for services to reach out and engage the young people and communities that are the hardest to reach. Many of the young people caught up in weapons crime are among the most difficult to reach and the most vulnerable in our communities. Together we must make sure that those who face the biggest challenges in their young lives have the opportunity and support they need to reach their full potential.

- ▶ The media to portray children and young people in a positive way. Government should take an active lead in promoting a positive view of children and young people to combat the negative stereotype that exists at present.

## Children and young people don't feel safe in the UK today

*'I don't like it. It scares me to go out after a certain time. There are always gangs around and you never know if they are gonna knife or shoot you or if they have got any guns or knives on them.'* (17 year old, South East England)

Children and young people are very worried about gun and knife crime:

- ▶ 29% of respondents told us they had been affected by gun and knife crime
- ▶ 41% know somebody personally affected
- ▶ 51% have heard people talk of local incidents

Reading the survey responses, young people's primary concern is for their own safety and that of their peers. Becoming a victim of crime, particularly violent crime, is a real fear for children and young people growing up in the UK today.

In the survey responses, many young people told us that they had been victims of a crime where weapons were used. Young people told us that they had been victims of attacks and that they had witnessed attacks; they also told us about friends and relatives who had been injured as a result of gun and knife crime, and in some cases killed.

*'Two of my friends have been stabbed. Several people around my age are known to have access to guns.'* (14 year old, Leicester)

There is also testimony from children and young people who have carried weapons themselves and been charged for offences.

*'I used to own a gun. It was given to me by a family member who was involved in gangs and I was dealing. Kids don't realise the emotions you get after you've seen someone get shot dead in front of you. Or the thoughts that go through your head afterwards. It doesn't have the same glamour as what you see on TV.'* (20 year old, Prestwich, Manchester)

*'I was at a party with a group of boys who didn't like me and I didn't know they were in the house I was in, in the kitchen, and one of the boys ran at me with a knife and I saw a knife on the work top and the first thing I thought was I was going to get a kicking so I stabbed him and it was the biggest mistake of my life.'* (16 year old, Greenock, Scotland)

The impact on those without direct experience of violent crime is also significant, with many reporting how the fear of crime affects them.

- ▶ 58% of respondents had read about incidents in newspapers or on the internet and 64% of respondents had heard about incidents on television.

*'I have had bad dreams about what I have heard in the news.'* (9 year old, Liverpool)

The limited statistics currently available show that in England and Wales, young people under the age of 16 are over five times more likely to be the victims of assault than people aged 16 plus.<sup>2</sup> Yet there remains a significant lack of information about the nature and extent of children and young people's criminal victimisation in England and Wales, particularly as those under 16 are not included in the British Crime Survey. Without this basic information, it is impossible to get a true idea of how many children and young people have been the victims of crime. How can policy makers begin to address this issue if they do not know the true extent of the problem? Action for Children calls on Government to act quickly to ensure this information is collected annually.

The consequences for young people of living in fear are widespread and there is some evidence that it may result in aggressive behaviour.

*'I think carrying knives or guns makes people think they are bigger. It makes them feel safe on the street.'* (18 year old, Irvine, North Ayrshire)

- ▶ 61% of respondents cited revenge as one of the main reasons they believe young people get involved in gun and knife crime.

The majority of respondents also indicated that drugs, image and peer pressure were main reasons when asked why they felt others might get involved in gun and knife crime.

*'To defend themselves as most teens carry knives. Also when people take drugs and drink, they get violent and knives are the fashion at the moment.'* (16 year old, Tullibody, Scotland)

Research has shown that victims can become offenders because of their experience. Causes could include a retaliation attack on the offender, or against others in a displaced show of strength or emotion. Victims might also make friends with offenders to seek protection.<sup>3</sup>

*'THEY ARE STUPID!!! They say because they want to feel safe but that's stupid coz it means you carry a knife or gun on road to feel safe, get arrested and then put in jail and well the rest is history.'* (18 year old, Tottenham, London)

*A more likely response to feeling threatened is an increase in emotional problems and anxiety, and fear has a negative impact on children and young people's emotional wellbeing.*

*'Sometimes I don't want to sleep in my room because of hearing about it.'* (9 year old, Newcastle)

<sup>2</sup> Home Office Statistical Bulletin, *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, D Wilson, C Sharp and A Patterson (2006).

<sup>3</sup> *Hoodie or Goodie? The link between violent victimisation and offending in young people: a research report*, Victim Support (2007).

## Action for Children's Counselling Service in Greater Manchester

*'I have learned how to control my anger and I have learned how to be sensible.'*  
(Action for Children service user, Bolton)

Action for Children provides an individual, confidential counselling service for children and young people aged 6 to 19 in Greater Manchester. The service addresses a wide range of issues, including bereavement and loss, a change in the family situation, relationship difficulties, low self-esteem and anger management. Through counselling, children are helped to:

- ▶ address their concerns and explore any specific problems
- ▶ make sense of their reactions to any changes in their lives
- ▶ identify and express feelings of anger, sadness, confusion or self-blame

- ▶ improve their personal relationships
- ▶ develop skills and coping strategies to enable them to move forward in their lives

The project provides counselling and group work in 24 primary schools. Referrals are made by teachers and parents for children who require support with their emotional health and wellbeing.

*'My visits to B. have helped me get out things that were bottled up inside.'* (Action for Children service user)

In addition, we supported the introduction of the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) curriculum in Bolton primary schools, delivering 105 groups and training 83 co-workers in group work skills. Teachers say that children benefit from increased self-esteem and that the groups have a positive impact in the classroom. Children learn new skills, such as identifying and expressing their feelings appropriately, learning to see things from other people's points of view and developing anger management strategies.

Growing Strong is Action for Children's campaign to improve the emotional wellbeing of children and young people in the UK. Emotional wellbeing has a huge impact on young people's futures. We want to ensure that every child and young person has the self-esteem, resilience and social skills they need to succeed in life. We want the most disadvantaged children in the UK to have the inner strength to overcome the difficulties they face.

*'I have a friend who has been stabbed. My friend has asked me to be in a gang but I refused.'* (15 year old, Camberwell, London)

Children do not grow strong on their own. They need support from families, friends, schools and public services. They need opportunities to talk about their emotions with the people who influence their lives and they need structured activities that can help them learn and grow. They need positive images, positive role models and positive aspirations.

*'I feel that it is not good and I am in danger and I don't know what is going to happen next. I am not comfortable and do not feel safe.'* (11 year old, Peckham, London)

## Action for Children Caerphilly Family Intervention Team

Action for Children's Caerphilly Family Intervention Team works with families, children and young people aged 5 to 14 with emotional, behavioural or social difficulties to support and empower them to develop resilience.

The service is community-based and flexible, offering interventions that adapt to suit individual need. Much of the service's work is solution-focused, based on a brief therapy approach. The project works with children and young people who are at risk of entering the youth justice system, intervening early on in the development of the problem to prevent difficulties from escalating. Young people are also supported to access learning opportunities and activities. In addition, the project delivers group work in innovative ways to build skills that enhance confidence and self-esteem.

This support promotes the emotional resilience of children, young people and their families, 90% of whom reported enhanced confidence in their parenting and marked improvement in their child's behaviour.<sup>4</sup> An external evaluation concluded that after only 18 months the service was well used and highly valued, demonstrating considerable positive feedback and evidence of improved outcomes in wellbeing and resilience.

*'It has given me confidence to do more activities and to be able to make my own friends.'* (Action for Children Caerphilly FIT service user)

*'The help I received has been like a light at the end of a dark tunnel which I could see no way out of.'* (Parent of Action for Children Caerphilly FIT service user)

Action for Children believes that more emphasis needs to be placed on addressing issues at an early stage. To keep out of trouble, children and young people need access to preventative services that can pick up on issues early on. These universal services must offer support to all children and young people and signpost the most vulnerable on to targeted, specialist services. Preventative services should always be there for children and young people who may need to call on them at different times in their lives. This open accessibility will enable young people to stay out of trouble.

### Working to end the demonisation of young people – young people are the victims of crime, and share adults' aspirations of living in safer communities

*'I think that the Government should treat us as individuals and shouldn't judge us on our appearance.'* (15 year old, Croydon, London)

- ▶ 63% of respondents felt that a main reason young people get involved in gun and knife crime was for protection.

*'Not every young person is a yob.'* (14 year old, County of Armagh, Northern Ireland)

Young people's anger about negative public perceptions comes across very clearly in the survey responses. Many are fed up with being lumped together and labelled 'a problem', rather than being seen as individuals – or even as part of the solution. It appears that too often children and young people are viewed as a threat, a problem that communities need protection from, rather than communities feeling that they have a responsibility to protect children and young people.

*'Nowadays, everyone is afraid of guns and knives. The other day, there was a gang of kids causing trouble outside a bus, and the driver wouldn't open the door for me to get on because he was afraid of knives or something similar.'* (19 year old, Brighton)

<sup>4</sup> Analysis of user feedback from *Growing Strong in Wales: Providing emotional health and wellbeing services for children and young people across Wales*, NCH (2007).

## The Action for Children Ayrshire Crossover Project

*'All the young people involved in Ayrshire Crossover took part in the online survey – they were really happy to contribute.'*  
(Action for Children project manager)

The Ayrshire Crossover Project works with young people who have offended, addressing issues in their lives, improving confidence and maximising social inclusion. Since its inception in June 2001, the project has found innovative ways to help marginalised young people (including young offenders) get involved in their communities and take responsibility for their actions.

The project won the Young Scot Heritage Award for a community project where young people worked with the local community to regenerate an area in East Ayrshire. Together they landscaped a garden, which they chose to name The Miners' Memorial Walk.

Young people from the project also contributed to the production of a DVD on the issue of what unites and divides communities for the 5 Nations' Youth Justice Conference, as well as a DVD to help train Children's Hearings panel members in Scotland. Last year, Action for Children Scotland teamed up with 7:84 Theatre Company to create For A' That – a unique contribution to the internationally acclaimed Burns Festival. The group has been invited back for this year's festival on the strength of their performance.

The experience of the Action for Children Ayrshire Crossover Project demonstrates that, with the right support and opportunities, marginalised young people have a lot to contribute to their communities.

*'My favourite part of the process was meeting new people when everything came together.'* (15 year old, Action for Children Crossover Project)

We need to challenge public perceptions. Sections of the media, and policy makers in particular, must do more to acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of young people do not offend, or behave anti-socially.

*'There are so many mixed messages as to how to treat us – one minute we are considered children, the next old enough to know better. Young people are unique and should be treated as such. There is nothing worse than old men in suits saying how "I was young once...".'* (Survey response from a 15 year old)

## Addressing offending behaviour

- ▶ The responses reflect polarised views about whether or not tougher criminal justice responses are the answer to gun and knife crime.
- ▶ Some young people felt strongly that tough sentences were the solution, others were more sceptical about the impact of longer sentencing.
- ▶ Prison is not always the answer to complex problems and needs, but there was a fairly equal split between those who did and did not feel that giving longer jail sentences to those caught with firearms would reduce gun and knife crime.

*'Start punishing people who do these things. Whether it's just owning a knife or gun, threatening someone, or using it; punish them!! I was pleased to see that the boy I went to school with got sent to prison for life.'*  
(19 year old, Brighton/Bournemouth)

## Action for Children Inverclyde GAP

Action for Children's Inverclyde GAP service works to reduce young people's offending behaviour using intensive, structured, community-based programmes tailored to individual need.

In the project, young people are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions, through increasing opportunities for them to make decisions that affect their lives. The project challenges offending attitudes by confronting young offenders with the consequences of their actions for themselves, their families, communities and the victims. Inverclyde GAP offers realistic and achievable opportunities for self-progression and independence, while promoting the individual's self-esteem and confidence.

The project has also been involved in delivering a Youth Build model of employability to help young people from the most deprived areas into permanent jobs in the building trade.

Action for Children Youth Build is a pre-vocational programme of support for young people aged 16 to 24, helping them get into the construction industry. The programme offers support and training targeted at socially excluded young people who may face challenges in entering and competing in the labour market.

The Action for Children Youth Build initiative offers a model of how to work with young people from a range of socially excluded backgrounds, including young people with experience of the youth justice system and those with special educational needs.

Successes on the Action for Children Youth Build programme include:

- ▶ an average 80% success rate for getting vulnerable and socially excluded young people into employment
- ▶ considerable savings on working with this cohort, in view of the estimated annual cost of £47k for a male in a youth offender institution<sup>5</sup>

Youth Build exemplifies how Action for Children is working to boost self-esteem and develop the skills of young people to help them make the most of their lives.

*'Several of the young people involved in Youth Build completed the gun and knife crime survey and two were in fact interviewed about it and broadcast on Real Radio.'* (Action for Children project manager)

*'Jail doesn't help anyone. People who are involved in gun crime and own firearms have issues and need some kind of help, not being locked up in a cell. People that are involved most probably have anger/emotional issues, because the main reasons for these crimes is anger or insecurity. Schools need to offer more and better support and counselling for those that need it.'*  
(15 year old, Trawden/Colne)

Government's response to gun and knife crime to date has been largely punitive and offender focused. Government must also

address children and young people's very real fear of criminal victimisation, raise awareness (such as informing vulnerable young people of the dangers of carrying weapons – explaining, for example, that they may well be attacked with their own weapon) and create safe places for them to be.

<sup>5</sup> Social Exclusion Unit (2002)

*'We are already labelled as "troublemakers" so we conform to that stereotype. As many young people who get involved in crime are working class our dreams are already shattered as all hope is lost because of our background. Resorting to crime is because of anger fuelled by Government because we are not given enough opportunities or chances in life. Racism and discrimination of backgrounds is the main problem.'* (18 year old, Hackney, London)

Young people who have been in trouble with the law require support to help them assume responsibility for their behaviour and the impact it may have on others. Research and statistical evidence tells us that this group of young people are some of the most disadvantaged in society. They have complex needs, some with a history of substance misuse, mental health needs and disrupted family backgrounds. Action for Children is keen to see a more flexible response to young offenders that supports closer working between welfare and criminal justice agencies.

*'I have carried a knife before to protect my mum.'* (15 year old, Glasgow)

### **Fear must not prevent young people from participating in local activities**

*'A friend of mine was shot dead. It is also a issue with a lot of my close friends where I live, and often makes inane things like going to the shop a risk.'* (16 year old, Hackney, London)

*'We need more places to go, like more youth clubs, and things to do. That is why people hang out on the street corner doing nothing and not just for boys, for girls as well'* (15 year old, London)

*'There is nothing to do, so we go about looking for fights.'* (16 year old, Govanhill, Scotland)

- ▶ Only 28% of respondents feel very safe in their community, while 45% could not claim to feel safe at any time.
- ▶ 1 in 5 respondents said they sometimes or often feel in danger.

- ▶ 36% of those who completed the survey are worried about gangs in their area.

Young people need things to do, but too often the fear of crime prevents them from participating.

*'I can't go to certain areas because there is a possibility I will get stabbed or shot. I have lost friends to the madness.'* (18 year old, Tottenham, London)

*'I was mugged last year at knife point and am now too scared to go out alone.'* (17 year old, Peterborough)

*'Get more activities for young people. Get kids from different areas involved in football etc with mixed teams, so people get to know other folk and stop hating each other.'* (23 year old, Coldsides, Dundee)

Research carried out for Action for Children has shown that structured, positive activities can help young people develop emotional wellbeing, enhancing their confidence and developing community cohesion.<sup>6</sup> This is in addition to the enjoyment of engaging with others and gaining a sense of achievement. While such activities do exist, provision is patchy and there is little evidence that structured activities are available in disadvantaged areas or accessible to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people. Without the proper funding and resources, we are concerned that the most vulnerable young people will continue to be prevented from accessing positive opportunities.

*'I don't really know, give people more things to do, stop them getting bored. If there are more indoor venues, we could go to ones that aren't extortionate in price, even like an arcade or something, it'll stop a lot of the kids gathering on the streets.'* (17 year old, Kent)

Involving young people in the design of local services will not only help to ensure that those services are relevant and interesting, but will also enable any safety concerns young people may have to be addressed from the outset.

## Action for Children Gloucestershire Children's Fund Participation Project

The Young Reporters are a group of young people who have been trained to become interviewers, evaluators, decision makers and consultants so that they can be actively involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of services in their area. They work to make sure children and young people are given a say not only in schools, projects and their community, but also on a county-wide and national level.

They have given presentations, been involved in recruiting trustees and interviewing MPs, and they have evaluated projects, trained other young people, and helped organise and facilitate a conference. They also decide upon the allocation of money from the Community Chest, which is set aside for other children and young people to apply to.

Young Reporters value and enjoy their experience, and identify benefits, skills and opportunities they gain from their involvement, including the ability to express opinions, increased confidence, being able to meet new people and participate in special events, journalistic and interviewing skills, being proud of themselves, and feeling better about themselves.

When Daisy became an Action for Children Young Reporter in 2004, her life was very different from how it is now: 'I was shy, nervous of meeting new people and I didn't want to talk to anyone, I was just too shy', but now, Daisy's confidence has soared. Her list of achievements is endless, and includes writing a quarterly newsletter. Daisy says her goal is 'to make sure that children have a say in what's going on in the council, social services, youth clubs, their general areas'.

*'Young Reporters gives you more opportunity to get involved. With a youth club you don't really do anything big, but with this it's like, wow.'* (Daisy, a Young Reporter)

*'If young people actually realise that they can be heard and that their opinions count, then it will make them understand and not think that everyone is against them.'* (15 year old, South East England)

### Part of the solution: young people must help make decisions that affect their lives

- 4 out of 5 young people welcomed the idea of a Youth Forum where they could meet local decision makers to discuss the issue of gun and knife crime.

*'Listen to young people. No offence but they're old. Not got clue what young people want.'* (Survey response from a young person)

*A key message from the children and young people who responded to our survey was the*

*desire for a voice, and for that voice to be taken seriously. Involvement of young people must not be tokenistic, but one of meaningful engagement, where participants can see and understand its purpose and benefits.*

*'They need to take in what the youth say because it is not only adults that live in this country. They should listen to what we say because we live in it.'* (13 year old, Peckham, London)

Young people need to be visible in their communities, yet we believe that too often young people are treated as second class citizens in community planning. Young people have special interests, which must be recognised in local decision making. Currently money is wasted because young people's views have not been sought, leading to poor decisions and often inaccessible or inappropriate services.

<sup>6</sup> Structured activities are very important in developing emotional wellbeing because they help young people to be constructive, relate to authority figures, acquire skills, and understand the need for hierarchy when appropriate – see *Get Happy: children and young people's emotional wellbeing*, Julia Margo and Sonia Sodha, NCH (2007).

Action for Children has welcomed the commitment in the UK Government's 10-year youth strategy in England that by 2018 young people will determine up to 25% of the children and young people's services budget. However, young people's decision making should not be pigeon holed or limited – rather we want them to have a say in shaping their local communities and be consulted on issues that affect the whole community, from their local school to the building of a new shopping centre. Where this is already the case, statutory bodies need to provide the right support for young people to play an active part in their communities.

*'Not all young people bad!!! Invest in those young people who are doing good things for their community, promote their work and listen to what young people have to say, because attitudes are changing all the time.'* (23 year old, North West London)

Action for Children asked whether it was a good idea for young people to meet local decision makers to discuss the issue of gun and knife crime with them. Some young people raised concerns and were sceptical, but 80% of the young people who responded to our survey were positive and thought it would be a chance to improve their community and help politicians understand their situations. Even where such a duty to consult does exist (as it does in different parts of the UK), young people need to be supported and actively encouraged to participate in meaningful decision making.

*'Yes, so they get more of an idea and hear the real story cause most of them live in cloud cuckoo land and don't have a clue.'* (18 year old, North Ayrshire, Scotland)

*'It's stupid coz they never really listen and we end up wasting our saliva then go out try and implement the change but then find out that we aren't really being backed by any superiority.'* (18 year old, Tottenham, London)

Action for Children works on the basis that the child is at the centre of all we do, meaning that participation runs throughout all our work. We involve our service users in the design and delivery of our services,

and help children and young people speak directly to policy makers about the issues that concern them. Some of this work has been through art or drama, for example through our ARTiculation initiative.<sup>7</sup>

Action for Children also facilitates groups to enable young people to respond to Government proposals. Our services offer numerous activities, including debates, meetings, training and workshops. Action for Children's membership of the Dare to Care campaign is another example of young people being supported to become active citizens in the workplace.<sup>8</sup> As a children's charity, Action for Children has both an obligation and responsibility to do all we can to open up and develop the interests of young people who use services in a local or national setting.

*'There needs to be regular communication to lessen the us vs them aspect. Half of Government decision makers have never been in a "bad area".'* (19 year old, Cambridge)

Action for Children is committed to supporting young people to engage with the political process. It is concerning to all of us who help and support young people that despite reforms to the electoral system there is still a growing disillusionment of young people with the political process.

<sup>7</sup> ARTiculation is a unique Action for Children project that gives a voice to disempowered young people. Using art and drama, it allows young people to express what matters to them, and helps them to develop confidence and new skills.

<sup>8</sup> 'Dare to Care: Make time to help end child poverty' is a campaign that will highlight the extent of child poverty in England and offer practical solutions to some of the problems.

## Active citizens – bringing local democracy alive

Action for Children believes it is necessary and valuable to create a community in which every resident, regardless of age, ability, gender or circumstance, has a stake. Later this year, we are launching our Local Democracy Toolkit. The toolkit will offer innovative and enjoyable ideas for Action for Children workers to use in their projects to help involve children and young people in the political process.

We believe that holding an event locally can help to break down communication barriers between young people and their councillors, national politicians or community representatives. The opportunity for different people to get their messages across should start a dialogue that can continue into the future. For participation to be effective it must be a continuous relationship, not just a one-off tokenistic activity. Young people increase their appreciation and understanding of the democratic process and also get answers to issues that matter to them.

This report is based on hearing from young people at Rightfully Yours about an issue affecting them. It is critical that local decision makers ensure there are channels for young people to bring issues of concern to the attention of policy makers.

*'We don't wanna do it... stop trying to solve by being patronising or ignoring or just putting us in jail and chucking away the key. confront the situation full on at the same eye level as us and u might get sum results and respect. the phrase "respect your elders" still applies in this generation but "treat those as u want to b treated yourselves" applies more, meaning that a adult who talks to us on our level can still gain control in the way that we are able to listen to them. if u just shout we are more likely to retaliate.'* (17 year old, Peterborough)

## Young people are as dismayed at the phenomenon of gun and knife crime as adults

*'I am truly against it and would love to help prevent it!'* (16 year old, Kent)

*'I want it to stop. I don't want to hear any more friends on the TV for being shot or stabbed.'* (17 year old, East London)

The Action for Children gun and knife crime survey demonstrates that children and young people have very similar views as adults about the causes of these problems. They share a similar reaction of dismay and disgust and have much to contribute to the dialogue when it comes to tackling this issue. The message from the young people we heard from was clear: they want to be part of the solution, they want to be an active voice in their communities, they want their voice to be heard and they too want the violence to stop.

## Conclusion

There are some striking results in Action for Children's consultation that highlight why listening to young people is so crucial when it comes to forming public policy, designing services and supporting each young person to be emotionally healthy and strong. Our work in helping young people engage with some of the key issues in their lives helps give us better youth intelligence and gives them greater emotional intelligence and literacy.

There is often a perception that young people are the problem – but we believe that youth intelligence highlights how they must be part of the answer. Many of those who took part in our online consultation said that they simply did not feel safe in their community, and felt demonised by adults and dismayed by the gun and knife crime culture. Yet the young people who spoke to us share a clear aspiration – to live in a safe community. Action for Children's work shows how young people want to play a part in realising that aspiration, and we believe that every effort must now be made to support them in building safer communities for us all.





Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

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