

## **The Street Weapon's Commission – Birmingham**

### **Chris Lue and Mike Royal**

#### **Cherie Blair**

And can I welcome Chris Lue who's a former gang member, and Mike Royal of Street Pastors. Thank you for joining us today. I wonder if, Chris, if we can start with you cos you're a former gang member.

#### **Chris Lue**

Yes.

#### **Cherie Blair**

Do gangs exist in Britain and what sort of things do they do?

#### **Chris Lue**

Well, gangs have existed in Britain for quite a while, but it's getting worse now, and they're starting from a younger age. I think the problem is a lot of single parents need support and they're not getting that support that they need, and it's just I think a lot of the younger ones think that no-one really cares for them. So they go out and they work and do things off peer pressure.

#### **Cherie Blair**

But you were a gang member yourself, involved in, not just low level crime, but quite serious crime.

#### **Chris Lue**

Yes.

#### **Cherie Blair**

And what age were you when you got involved?

**Chris Lue**

The age of about 19.

**Cherie Blair**

So, in other words, you're saying now these days that it's much younger than that?

**Chris Lue**

Yeah, I'd say from 15 upwards.

**Cherie Blair**

And so what other differences between when you were involved in a gang and what's happening now?

**Chris Lue**

Well, the difference is we were brought up a lot stricter than these kids today, and we knew right from wrong. But to me it was a easy way of life for dealing in drugs, tax free, and we had more unity, we had more youth centres and people would come from different areas to utilise that youth centre. Now there is more segregation. So because of that people don't really unite that much. [NOISE] And everybody who's brought up in an area, the area that they're brought up in, they're recognised as a gang from that area.

**Cherie Blair**

So is this, this postcode gang that we've been hearing about?

**Chris Lue**

Yes.

**Cherie Blair**

And that wasn't something that existed when you were first involved in gangs?

**Chris Lue**

No.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Could I ask you following that point about the structure of gangs today, we've heard a lot of rather loose talk about gangs. Some people saying well they're nothing really but a group. Others saying that they are very well organised. I mean is your experience that gangs are quite well organised with a hierarchy, with one or a small number of people in charge, getting others to do the work, Is that the way it works or not?

**Chris Lue**

It does, but that is a minority. A lot of them, they just follow for protection. As I say, it's peer pressure, cos if I'm from one area and someone from a different area recognise me, not someone from their area, then I'm vulnerable if I'm on my own. So because of that they prefer to be with a group for protection. So I would say from my experience out of every ten lads there's hope for seven.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

You said earlier on to somebody who's put some pre-briefing notes for us that there's many of the junior members of gangs are put under, and the quote is, terrifying pressure to carry out tasks, and they're very scared to do that, but they do it because it's part of the gang culture. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

**Chris Lue**

Well, at the end of the day there is lads out there, the main dealers, they sometime are short of foot soldiers. So they'll be [INAUDIBLE] put pressure on someone to do their dirty work.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Which is running errands?

**Chris Lue**

Yes.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Would it be telling them to go and commit a violent act in order to prove themselves?

**Chris Lue**

Yes, that happens in some gangs.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Does it?

**Chris Lue**

Yes.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

What sort of violent act?

**Chris Lue**

Right up to murder.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Just go out and stab somebody or slash somebody just to prove you can do it?

**Chris Lue**

From a different gang.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

As serious as that?

**Chris Lue**

Yes.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Yeah.

**Cherie Blair**

Can I bring in Mike Royal of Street Pastors? What's your perspective on all this?

**Mike Royal**

Just ask the question again that you asked at the beginning, sorry?

**Cherie Blair**

I was just saying what's your perspective on this? Are you seeing too that the gangs are younger, more disorganised, often being drawn into gangs almost for self preservation?

**Mike Royal**

Yeah. I think that there's different levels of gang operation, and at the street

level is one thing, but at the peer level there's a lot of pressure on young people, even in the school playground, to get involved in gangs. And if you're not gang affiliated then there's a feeling of not being safe and so some young people are almost ushered into it for self preservation reasons.

**Cherie Blair**

Liam?

**Liam Black**

Chris, in the paper that we have here about you and what you think about these issues, you make a startling claim that you suspect that the problem of gangs and violence is marginalised by the government because gang youth crime is predominantly black on black. Could you talk a bit more about that?

**Chris Lue**

Well, in the community, you know, most of the crimes and killing are black on black, and sometimes people get frustrated, I get frustrated, with trying to help and looking for support from the government, and it's, as I says, it seems like nobody cares because it's black on black, and I think it's sad and it's wrong.

**Liam Black**

What's your evidence for that?

**Chris Lue**

It's not just my evidence, it's what the majority of the community, the black community, feel. That, you know, there's someone killed, a family member, and that the police will come and do their bit, and from there they're left on their own. A lot of the times we try and help as much as we can. Sometimes it does cost me personally, and it's just frustrating. I feel like I'm hitting my head against a brick wall.

**Liam Black**

So are you meaning by that if there were more white young people being damaged and killed then the government would take it more seriously? It's the colour of their skin, if they're black it doesn't matter. Is that what you're saying?

**Chris Lue**

Yes.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Could I rather hog this and bring it back to the point we were making before about the structure of gangs? I can understand you're saying now postcode gangs, it's very much the locality, people are drawn into it because they live there, and they need to join because otherwise they're outcasts and they're at risk. So I can see the grouping around the postcode. Does it automatically follow that they will then involve themselves in crime like drug dealing or protection racketing or whatever else? Or are some of those gangs just there to protect their turf?

**Chris Lue**

Some of them are just there to protect themselves really. I mean there's a lot of them who don't want to be involved, don't want to be with gangs, but if they segregate themselves and walk to the city centre on their own then they're vulnerable and they can get hurt. So what do they do? Go back to the company they know where they feel protected and safe.

**Cherie Blair**

So what do we do to reach out to these young people and give them some support so they don't take up violence?

**Chris Lue**

There's one thing, a 24 hour call centre, where there's someone at the end of the phone at all times who can give professional advice, and I think that would help, and youth centres, but not youth centres like 20 years ago, more specialised youth centres, targeting high risk individuals and gangs. You know, there's a lot of these lads who they've got talent. They just need some push. They need some help, some encouragement, and if we do that then I think you will see a change. They just wanna feel loved... you know.

**Commissioner**

Is there a risk of talking all this up too much? I mean most of the evidence says these gangs of the kind that you're describing are concentrated in the big cities and certain parts of the big cities, the tragedies that happen are awful to the people that they happen to, but the numbers are very, very small in the overall run of things. Knife crime, gun crime, yeah, it's talked up again, but actually when you drill into the statistics it's pretty low level, you know, pretty low scale. Isn't there a risk that you contribute to the talking up of this? Isn't that in your interests to do that as well? I know these people, you know, I can get in there where nobody else can. Is there...

**Mike Royal**

I don't think it's just a case of talking it up. I think that it's about who's got, you know, the cultural lead. And I think that the whole gun and knife thing has very much been part of urban culture, and I think that's got the cultural lead in Great Britain. And so often time what is happening in a city has an effect right across the board and can filter right through to the small village communities, and we know that in small towns as well as the big cities there are these same issues. So we have to understand it as cultural influence. So it's not something that we can afford to leave the lid off.

**Cherie Blair**

Mark?

**Mark Johnson**

Can I just my question to Chris? It's guns [INAUDIBLE] you work on the ground. How available are guns in Birmingham?

**Chris Lue**

They are available. It is frightening. Sometimes I do wonder how so many guns get in Britain. But there is a way and it is happening.

**Mark Johnson**

Can you give us a sort of description of like how much they cost? How easy it is to get or...?

**Chris Lue**

I don't really know how much they'd cost, but I know that there's quite a lot on the streets.

**Cherie Blair**

They're not expensive then?

**Chris Lue**

I'm not sure I mean it when you're selling drugs, you know. You can afford what you want.

**Cherie Blair**

Yeah.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

You can hire the gun?

**Cherie Blair**

Yeah.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Hire the gun.

**Mark Johnson**

Do you think drugs are a predominant factor?

**Chris Lue**

Well, yes. It is because it is a market, it is a big market and the profit margin is very high. So of course there will be people who will be attracted to that.

**Cherie Blair**

The profit margin is only very high if you don't get caught or if you don't get killed.

**Chris Lue**

Yes, that's true.

**Cherie Blair**

And so actually there's a very high cost to it as well. Do you, in your work as a street pastor, do you try and explain to young people that actually it's not necessarily an easy way to make money?

**Mike Royal**

Indeed. I think that when a young person loses a sense of any future, when

they live for today and there's no sense of tomorrow. And one of the key things is to engage these young people in a way that actually causes them to say, look, there is a hope, there is a future, there is a possibility of raising your aspirations and actually making it in mainstream society. And that means that we've gotta re-engage them back in education. We've gotta give them the one to one support they need, and their families as well, because struggling young people are often struggling families as well.

**Cherie Blair**

And how easy is it for you to engage with these young people? How do you do it?

**Mike Royal**

Yeah, I think ideally we want prevention's better than cure, and we want to engage the young people before they've got involved in the criminal justice system. I think the reality is is that sometimes it takes a young person maybe to get an asbo, and then there can be an opportunity for some help. And what we've found, we've been doing some mentoring with young people over the last three months, and actually in the gang these young people are one thing, but on their own actually they're vulnerable young people and they really need just a caring and a guiding hand and a sense of right and wrong and some boundaries. And they haven't had that.

**Cherie Blair**

Ian, did you...?

**Ian Levy**

Yes. Well, first, Chris. What I'd like to know is, it says here that you're 39, hope you didn't mind me saying, but how do you relate to the young people who you say are starting at a very young age, and your history, you're a

former gang member, how do you come across to them in terms of the time when you were a gang member in relation to what's happening in gangs now, but as surely the whole ethos of a gang would have changed between the time that you were a gang member and now, and how do they sort of relate to that?

**Chris Lue**

Well, what happens is I'll show them the road they're on now and where they're heading for which is prison or death. And I show them another road where they can be a successful person and do positive things. Where I have changed, I am a successful businessman and if I can change I think the opportunity is there for other people to change, but we just need some more support and help from the government.

**Ian Levy**

What sort of support directly would you like?

**Chris Lue**

We need more specialist people directly dealing just with high risk individuals and gangs.

**Ian Levy**

But that would be you, wouldn't it?

**Chris Lue**

But it's not just me. There's other people out there who are willing to help. There is lads who are even in the gangs who would like to help because sometimes to get to some gangs we have to use facilitators when there's problems, and when we do a risk assessment and speak to those facilitators they don't want the problem and they do go out and do a good job of calming

them down and preventing crime or murder.

**Ian Levy**

And Mike, just quickly, what I'd like to know is you said when you speak to these hard to reach young people who may be involved in other things, how do you get that change in mindset to try to turn a young person around from selling drugs on the street, earning £2,000 a week, to then saying to him you need to work in that shop for 200 quid a week?

**Mike Royal**

I think the reality is you need to cause them to face the fact that they may be earning that amount but they will either be in prison or dead tomorrow. And the average length of time on the street isn't very long. I think that it's about lifting their aspirations and causing them to realise that if they actually go again and have a go at their education and a career opportunity, then actually there is a possibility that they could make something positive of themselves through that avenue.

**Ian Levy**

These are kids that you say only live for today. Is it something that you have to be persistent at it and keep going back and back and back?

**Mike Royal**

Yeah, indeed. I think one of the key things is that many of these young people have been excluded from school. The education system often has failed them. They haven't got along with it and the importance of re-engaging them is very important. If they're under 18 then they need to be re-engaged kind of during school and college time. And they need to see that if you're engaged for a month, two months, on something where they could possibly have a sense of success... I work with young people where we're able to give

them qualifications, we work them through a term or two terms, then see them re-integrated back into school or back onto the college course. And all of a sudden they've got a hope and a future where they just thought their future was on the street.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Could I ask you one quick question about street pastors which is changing the subject but it's in the brief that was provided for us before you came? Has that system started yet where you put people onto the streets, virtually into a sort of uniform, certainly recognisably dressed? Have you started that yet?

**Mike Royal**

Yes, we've been actually working in Birmingham since June 2004.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

And that's been introduced here?

**Mike Royal**

Yes, we work in the north of Birmingham, working in the communities of Aston, Hansworth and Lazell's. We're very well known in the community not only gauging young people...

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Shirt and baseball cap and it's...

**Mike Royal**

Yeah very much so, very much you know a baseball cap, a very visible jacket, and we're about listening, caring, helping and signposting people where they can get help.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

And how is it working because a similar scheme I seem to remember started on the London Tube system some years ago, I can't remember what they were called. The Guardian Angels. And sort of disappeared, it was tried for a while, lot of publicity and it just withered away. Presumably you're, by the look on your face you're not gonna see it wither away are you?

**Mike Royal**

I think one of the key things for young people, and our community generally, is our community needs to see long term solutions. I think they're tired of, you know, the project that comes, that's here while the funding is here, that's gone when the funding is gone. We have to have ten, 15, 20 year view in terms of our service delivery to our communities. So we've been there since 2004, we're in 2008 and we're still very much there, and we've grown the team and we're seeking to do more.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

I wish you well with it.

**Mike Royal**

Thank you.

**Ian Levy**

It's a financial element of your belief system, got to be taken on board by these young people to get support from you?

**Mike Royal**

I think one of the things you need to understand, particularly in urban communities, I mean in the City of Birmingham, Birmingham is a faith city and many of the people, whether they're from an Asian background or from an

African or African Caribbean background have grown up with faith as part and parcel of life, and so when they see the word Pastor it means something. Sometimes they have grown up in Sunday School, they may have long forgotten they may have felt that it's irrelevant, but there is a sense of respect, and I think that even if you listen to Rap music you recognise that in there is an incredible amount of spirituality, and actually I think that when young people and the community at large engage with street Pastors actually they're saying okay, this may not be relevant for me, but I do respect it and I see its relevance, and I see that the church is being relevant in society.

**Commissioner**

What about the people, I'm interested you know like they, what Liam said there about faith, you know, and what it, how many people do you think it excludes because of the faith [INAUDIBLE] and you know is it, are you helping people, do you know what I mean, or is it...?

**Mike Royal**

One of that...

**Commissioner**

Which is it, faith or help?

**Mike Royal**

One of our I guess let me try and answer this. One of our values is the sanctity of human life and I think that what you're doing is giving people yourselves, and you're giving them love, it's the word that's missing from service delivery, that you're giving them love, and that kind of faith ethos very much drives that, and so we're not knocking them over the head with a Bible or any other religious book, we're actually giving them ourselves, and I think people appreciate that.

**Commissioner**

So they can be involved with you and not have to buy into the supernatural [INAUDIBLE].

**Mike Royal**

I don't quite know what you mean by the supernatural, but go on!

**Commissioner**

Well...

**Commissioner**

Nor do we!

**Commissioner**

Well you're a Christian, you believe in a supernatural world, Jesus, God, that would be underneath your values, if you encounter me on the street and I don't, I take your point that it might be a faith city but if I need some help I don't need to have to buy into the supernatural bit?

**Mike Royal**

Absolutely, absolutely not. It is about bringing help and making a difference to our community. There's no need for any buying.

**Commissioner**

We visited some local businesses in Layzell's this morning and one of the business leaders commented on that the activity from organisations around these issues only come when there's an incident occurs and that actually he didn't see a real sort of sustained presence of organisations like yourself in the community. How would you answer...

**Cherie Blair**

He said in the faith community.

**Commissioner**

Faith, he did say the faith based community.

**Mike Royal**

I would disagree with that. I think certainly when there is an incident then there's a need for a heightened presence, but we are there week in week out, meeting, you know, owners of shops, owners of takeaways, owners of local businesses, but when there is a crisis or a critical incident, yeah there needs to be an additional presence on the street, and it's not just the Police because sometimes that in a local community can feel quite oppressive.

**Cherie Blair**

Well Chris Lue and Mike Royal, thank you both.

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