

Street Weapons Commission – London

Claudia Webbe

Naomi Hutchinson-Smith

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Well hello ladies. We've got Claudia Webb from the Trident Independent Advisory Group particularly in relation to gun crime. And then also we've got Naomi Hutchinson-Smith. Hello Naomi too. I think you've been doing a lot of work with women in prison. We're looking forward to hearing from both of you. Can we start with Claudia? Tell me what have you learned from your experiences with Trident? Was it a positive experience?

Claudia Webb

Well I've been dealing with gun crime for probably going on 20 years now across the country from Chapeltown Leeds, Hansworth, Birmingham, INAUDIBLE Green. St Anne's Nottingham. And here in London. Just over ten years ago in the mid 1990s a group of concerned individuals from the black community came together and formed Operation Trident initiated from the community. So fed up were people within the black community in terms of the gangland men of violence that were terrorising our communities. Using crack cocaine or using guns to peddle their crack cocaine industry. And in that respect we said enough was enough and we formed Operation Trident. So in a sense it's a community led, policing initiative, to tackle the disproportionate effects of gun crime on black communities. So to that extent it's success in changing the policing response which at that time left to their own devices the police were using if you like what they called police informants, what we call in the community called criminal informants, largely imported from Jamaica to tackle at the time this level of gun violence. What we said was enough was enough. What we needed was more intelligence led. Partnership with the community, in order to address this level of incidents. And so we saw a change over time, and even then back in the mid 1990s, it took until 2000 before we saw effective resources allocated to the police to have a targeted approach in this way. Up until that time we had effectively the resources of

two police commander, Commander Hugh Ward now Chief Constable of Northern Ireland and a chap called Steve Cupis and then in 2000 you had the establishment of the Trident Command Unit of 200 officers dedicated to tackling this issue. Where we've been effective is essentially taking those men of violence, 20 year olds, 25 year olds, 30 year old, 35 year olds, off our streets in terms of numbers. And the proliferation of those people and the effects that they were having on the community and creating and building greater trust and confidence in terms of a partnership with the police. That allowed if you like people to come forward so you got a situation now where members of the community are prepared to speak up and speak out but what we've seen in terms of the change is whilst we've taken these men of violence what's replaced them in some respects, although not wholly, is children and young people. And of course this is the particular problem where we've now got a more disorganised if you like operation where I don't think children and young people are procuring guns and weapons and knives and so on in order to furnish a drugs industry. What we've got is I think young people using weapons in a disorganised fashion sometimes without any motive or cause I think that's where we've got to at the moment and that's where we've been effective is creating campaigns that begin now to address some of that.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

So that's a gun and knife culture independent of drugs you're describing then.

Claudia Webb

I think I'm describing where it applies to young people I'm describing their motive behind acquiring guns and violent weapons I don't think it's necessarily a crack cocaine industry that they are consciously supporting. However very clearly they've grown up in a climate where they have seen men of violence 25 year old, 30 year olds, operating on a get rich now die ... later philosophy. They've seen that. they've seen that sort of modelling in their localities where people have been able to drive fast cars, have a lifestyle and grown up living next door to crack houses and the likes. And that

is what's if you like impacted on some young people growing up and then coupled with that alongside that we saw the decimation if you like I think of a youth service and the voluntary sector which has not necessarily provided the safety net that would otherwise have been there for those young people faced with that kind of climate.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

So do you recognise that description of a gun and knife culture yourself?

Naomi Hutchison-Smith

Oh definitely I think a lot of children nowadays are turning to guns and knives because there's a whole thing nowadays of children feeling they don't belong. And a lot of children don't have any input into the services that are there for them. I mean a lot of children would benefit from forums and from ways that they could kind of put their experiences and put to people who make the decisions maybe let them make the decisions for themselves. Do you know what I mean? And advise people such as yourselves. A lot of children do get into gun and knife culture because there's nothing for them. There's no way of their status being ... being established basically. They're excluded from mainstream education a lot of them. Excuse me. a lot of them don't have as strong and positive family backgrounds. A lot of them don't really feel that there's any way for them to achieve in society. I mean we look at media culture and how a lot of role models for children are these guys of enormous wealth quite quickly like Claudia was saying. Yet we're not giving these children any way to kind of get to that place. We're kind of saying OK this is where you should but we're not giving them any stepping stones to get there with proper guidance and support. So a lot of children feel very frustrated. I mean I've spoken to a group of boys recently who feel completely frustrated and feel that there's no way that they're ever going to reach those goals because they're excluded from education. They're maybe not as academic. They don't have links to resources. And so they become very frustrated and obviously then you get frustration in yourself which means that obviously it's kind of followed on to communities. So you've got now with kids

fighting postcodes. So you've got say I don't know E8 against E9 so it's become due to boredom it's become now an epidemic of children kind of finding their own status in society.

Gus John

I want to ask you two things. I want to ask you this the get rich quick or die trying philosophy amongst this generation is the total antithesis of what their parents stood for and to a large extent continue to stand for. Claudia you've written and talked a lot about the role of youth relevant and adequate youth services in the lives of young people how do you envisage that one can support parents in keeping their children focused on the kinds of values that they themselves as parents share.

Claudia Webb

I mean it's difficult without the proper support structures in place I mean often people talk about to what extent do parents INAUDIBLE or to blame or part of the problem and I you know often I work on the philosophy that I don't believe any parent woke up and said that they wanted to be a bad parent. And so I think it's always about the kind of support structures and so on that are in place. You know we have a saying in the African community that it takes a village to raise a child. And it's that philosophy which guided my parents generation when they came here they had in a sense self made, self developed systems of support. Whether that be the Saturday schools, the voluntary clubs that formed. Those things which then gave an empowerment, a pride, self awareness and basically provided a safety net and largely in those days they did it without support of the state. But over time that support came. But what you had is I think a decimation of that support. The voluntary sector as we knew it died to some extent over time. so that we are now left with almost like a handful of organisations that we can champion rather than a consistent and systematic approach in terms of a range of activities in a range of urban areas that provide that support. The same goes with the youth service. I can speak in relation to the youth service because my initial background was in the youth service. Qualified youth and

community worker. Trained at the University of Birmingham. Seen as a qualification of status at one point. Now regarded as something that where does it go because where is the youth service. Where is the identifiable youth service? In those days you were able to focus on for example which is what I specialise in something called detached youth and community work. Which basically is working with young people on the streets without the resources of a centre, without the resources of financial resources or otherwise. What you had is your shoe leather and you walked the streets. You found young people and you worked with young people from where they were at. You talked the issues that affected them and you worked with them beyond the hours of six to nine. Sometimes late into the night. Sometimes early in the day. Sometimes midday. Sometimes after school. And you worked with the resources around and you worked on the issues that affected them so that you transformed their lives to their betterment as opposed to their detriment. And those kinds of activities those kinds of street activities and the engagement of the youth service in that way I don't think really exists. Alongside the detached youth workers of course you had a range of outreach workers. You had a range of centre based workers. You had the uniform service. You had the voluntary youth service and you had a statutory youth service. And you could visibly in every local authority you could find something headed up youth service. Now you have to go and look for it in social services, leisure services, education services. It's not readily identifiable.

Gus John

I've got a question for Naomi I trained as a youth worker like Claudia though at a different time in the middle 1960s and at that time a major concern in the country was about the activities of mods and rockers and other such exotic people. Your territory was very important at the time. So what do you think is the difference between that phenomenon in which mainly white young people were involved and the situation we have now where young black people are claiming territory having the postcode fights and all of that sort of stuff? What do you consider to be the difference between those

expressions of youth culture?

Naomi Hutchison-Smith

Well I think now if you look at a lot of inner city communities Hackney for example has sold off lots of its properties to private developers. At the moment in Hackney have one swimming pool that's in the process of being redone. Basically there's limited facilities in Hackney for young people. So you've got think if you're a young person growing up in an area that's meant to be your home and you're completely kind of alienated from that area basically you've got to cling onto something so the estate that you live in then becomes your territory. I think with a lot of children now where the difference say the 1960s and now is we've made this problem for ourselves. We've stigmatised a whole group, a whole generation of children. We've said right I mean if you look at the media most of the articles and stuff about young black males are negative. So it's that whole self fulfilling prophecy thing. If you're not going to believe in someone then they're not going to have that belief that they can move on and be someone. So I think it's a whole collection of reasons. I mean definitely looking at the way children feel so alienated in their communities and the fact that they don't feel they own anything. And if you look a lot of these children that are saying oh yes this is my area hardly any of them have any businesses in that area or own any properties in that area. So in a way they shouldn't. It's like that contradiction. They don't feel like they belong so they have to cling onto something to kind of feel like they belong.

Ian Levy

Hi Claudia I'm just wondering you said that the youth service just doesn't exist anymore or is it a case that it has evolved into something different from what you're used to seeing? I find that sometimes you will talk to young peeler and they'll say there's nothing out there for me and you say well did you know that that club just exist around the corner. And often times they question is no they didn't know. So is it a case where things have evolved and become disjointed to its detriment or is it that it just doesn't exist?

Claudia Webb

Well it certainly didn't evolve. I think what we're seeing now right now is trying to reclaim the youth service. So we've seen you know this current government trying to put more investment back into the youth service and trying to recreate a youth service. But what I'm talking about is there was a period when there was a shake down of the youth service to the extent that it disappeared and to the extent that there was no such thing a structure called a youth service. You know different local authorities chose to deal with it in different ways. Some INAUDIBLE ... social services INAUDIBLE. Some chose to encompass it within leisure services agenda. Some chose to encompass it within education agenda. So in some areas you see a youth service perhaps which is focused on what they call project work. Project work around problem areas. You know whether it's a drugs project or a sort of alcohol project and so on and they've called that if you like or youth offending service. Now there used to be a youth service that was for everybody regardless of whether you were likely to offend. so you know as a young person growing up I could go to a youth club or rather in fact what I got in terms of my youth service was rather I got people coming out to me and saying and trying to work with me in terms of identity, awareness and so on. that's also what I classify as good youth work. I don't have to attend a youth club with hundreds of people for it to be quality youth work. So I'm seeing so much as I said a disappearance of the service alongside a decimation of funding to the voluntary sector and now a re-emergence of trying to restructure a youth service. But what we need to see is some uniformed approach so that we're not just able to say oh you know so that every local authority area, every urban area, understands what they might be able to find in terms of the youth service. And the youth service consists of not just the statutory provision but it consists of a uniform provision. You know I found it valuable growing up as a young person attending the church lads and girls brigade. That was part of the youth service. Do you see what I'm saying? I found it valuable to have the voluntary sector part of that process as well. so all of this encompassed

together is what I call a youth service.

Ian Levy

it's more a problem of structure for you rather than the fact that it ...

Claudia Webb

Well most local authorities if you ask them they will say they spend x amount per head on young people. Therefore they're defining that in some respects that they're spending a lot of money on work with young people. What I'm saying is you know we're absolutely not, whilst they're able to say they're spending x amount a head per young person it's the effects are not being felt on the ground. So the measurement of you know whether or not there's a youth service is measured in figure terms in terms of the x spend per head on per young person per local authority area. But when you talk to young people on the ground, when you talk to communities on the ground, they can't see that youth and community service, do you see what I'm saying? in a real way.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Claudia and Naomi I'm afraid we ... quickly.

Naomi Hutchison-Smith

I was just going to say there are a lot of youth clubs that are open at the moment and a lot of them aren't funded the way that they should be. I mean if you look at a lot of young people services, especially youth clubs, they have limited access to equipment, to staffing. So you end up with a hall with no facilities and all these children. I do believe that the way forward is to put more money into youth clubs and proper kind of why don't we have borough run youth clubs? I mean why doesn't say Islington have a youth service that deals specifically with youth club. Build a massive youth club and that's where all the children can come. And not just to do music and sports but to learn things that they might actually want to learn. Such as I don't know. There's children out there that might want to become lawyers or

doctors or do you know what I mean? Quite academic. So there needs to be youth clubs involved in kind of helping them with academic subjects and all kinds of sports and things like that as well.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Thank you both for putting in that plea for properly funded properly run youth services for all and not just the problem children if I can put it that way. Thank you.