

Street Weapons Commission – London
Keith Vaz MP

Chair - Cherie Booth

Keith Vaz welcome to the Street Weapons Commission. You're of course Head of the Select Committee of Home Affairs of the House of Commons and I know that you're interested in looking at crime generally but also the issue of the over-representation of young black men in crime. Is that something that applies also to violent youth crime?

Keith Vaz

I think it does and the concern that we have is that particular communities may well be stigmatised because of the level of statistics that show that young black people are more involved in crimes of this kind.

Chair - Cherie Booth

We were interested this morning we've just been attending somewhere in Peckham in fact and there were a group of primary school children, 11 year olds year six, and the young, there was a young girl there who said that she felt as a young black girl in the community that people looked at her and they looked at her because they thought she might be a criminal, and obviously that was a very sad thing to hear.

Keith Vaz

Well that's the concern I think that I have that because the statistics show that the number of young black people are over-represented, that the whole community becomes stigmatised, of course young white men in particular as opposed to young white people, also are involved in crimes of this kind, but it's the fact that we have statistics that demonstrate that one community is perhaps over-represented, that there is concern.

Chair - Cherie Booth

And how do you think we can, how do we tackle that because clearly there's a balance between evidence based approaches to crime and avoiding stigmatisation.

Keith Vaz

There is and I think there are a number of ways of dealing with stigmatisation, and one of your witnesses to this important commission is representatives of Boyhood to Manhood, an organisation that seeks to take young people off the streets, give them a vision of what life could be like without a gun or a knife, and mentoring is obviously a crucial part of what we should be trying to

achieve. It's giving people hope that there are alternatives to the kind of lifestyle that some of these young people are involved with. But I think it goes further than that. I think there is a responsibility on schools and teachers to make sure that they are involved in this process. It's not just the easy though important initiatives such as, for example, scanning kids when they go into

school or making sure that there are PCSO's outside a school premises when schools break up. It's also about making sure that parents are part of the solution. So I think it's a partnership approach and I think that's what you will find as people give evidence to you. My Select Committee has just begun a major enquiry into policing in the 21st century and we're covering some of the

grounds that the Street Commission is looking into, and what's come across the Committee so far in terms of what witnesses are saying is the need to make sure that the legislation that we have works effectively, but also legislation is not enough. You can pass the toughest laws possible as far as street crime is concerned, but unless you have the ability to enforce, and

unless you bring communities with you, you're not really going to make much of a difference.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Let me bring Fay Selvyn in here.

Fay Selvyn

Yes thank you. I was interested in your views on stop and search and we've had a number of witnesses who have talked to us about the need to build up community trust with the Police, and then have talked about the need to increase stop and search but in an intelligent led or focused way, and I was interested to hear your views on that.

Keith Vaz

Well effective policing does not mean you have to just stop every single black person you see on the streets of London, because you hope that you might find somebody with a knife or a gun. Effective policing, and obviously you have distinguished former Police Officers on your Commission, means that you gather intelligence in a particular way and that you use that intelligence

effectively in order to secure your objectives. My worry is if you extend stop and search all you're doing is you're saying to Police Officers if you meet a certain type of person, a black person, on the streets of London then they're more likely than not to be carrying a particular weapon and I think...

Fay Selvyn

So you support targeted stop and search?

Keith Vaz

Well I don't support the suggestion that you should extend stop and search to cover whole communities, it's like fishing, you go off and you hope you're gonna find something, I think you have to be very, very careful in the way in which you approach the suss laws and you need to make it plain why you're investigating particular people at a particular time.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Ian I think you have a comment about this.

Ian Joseph

Yes, thank you ma'am. You will hear Police from time to time, they will tell you that often they're let down by the judicial system, they're there to enforce the law etc. in terms of the judicial system how much more do you think needs to be done to make the system water-tight if you like, or to make the penal system exactly what it should be which is an institution that is designed to get people to be held accountable for their actions.

Keith Vaz

Well I think that the basis of sending people to prisons first of all to punish for the commission of a crime and those who commit crimes of a certain magnitude have to go to prison because that's what the law demands, but I fear that the second element of why we send people to prison is not being realised, and that is to reform them and to educate them in such a way that they don't go out and commit the same crimes again. There's anecdotal and factual evidence that supports the view that if you send someone to prison they may indeed pick up more ways in which they can commit crimes when they come outside. My worry at the moment is that we do have overcrowded prisons, obviously the Government is proposing to build more, but I don't think we spend enough time on rehabilitating offenders once they get back into the community and secondly while they're in prison making sure that they know that there is another way, and I go back to quoting Boyhood to Manhood, partly because the Select Committee praise the work that that organisation did, but it is only one organisation, we need an equivalent type organisation that deals with the mentoring of people when they're still in prison to prepare them for their life outside, otherwise they'll just go out and commit the crimes again.

Ian Joseph

Yeah but whilst that may be true there's also evidence to prove that a lot of this sort of programme that is run by Boyhood to Manhood is quite widespread, however we still have people who are persistent offenders, what I'd like to hear from you is your views on do you think that regime in prison is designed to the point where it is there to prevent somebody committing another, the same crime when they're released?

Keith Vaz

No I don't. I don't think it's designed to ensure that happens at all. I think because of the pressure on our prison system, which means of course some prisoners being held in Police cells for far longer than is necessary, we don't spend enough time in preparing people to go outside and not commit those crimes again. But in a sense the problem that we face happens before they even get into prison, and it's how we address that. We address it with obviously tough

laws, which I think we have at the moment, enforcement, schools and teachers playing a part of what is a solution that requires partnership, and finally parents. There is a responsibility on parents to ensure that they do ask their children what they get up to, and they do check to make sure that they don't have guns and knives in their homes.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Let me bring Lord Geoffrey Dear in.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Thank you. Can I change the topic and ask you to look at video games, which I know you've got a particular interest in, and some strong views on. Put into the context of, and you may agree with what I'm going to say, that society it seems to me over the last 12 or 15 years has become considerably more belligerent, lowering in standards of manners and all the rest of it, road

rage will come into the general picture, and in that worsening environment if indeed I'm right in that supposition, it seems to me that the use of gratuitous violence and the consequence or ignoring the consequences of that would diminish. You know the invitation is there to say yes or no you agree or don't agree to that, but video games it seems to me, certainly the extreme end

of video gaming would fit very neatly into that theory. that I have, that it has something to do with the increase in gratuitous violence and I wonder if you could give us some views on that?

Keith Vaz

It's going to be an easy answer Lord Deer because I agree with what you've just said. I'm very, very concerned about the violent nature of some of the video games that are on the market. I do not believe in censorship. Those who are 18 and over should have the right in a free society to be able to go into any shop and buy anything that they wish. We have a system for the

classification of video games and one or two of those video games only I think a very small number have actually been banned by the people who give classification, the British Board of Film Classification. My worry is that violent video games will find their way into the

hands of those who are younger than 18. There is strong evidence that young people can go into any of our major retailers and they can purchase a violent video game for those that are 18 plus and take it home and nobody stops them. There is good evidence to suggest that parents are not watching what their children are playing on the home computer. We've just had an excellent report that has been written by Dr. Tanya Byron suggests that young children are affected, their judgement can be affected by violent video games. If you look at a game like Grand Theft Auto which has been publicised very widely, millions have been spent on this video game...

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Best seller, best seller ever.

Keith Vaz

And, you know, if someone under the age of 18 plays this game, violence, murder, most terrible, terrible scenes in this particular video game, but it's still widely available, if you go to any bus stop there's a big picture asking young people to buy this, and even if it's not bought by children it might fall into the hands of children, so I am concerned at the very violent nature of...

Lord Geoffrey Dear

So is there a case for distinguishing between film on the one hand where quite clearly the, the way you watch it you're not bound up as part of it, whereas a video game you are an integral part of it, you almost choose the direction of a video game in many sophisticated examples. Is there a case for increasing the censorship of that although you and I, certainly I'm against censorship in the broad sense, is there a sense of bringing a censorship in on to that quite pernicious end of the video gaming market?

Keith Vaz

I wouldn't like to use the word censorship.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Control?

Keith Vaz

There needs to be better control which means we need a stronger method of looking at these video games. My children are 13 and 11 now and they spend an awful lot of time at the computer, I now check on them to see what they are playing, but as we know they can go on to sites for children that are marketed towards children, and the internet is another area and it's not just

video games, also the way in which the internet operates. The difference between film and video games is that you're part of the solution in the game, you're actually shooting somebody, or you're stabbing somebody and that doesn't apply in films as you correctly said, you sit and watch a film but because a video game is interactive you feel you're part of it. Whether that

then is translated into violence on the street by young people is a claim that I don't think I can make because I don't have that kind of evidence. But I think it merits additional research. I think we should look at this because so many of our children and young people are now playing these games, not just at home, but on their hand-held computers in every, on every street corner, in every bus, every tube, in every car, this is what parents sometimes give their children in order to occupy them, I know I have, and you don't actually check the content and I think we need to do that.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Keith Vaz, thank you for coming and we look forward to hearing the results of the Select Committee's enquiries into this matter.

Keith Vaz

Well I hope Chairman that you and your Commissioners will also come and give evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee because obviously you've been looking at this subject in great detail and it would be great to hear from you all.

Chair - Cherie Booth

We'll be delighted to do that when our report is published, thank you.