

Street Weapons Commission – London

Mike Gervis

Junior Smart

Chair - Cherie Booth

Can I welcome Mike Gervais, Chief Executive Damilola Taylor Trust and Junior Smart from the St. Giles Trust SOS Gangs project. Thank you for joining us today gentlemen. Mike maybe if I can start with you, specifically with the work that you've done with gangs and young men mainly, working gangs. Can you tell us what you've learnt from that work?

Mike Gervis

Okay all with regards to the work that I've done I've created a number of projects over the years, Parents Against Violence, Defending the Hood, these are gang specific projects. What I've learnt in the years is that one of the problems that we are gonna face is that organisations such as Local Authorities does not, do not have the right access to the communities, and one of the challenges for us as the Damilola Taylor Trust is to how we sustain access to the affected communities, so that's what I've learnt in the few years that I've been doing this.

Chair - Cherie Booth

And how do you sustain access?

Mike Gervis

Well obviously we have to work on the street at grass roots, we have to build capacity with groups and we have to involve ourselves with members of the family who have been affected, people who are on the like parents of boys who are actually involved in gangs and we've got to make sure that we keep regular contact, regular dialogue with them, and just signpost them to the departments that can assist.

Chair - Cherie Booth

And you Junior, what's your experience with gangs?

Junior Smart

Well firstly as an ex offender and then moving on to...

Chair - Cherie Booth

As a member of a gang?

Junior Smart

Certainly being in environments where gangs were quite prolific, being able to work on the SOS Gangs project run by St. Giles, being able to work with gang members whilst they're actually still inside prison, I use a range of intervention depending upon the person's background and it really is about tailor making a service to suit the needs of an individual, I don't feel that there's necessarily

one solution to any, to the problem at large, I think it's about tackling everybody as an individual. I think it's far too easy to generalise the whole thing and forget that they are actually individuals. Someone's son, someone's mother, someone's brother, someone's sister, in many cases someone's father, so it's a tailor made mentoring programme to help.

Liam Black

So it's a tailor made solution that works for you?

Junior Smart

It's a tailor made solution that I've seen has worked amongst our client group, so far I've been fortunate enough to work with over 40 plus individuals and out of those only four have actually gone back to prison over the 18 months that the project's been running. I've seen remarkable success, I know in the media they talk about negative cycles of crime, well I'm here to tell you that

there's positive cycles, I've seen people go back into the community, come out through the SOS project from prison, I've been working with them and they've made traumatic immense changes and gone back out into the community and I've seen that, the same, what we usually see is the negative ripple effect become a positive effect and they've gone out and they've mentored other individuals away from crime. That's amazing isn't it?

Commissioner

How have you, how have you been able to apply an offender's sentencing plan or vary it, such that you do work with them, that's more focused upon their particular needs while they're in prison or a young offender institution.

Junior Smart

It's three-fold. Firstly I was trained in information and advice and guidance by St. Giles which means that the thing that I'm teaching them the mentoring skills that I'm applying to them is standard, it's quality, it's at a certain standard. Secondly from my own personal experience of being in prison and knowing the obstacles I've had to overcome to get through it, and to break through my old ties as well, I can appreciate that much more closely with where they're coming from, and thirdly because I'm treating them as an individual I'm befriending them, I'm bringing them alongside of me and I'm providing on-going support, this doesn't necessarily mean that it's easy, I mean my work phone is consistently on, I never switch my work phone off,
it's...

Commissioner

And the work that you do in prisons is it separate from or integrated with the education that is on offer to those offenders in the prison?

Junior Smart

I apply a holistic approach. I will work with every single source that is around that individual both when they're in prison, probation, the teachers, the sentence management, and when they're out in the community and that could mean helping them with family relationships, you know, the family support often tends to break down because they lack that support or they need that protection, so they then find their support from other sources which are obviously negative sources, their friends, their associates, gang members in the community, to Police, probation, whatever works for that individual I look at the whole picture and I'm looking, working with them seeing them as an individual rather than like a problem really.

Geoffrey Dear

Could I take that point and develop it. A few years ago the problems were not as great as they are now, but some years ago maybe 15 years ago, the Probation Service would have done a very great deal of what you're talking about, and it doesn't do it now to nearly the same extent, and I wondered if you could give me and perhaps colleagues also some pointers on how the probation service could pick up a lot of the strain, and I ask that because at the moment the Government is busy dismantling the probation service we're not too sure what's going to come up in the process as the new image, and you're right in the centre of this, seeing something that, as I say to repeat myself, the probation service would have dealt with, used to deal with, in many ways but is not at the moment, so from a probation service point of view, you know, could you give us any pointers as to how that can all be re-managed?

Junior Smart

Well I've actually got quite a unique perspective. I'm on Licence myself and I've seen my own probation officer, she's struggling, she's got quite a high case load and it means that her resources are being pushed to the limit, especially, you know, the help, you know, the gang, this whole thing about gang crime has blown way out of proportion. So yeah it, firstly where the SOS project is able to complement what she's already doing with young offenders in the community is to provide ongoing support firstly.

Geoffrey Dear

But if you were giving advice to a Government Minister, just imagine you are, I mean what would you say that he should be, or she should be doing to re-plan and re-model the probation service?

Junior Smart

Okay. That work that probation officer does can be shared. Some of the [lower tier] work, the ongoing support can be put into use through organisations like Mike's, like positive charity organisations...

Commissioner

With the probation service as it were directing what's going on underneath using volunteers where necessary?

Junior Smart

Absolutely, and [pay] resources through voluntary organisations.

Commissioner

Yeah.

Junior Smart

Secondly they can, I believe that they could resource the probation teams better. I also believe that perhaps there needs to be partnership working more between probation services and voluntary organisations.

Commissioner

But one last question, [INAUDIBLE] would you in that brave new world would you leave the probation or empower the probation service to be the number one agency, managing and facilitating the others? Is that sensible?

Junior Smart

I believe it is about empowering, in some cases probation officers have actually helped me to achieve positive outcomes with clients that I've worked with. There's been clients that I've worked with, sadly, that have had contracts out on their life, and I've had to move clients out of the area, they can't come back, the gang tension is too much for them to come back into the area. Probation officers have been able to help alongside the Police in getting that person moved safely and securely, so why not empowerment, but why not empowerment amongst all the team rather than just a [INAUDIBLE] Does that make sense?

Commissioner

It does, thank you.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Let me bring Ian in.

Liam Black

Okay I've got a question for you, I think we all know a lot of money's gonna come into this area in London with the new Mayor and I suspect the Government will wanna be seen too to be doing it, you had your funding for the Defend the Hood programme cancelled cos you couldn't convince, if I understand this right, you couldn't convince the Government that, you couldn't

verify what you were doing with that money, what the impact was, they were too [soft] you couldn't say look at that guy, he's now got a job and he's doing that because of us, I think this is a real, really, really important issue about what successes and how it's measured when you do something, it's very, very complex, what's your, let's do a bit of role playing, he was a Minister I'm

a hard faced funder from the Home Office, you want 50 grand from me, what is your story to me about how that money will be used, and the tax payer will get good value for that.

Mike Gervis

Okay well the Minister may say well how, on your role play scenario, how, what will be my outcomes, okay, that would be a standard question, and I will say to the Minister, well it's how come you can't achieve what we're doing. Fundamentally we have a number of issues. I managed to put 500 gang members in one hall 14 times okay, to have discussions about social issues

and have an understanding of what they're doing and how we can help them and assist them. That access to community or, sorry the Council, would never be able to attain. Now if you can't achieve that the question I have to ask the Minister would be how come you cannot achieve that, because it's relatively easy if you have the right actors in the right place doing the job

correctly. Now it wasn't only one project that was but, it was every project has been cut. Parents Against Violence, they are parents of mothers whose sons are in gang activity present, presently, right now. The boys are shooting at each other, stabbing at each other.

The parents jump out and say well look Mike we have to do something about this, okay. My windows are getting shot in, the boys are coming to my door and kicking off my door handles, yeah. My daughters who, one of my son's can't even take his child to school, okay. Now these are issues that we've got to find out how do we measure. Now we've got Parents Against Violence together and we sat down and we said well look opposing sides, mothers, mothers can access their boys, we don't have the direct access, the Council don't have the direct access, so we need these people in one room. We got them in one room. Because the Government, or the Local Authority can not measure the impact of that, and I know it saved lives cos I was there when a shooting occurred and the boy who was involved in the gang was talked down by his mother with me on one phone and the Commander of the gun team on the other phone and we're mediating on the phone, and the mother's doing the talk, so I know this works, but we couldn't measure it down because we could not write it down, cos we're [barred by] information sharing. So my argument to the Minister would be, you've gotta figure it out, that's what you get paid to do, you know. You figure out how to create softer measuring tools.

Ian Levy

I think you've gonna have to help though.

Mike Gervis

Yeah, no definitely, I mean what we've done, what we've done is...

Commissioner

If you want the Home Office to sort it out you'll be waiting a long time for your money!

Mike Gervis

Well actually funnily enough you're right!

Chair - Cherie Booth

Let me just bring Fay in for a minute.

Fay Selvyn

Yeah I just wanted to ask, I mean from some of that work that you've done, we've had lots of people come and tell us what they think of the causes of gun and knife crime, and a particular view given to us that it's the breakdown of communities, but also of families, and I was interested reading what you say about parents, that it's them who live with the burden, a slightly different

approach, so I wanted to find, you know, from what you've done, the work you've done what do you think are the causes of gun and knife crime and how do you think family breakdown relates to that?

Mike Gervis

Well personally I, I'm looking at gun and knife crime from a different cultural perspective. I'm looking at it from a street culture perspective, and I understand the pressures that are placed on young people in the street. I understand how they're recruited into gun and knife activity, and I understand the pressures that are placed on the parents who face that as an obstacle, and you don't necessarily have to be a bad parent to have your son involved in peer pressure, peer gang activity, but what you need to do, you need to be able to understand what pressures your boys are going on to. When they leave home like any one of you, when you leave home and you go to work you change. You become a different person when you're going to your work

place, the environment change makes you change. When a boy leaves his house and he goes out on the street, he changes into that environment, and we have got to teach the parents how to deal with that, and how to empower their young person to be resilient in that street cultured environment. How we do it that we try to empower the boys to understand the six steps of

recruitment that goes on on the street and how the drugs man will use them as mules and abuse them. This is what we do.

Gus John

Have you taken this method, this model, into schools and to what extent has it assisted you or your have assisted the schools in reducing the number of school exclusions of black boys?

Mike Gervis

Right okay, with regards to school exclusions, the first question, with regards to taking it into schools, what we've tried to do, we've seen a number of our partners have access to schools and they're delivering good programmes, so what we're trying to do is come from a different perspective and talk to CDRP's and educate them that what we need, we need a better crime management system, so the whole system has got to be managed better, so that doesn't necessarily mean the schools, it means the youth offending team, it means the youth services, it means the social services, the mental health, so it's about the system from a strategic approach, and then we will filter it down. But just with regards to exclusion, we ask whether it's a conspiracy or

a coincidence that all the black boys are getting suspended from school, because you need to understand that once you put a boy in the street... he's gonna be subject to greater risk. Now what we try to educate the school system is to basically say well how do we keep that boy in school? We understand the pupil referral units, we understand how they work, we understand their capacity to deliver, but if the teachers are not trained to understand the street culture, to understand the pressures that are placed on that individual, you've got a boy walking into a door that has got no solution, no resolution, cos the teacher doesn't understand it. However, SOS, people like them, they can go into the schools at operational level and deal with the situation cos they understand the street culture... and that's how we, that's why partnership is effective on the community side of the fence.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Well Mike and Junior thank you for that, I think that was very useful, thank you.