

Street Weapon's Commission

Erinma Bell

Fay Selvan

Hello Erinma Bell from Charisma and Dr Robert Ralphs from Manchester University. Thank you for coming to give evidence today. Just to kick perhaps Erinma you could talk to us about what is Charisma and why you set it up?

Erinma Bell

Charisma actually stands for an acronym which is Community Alliance for Renewal In A South Manchester Area. It was set up approximately seven years ago. Set up by community members for the community. As a response to you know the gun and gang crime that we have. And as a means and way of having one voice as community people. What we do best is we link up with not only with grass roots groups and grass roots individuals but we link them up with the key stakeholders what we see as the key stakeholders of our communities in order to provide life chances for our young people and positive alternatives for them. Other than the gun and gang crime that they get involved in or they get stereotyped for being involved in or get labelled for being involved in.

Fay Selvan

And one of the things that you do which looks very interesting was the conflict resolution with younger children. You teach them conflict resolution skills.

Erinma Bell

Yes part of our work we actually do go into schools, primary schools and secondary schools, and we carry out workshops. What I've termed as conflict resolution. Because we think that is very important to teach our young children, especially from a very young age, how to deal with conflict because

what is tending to happen is, well what they're doing is they're solving their conflict most of them because this is not all young people because we have to you know you have to understand that I'm generalising here. Some of them are resolving conflict by using what is known as dangerous street weapons. So we need to. What we try to do is go into our schools. Talk to young people about conflict. The different types of conflict that is pertinent to them in their neighbourhoods, their communities, their society and talk to them about how best to deal with that you know rather than having to resort to you know criminal ways.

Fay Selvan

OK thank you Mark you wanted to ask something.

Mark

Where do you think the problems stem from you know with the escalation of violence and stuff in Manchester? Where do you think its roots are?

Erinma Bell

Well I think its roots are basically one, not having an understanding as people and young people of how to deal with conflict and also the easy access to dangerous weapons. I mean they are readily available. You know they are easy to get hold of. And also as adults you know what are we doing as adults to help our young children not to get into that situation? Not to you know be able to get hold of these weapons. And how are we as adults teaching our children you know the best ways to deal with conflict because it's not always the young people. You know we blame the young people too many times. No young person wakes up in the morning and decides they're going out to do something evil or something bad. I think the images that we portray around them, the circumstances that we put our young people in, all that is done by adults. So I think you know the problem stems with the

adults first and foremost and how are we going to deal with that problem in order to safeguard our children.

Fay Selvan

Gus did you want to ask something?

Gus

Erinma in 2006 there was the Enough is Enough guns and gangs conference in Manchester. Following which a number of people got together and formed UGIMA to try and implement a ten point action plan that arose from that conference. What's the correspondence between that work and the work that Charisma does?

Erinma Bell

The correspondence what we've done is according to those ten point plans we have tried to identify how the work we do meets those ten points. We have you know we sit on that group. Charisma members are part of that group.

Gus

How many members in Charisma?

Erinma Bell

How does it work? We started with a core group of 12. You know we had a core group of 12 and then it went down. We're like a core group of nine now. We have a core group of nine but we have many volunteers who get involved with the work of Charisma. So it's not just the nine people. You know we have a huge database of volunteers depending on what it is that whatever the issue is what we're tackling or what we're going forward with we call on other volunteers and other groups to take things forward. It's not necessarily you know that core group of Charisma itself. Because one of the

things that Charisma does not do we don't run projects. You know we don't set up projects unless there's a gap you know in order to do that. so coming back to your question about the ten point plan. We try our best to meet those ten points or at least identify work that we're doing how the work we're doing actually meets the ten points within the plan that came out from the Guns and Gangs conference.

Fay Selvan

Can I just move on perhaps to Robert? You're a criminologist at Manchester University and you are doing research around with gangs but you also work with mothers against violence. So what do you think? I mean in your evidence here you presented to us that we shouldn't actually be talking about gangs. Do you want to tell us a bit about that?

Dr Robert Ralphs

Did I say we shouldn't be talking about gangs?

Fay Selvan

You said it's not an issue so much of gangs. Shooting is more of a random and more round personal relationships and issues.

Dr Robert Ralphs

In terms of gun crime. I think I was making the point that quite often when there's any gun crime incident it's often been linked to gangs. Both the victim and perpetrator is seen as a gang issue and quite often that's not the case. I'm thinking quite often the police have made the mistake of naming somebody as gang involved who's been shot only to later to have to retract that statement. And I think quite often the public will think that if somebody's been shot then they must be a gang member or they must be dealing drugs. And in my experience that tends not to be the case. I think a lot

of young people, especially if they live in certain areas of the city, and they become a victim of firearm offences then people often just make that connection that they must be a gang member. And again people have this view it's all about drugs territory. It's about territory yes. It's about territory and if some young people from a certain area go over to another area then that alone can make them a potential target. But I've never come across anything in all the research that I've done. And I think it's the certainly the exception rather than the rule that when there's shooting incidents it's not about drugs territory and controlling the drugs markets it's about lots of other things. But drug territory and drug wars comes way down on the list of reasons why people get shot.

Gus

Staying with that for a minute we've heard in this Commission from other people that it's not helpful to be referring to young people involved in these activities as gangs because we don't understand gangs in the sense that for example the United States colleagues you work with understand them. What's your view about that? do you think that by calling them gangs we escalate the problem?

Dr Robert Ralphs

Well I think interesting that you should say that because two of me colleagues have just returned at weekend from a week away in Los Angeles looking at the gang problem there. And part of that they went on a tour round Los Angeles and looking at the gang issues. And it's a completely different world to what it is in the UK and again they talk about individual gangs such as M13 and Buds and Crips having 300, 400 thousand gang members. Even that the police would say for Manchester there's probably like two to three hundred known gang members that they have on a database. You're talking single gangs with hundreds of thousands of gang members. You get different

issues around gun crime, around welfare system. And it's completely different issue in America. And that's why I don't think it's particularly helpful to go over to America and bring their policies over to the UK. I think even if you're looking at Manchester and if you go to areas such as Wivenshaw I think they've got much more of a knife culture in Wivenshaw. Other parts of Manchester are more of a gun problem. I mean I go up to the northeast. I go to Scotland. And they can't understand why we've got a gun problem in Manchester. They say you know we've got some of the most deprived wards in our area. I think in Teesside around Middlesbrough in south bank they've got three of most five deprived wards in the country. Six of the top ten. You know it's known as a rough area. Traditionally rough working class area. But they don't have a gun problem. So I don't think you can generalise across England, across the UK, even within Manchester. So I don't really agree with going to the United States where in the last 20 years people talk about gangs originating in the 80s. some people contest that but I think that's what INAUDIBLE would say in Manchester and what the police would say they can trace gangs back to the 1980s. And yet the numbers that the police talk about are still quite consistent. Quite low. Two to three hundred. If you look at the United States since the 80s their gang membership has escalated from a couple of thousand to over a million. So I think they should be coming over to the UK and looking, no really truthfully. How we've managed to pretty much contain the gang situation here. So I don't think it's helpful going to the US for solutions to what are localised problems.

Fay Selvan

Can I just bring in Ian?

Ian.

Hi Robert. I'm just fascinated by your statement that we shouldn't be looking

at America. Looking at the fact that a lot of the young people who adapt this gang culture look to what happens in America and how things happen there. Shouldn't we surely be looking at what could possibly happen in the next ten 20 years down the road with a view to stemming it here? And if we're not supposed to look to America where a lot of the sort of first impression comes from where should we be looking?

Dr Robert Ralphs

I think what works locally. I say I think it's very localised problems. And I think you know there's people within Manchester such as ex gang members in Manchester who could do a lot of good work working with the gang members. They actually do. They do concept resolution. Mediation work. But they don't get the credit for it. I know for myself that people get phone calls certain amount of conflict has happened. You know can you help out? And there is that kind of mediation that goes on but they've not been trained. They're not recognised as mediators. And they don't get that kind of training. What Erinma was talking about. You know they could be used in a much better way but you see a continual investment given to agencies such as MAGS or to the police or other interventions. They're trying to contact these so called hard to reach young people where they're working with them all the time. You know it's their family, friends, local people that they know. They've got that respect. They've got that experience. So I think we need to look more locally and look at organisations like Charisma, Mothers against Violence. The contacts they've got, the work they do, and build up on that rather than looking at what happens in America because it's a completely different situation for lots of reasons. And in particular you know access to guns and firearms in America is the obvious one.

Fay Selvan

Thank you. So apart from that one thing which was very interesting just as a

last question what would be the one thing that you would do to help stem gun and knife crime?

Dr Robert Ralphs

What would be the one that I would do? That's a difficult question. I say I think that's one of the things is the local side of things. But I mean I suppose one of the things and again I suppose what I would do is things like mandatory sentences around gun crime, possession of guns, and talk of the similar kind of things around knife crime. Again from the research that we've done nobody has ever mentioned the fact that you know there's a minimum sentence of two years, or five years, or ten years around gun crime is going to make somebody not carry a gun. He's carrying a gun to commit an offence or for their own protection. And again I think it brings a lot of young people into the criminal justice system. They might be carrying a knife in particular for protection and could end up with a minimum two year sentence. And I think what quite often happens is since these changes you know some people have you know mentioned that whether the increase in knife crime could be as a result of the mandatory sentences around gun crime. So young people know there's a risk of being caught with a firearm that they're more likely to carry a weapon. But also people are hiding guns in public places. Maybe giving them to relatives and friends. Our younger more vulnerable people that might be involved in gangs giving them to carry or to look after. So I think I'm against some of the policies, some of the American policies and some of the policies around mandatory sentences for possession.

Fay Selvan

Thank you. Erinma.

Erinma Bell

I think you know I think Rob has already mentioned a bit of it but work that's

being done locally on the ground because I think a lot of the answers, we have a lot of the answers but we're not looking directly at those. Again you know we're looking outside. So I think a lot of the work that's being done locally you know needs to be looked at and needs to be scrutinised and we need to learn from the small pockets of work that's being done and the small successes that are being done or being achieved we need to look at those and learn from those. Most of the time the reason why you know the successes are only small is down to resources. Because you know we don't have the resources you know to be able to spread our work you know wider or further and reach more people. We can only work with so many people with the limited amount of resources. So work that's being done successful work that's being done I think that needs to be scrutinised and looked at and let's learn from that. And again I think the thing with the sentencing. You know it's not helping our children at all because when they actually come out you know from a sentence they come out worse criminals than you know when they went in. I'm not saying people should not be you know reprimanded for what they do but I honestly believe that if a child reaches, or if a person reaches the criminal justice system or we lock them up and put them away, we've actually failed that child. You know we've failed them. We need to be concentrating on preventative work. You know prevent them from getting into that system in the first place. Maybe we might need some sort of national campaign you know to actually create the awareness that carrying a dangerous weapon. You know it makes you not only a potential killer but also a potential victim as well. you know we need to have something that is national that we're saying the same message you know right across the city and not just you know in one particular area. You know the message needs to go right across the UK really.

Fay Selvan

Thank you.

Dr Robert Ralphs

I would add to that Erinma was saying there about some of the young people that I've known in the last few years that have gone to youth offending institute and they've gone there with no real gang connections. They've come out after a year or two affiliated to a gang because they've had to do that when they've been inside for their own protection and they've latched onto a gang that's in the area that they're from. So I think there is more negative.

Erinma Bell

More negative than positive.

Fay Selvan

Thank you very much we have to end it there. But thank you very much for giving evidence.

Erinma Bell

OK.

CUT