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Date: 21 September 2016

Sophie Linden
Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime
MOPAC
(via email)

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Serious youth violence

In July 2016, the Police and Crime Committee met with a group of stakeholders to discuss the recent rise in serious youth violence (SYV), including the reasons why some young people become victims or perpetrators of SYV, and how it might be better prevented.

The committee will continue to take an interest in this important topic as part of its ongoing work programme, in respect of both prevention and enforcement. We would like to share our initial findings and observations with you in the hope that they will be a helpful contribution as the Mayor and yourself develop the Police and Crime Plan.

The number of young women becoming victims of SYV is a concern. Almost a quarter of all victims of SYV in London—around 1,500—are young women: a rise of around 58 per cent compared to four years ago. While we recognise the good work being undertaken across London to increase reporting, particularly in respect of domestic violence, we were concerned to hear that young women are increasingly involved in “working with drugs and holding knives”, and that social media is being used as a tool to connect vulnerable young women with groups—often of young men—that increase their vulnerability and place them in danger.

The tendency to link SYV closely to gang activity is unhelpful. Data provided to us by the Met suggests that gangs are involved in a relatively small amount of SYV: just under five per cent—or around 290 incidents—in 2015-16. While we accept there will be some under-reporting of gang activity, it is clear SYV is a much broader issue that affects a much wider section of

Londoners. The GLA Peer Outreach Team suggests that a lot of violent activity in London happens among peer groups, rather than gangs as they are traditionally known. However, young people feel that the Met and other services unhelpfully 'label' these young people as gang members. MOPAC should consider how it can help to uncouple the two issues, encourage SYV to be treated as a broader problem than that of a 'gang issue', and rebalance public policy and public attention to reflect the prevalence of non-gang-related youth violence.

The fear of knife crime is in itself fuelling knife crime. A dominant driver of knife crime appears to be a belief that young people need to be prepared to defend themselves. In some cases, this is fuelled by a perception of the number and severity of weapons on the streets, or by incidents that occur in their communities, which creates a negative perception of safety. If a serious incident occurs, there needs to be a concerted effort by the police and other agencies to reassure young people that they are safe and to tackle the immediate sense of danger. This might be through intelligence led stop and search, more visible patrols, or by agencies working with local youth clubs and schools.

We heard about the increase in availability of knives, and the ease of purchase of weapons like 'zombie knives', which is fuelling fear among young people. However, we also heard that most knife crimes are committed using regular knives, "ones that are readily there in the home, not the trophy knives that we see quite often on social media and elsewhere." The Mayor and MOPAC should provide reassurance and effective and appropriate messaging to London's young people about the realities of knife crime, without increasing fear.

Young victims of serious violence need to have the confidence to report it, be that to the police or another trusted source. Members of the GLA Peer Outreach Team have said that a large proportion of youth violence is not reflected in current statistics because young people are reluctant to report to the police. The Commissioner has recognised that under-reporting among young people is a problem and has said that greater awareness of the different ways young people can report anonymously is needed, as "they do not often know who to tell to not be then seen as somebody who just gives information to the police". We look to MOPAC to help drive an increase in awareness of the importance of young victims reporting crime and the ways in which they can do so.

There is more to be done to understand not only the drivers of SYV, but the reasons why most young Londoners do not become involved in serious violence. We heard a range of suggestions as to why the data is showing a rise in SYV, including changes in recording practices; the changing "criminal economy", as young people become more involved in serious crimes such as drugs; increased population mobility creating tensions among different communities; and an increased willingness of young people to carry weapons. There are, of course, many young people exposed to these and other risk factors that do not become victims or perpetrators of SYV.

Speaking to young Londoners will help to more clearly identify the drivers as to why people do and do not engage in SYV. We heard from Chief Superintendent Dave Stringer that "the thing that has really been missing so far is actually getting to the voices of young people themselves and what they think about gangs and victimisation and how much of it is happening to them." MOPAC should build upon existing work to understand the particular drivers among London's young people that both push them toward, or stop them, getting involved in crimes such as SYV. This, in turn, will help to shape targeted and tailored preventative measures. We will look to see how such analysis is used to help inform the Police and Crime Plan.

Overall, the Mayor's and MOPAC's commitments and the tactical responses to SYV will need to adapt as the threat, risk and harm evolves. There are several ambitions that the experts we heard from would like to see considered as strategies are developed. These include:

- earlier intervention with much younger children through work in schools
- effective engagement with young people in pupil referral units or alternative provision, who are often some of the most disengaged and vulnerable
- building upon the capitals' focus on young victims, through measures such as restorative justice
- better sharing of information to further understand the problems being dealt with by services
- efforts to ensure that the impact of funding changes on the recruitment and retention of youth workers is minimised

We look forward to hearing about your plans to tackle SYV in London as they develop, and welcome any comments that you have in response to our findings. It would be very helpful if you could copy your reply electronically to the committee's Scrutiny Manager, Becky Short, becky.short@london.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve O'Connell', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Steve O'Connell AM
Chairman of the Police and Crime Committee

Cc. Commander Duncan Ball, MPS

