

Serious youth violence

- **The number of victims of serious youth violence in London is rising.**
- **An increasing number of young women are victims of serious violence.**
- **Gang activity is present in only a small proportion of serious youth violence.**
- **Knives continue to play a significant part in serious youth violence.**
- **Following an incident of serious violence some young people will carry a knife if they feel unsafe.**

News of young people being violently injured or killed in London—often by their peers—feels like an increasingly regular feature in local media. The number of victims of serious youth violence in London has been rising over the past four years. In July 2016, the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee examined the detail behind this rise, and the reasons why some young people find themselves victims or perpetrators of serious violence.

The Metropolitan Police (the Met) collects and publishes information on victims of serious youth violence in London. Victims of serious youth violence are aged 1-19, and have been subject to offences such as violence against the person, sexual offences, robbery, or gun or knife crime.¹

We have examined data from the Met to assess the types of serious youth violence that are taking place in the capital. We have also spoken to organisations working with young people and heard about what drives them towards serious violence and how it might be better prevented. This report summarises the committee's key findings.

The committee welcomes your thoughts and comments on serious youth violence in London, to help us hold the Mayor and MOPAC to account. You can get in touch with the committee via policeandcrimecommittee@london.gov.uk.

Serious youth violence

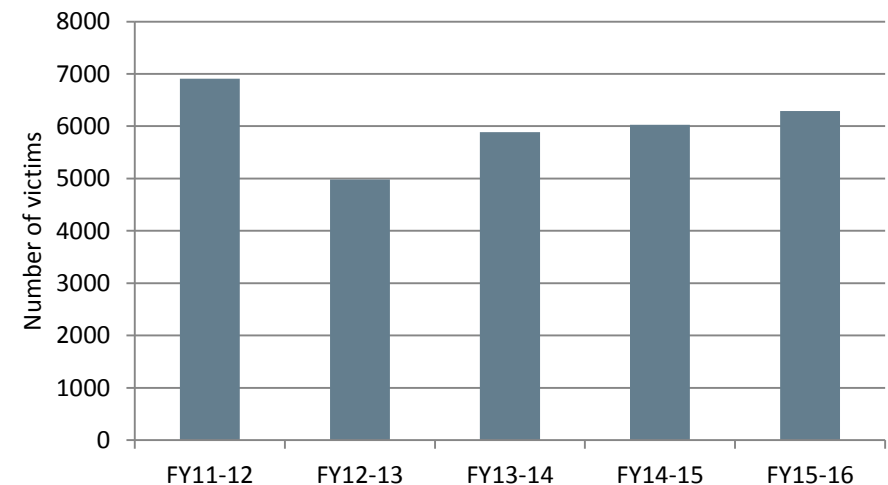
The number of serious youth violence victims is rising

In 2015-16, there were 6,290 victims of serious youth violence. This is around a 4 per cent increase on the previous year and over a 20 per cent increase on 2012-13.² Youth workers supporting young victims in each of the four Major Trauma Centres in the capital currently see around 50 young people that have suffered assault every month at each centre.³

The number of victims has been rising slowly over the past four years, following a sharp drop in 2011-12. The Met attributes that drop to a reduction in personal robbery at that time. It also suggests that the recent rise can in part be explained by a change in recording practices around Grievous Bodily Harm, which ranges from incidents such as “a fight in the playground to a really serious assault outside a nightclub.”⁴

Other commentators, however, suggest that a number of other factors are driving the recent increase. These include the changing “criminal economy”, with young people 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.⁵

The number of victims of serious youth violence has been rising slowly since 2012-13



Source: Metropolitan Police

As with many crimes, the likelihood of under-reporting makes it hard to understand the true picture of serious youth violence in London. The Commissioner of the Met, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, 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”.⁶

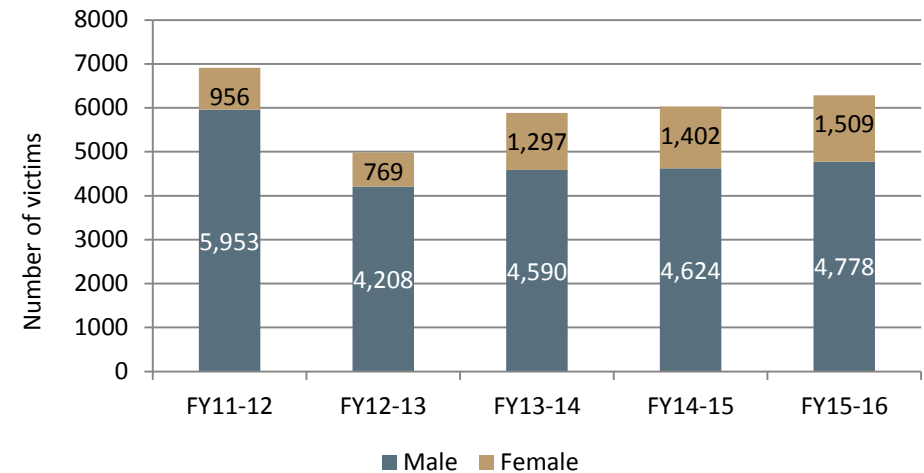
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An increasing number of young women are victims of serious violence

Almost a quarter of all victims of serious youth violence are young women. This is a rise of around 58 per cent compared to four years ago. The Met says, however, that the number of young women who are victim to offences that cause the most harm has remained stable.⁷ There are also indications of an increasing number of young women committing serious violence. Following a sharp drop between 2011-12 and 2012-13 (from 179 to 99), the number of young women who have had formal action taken against them stands at just over 200 a year.⁸

The recent rise has been attributed to greater awareness and reporting of domestic violence. Matt Watson, Service Manager at the Integrated Gangs Unit in Westminster Council, said that young women have “an increased awareness [...] about reasonable relationships and what they can expect from relationships” and that this is helped by interventions specifically aimed at supporting young women.⁹ The Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), for example, provides funding for youth Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) in trauma centres. John Poyton, Chief Executive of Redthread—an organisation that supports vulnerable young people to access services such as youth work, healthcare, and education—explained that this positive development has enabled them “to start to pick up some more of those young women that were otherwise probably slipping through the net”.¹⁰

Young women now make up almost a quarter of serious youth violence victims



Source: Metropolitan Police

The involvement of young women in serious violence is now a much higher priority among local services. Matt Watson said that at the start of his work at the Gangs Unit he saw work with young men but “the young women would be routinely ignored as not particularly important.”¹¹ Now it is recognised 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, increasing their vulnerability and placing them in danger.¹²

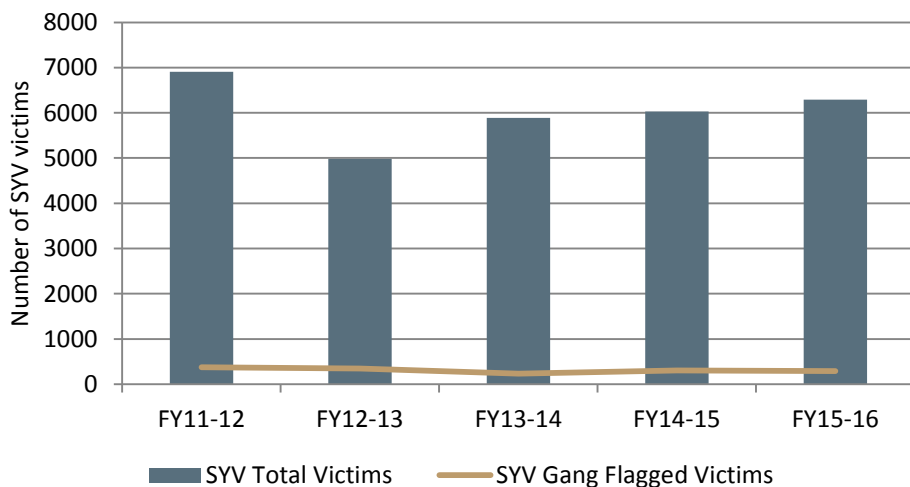
Serious youth violence

Gang activity makes up only a small proportion of serious youth violence

Serious youth violence in London is often considered a 'gang issue'.

However, not all young victims of serious violence are linked to gangs. The Met's data shows that a gang element was identified in a relatively small amount of serious youth violence: just under five per cent in 2015-16.¹³ This figure has been fairly consistent since 2011-12.¹⁴

A small proportion of serious youth violence is flagged as having a gang element



Source: Metropolitan Police

While there is some under-reporting of gang activity, it is clear serious youth violence is a much broader issue. In 2014-15, a higher proportion of gang-related knife crime resulted in serious injury, but in terms of overall volume there were more serious knife crime injuries that were non-gang related.¹⁵ The GLA Peer Outreach Team suggests that much of the violent activity in London involves 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 when it is not the case.

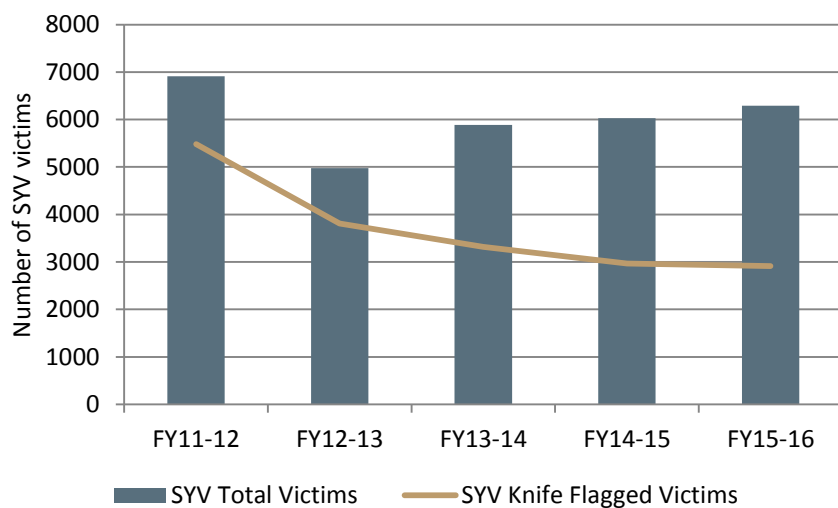
“serious youth violence does not equal gang crime”
– Stephen Greenhalgh, former Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime.¹⁶

Serious youth violence

Knives continue to play a significant part in serious youth violence

There has been a reduction in the number of serious youth violence incidents in which knives are identified as a factor, but it remains a significant problem. It is currently identified in around half of all serious youth violence, compared to 79 per cent in 2011-12.¹⁷

Knives were flagged as a factor in around half of serious youth violence in 2015-16



Source: Metropolitan Police

John Poyton from Redthread said that currently, the percentage of victims presenting at trauma centres with knife-related or weapon-related injuries is going up.¹⁸ It is not yet considered the start of a longer term trend. Graham Robb, Youth Justice and Education Consultant, said that there tend to be “spikes of volatility” in knife crime, and, rather than a change in trend, the recent data might be showing that kind of spike.

“...we know that if you carry a knife you are far more likely to get stabbed, probably with that knife.”

- Matt Watson, Integrated Gangs Unit, City of Westminster

The availability of knives is an ongoing concern. Graham Robb said that “what is happening now appears to be people being able to order really nasty knives over the internet”.¹⁹ However, the police and youth workers have said that in reality 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.”²⁰ The Met has said that intelligence led stop and search is “absolutely critical” to removing knives from the streets, but recognises that it needs to be used fairly and with the support of the community.²¹

Serious youth violence

The drivers of serious youth violence are complex and multi-faceted, but a negative perception of safety is a big factor

The reasons young people become victims and perpetrators of serious youth violence are many and varied. Factors such as the influence of peer groups; the level of exposure to violence within the family; or the impact of the community have all been cited as reasons why a young person might engage in serious violence. Unfortunately, it was suggested that many of the underlying drivers of serious youth violence are the kinds of issues “we will probably be talking about in 30 or 40 years’ time” and are not things that can be easily addressed through traditional local government interventions.²²

A dominant driver, particularly of knife crime among young people, appears to be a belief that they need to be prepared to defend themselves. This could, in part, be fuelled by a perception of the number and severity of weapons on the streets. New legislation banning the sale, manufacture, rental or importation of so called ‘zombie knives’ could go some way to addressing this perception.²³ It may also be a fear fuelled by incidents that occur in their communities, which cause 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.

“...if you do have an increase in violence or an increase in stabbing, that then creates that environment of insecurity for the younger person and therefore they are more likely to take a knife out and therefore are more likely to use it and so it goes on.”

– Commander Duncan Ball, Metropolitan Police

There is more to be done not only to understand the drivers of serious youth violence in London, but also why some young people who are exposed to risk factors manage to avoid becoming victims or perpetrators. Matt Watson suggested that currently “the problem with prevention [of youth offending] is you throw the net very, very wide. That is obviously very expensive, and you are not really sure what the key factors are with all these people with very, very similar issues and difficulties”.²⁴ Understanding why people do and do not involve themselves in serious youth violence should help with “learning your way out of the problems” and shaping more targeted preventative measures.²⁵

Serious youth violence

Approaches to tackling serious youth violence need to develop in parallel with changes in threat, risk and harm

The Mayor has committed to tackling the “growing problems” of knife crime and youth violence.²⁶ Among his proposals to tackle serious youth violence is a knife crime strategy that will focus on tackling gangs and shops illegally selling knives; an anti-gang strategy developed alongside local authorities, schools and youth services; and greater control of the youth justice system to deliver a joined up approach to cutting youth crime.²⁷

“this is an incredibly dynamic bit of landscape and we have got to be very careful not to design a solution that is right for 2016 that changes in 2018” – Graham Robb, youth justice and education consultant

There are good examples of projects that support victims and perpetrators of serious youth violence, using the “teachable moment” in their lives to motivate change. This might be in a major trauma centre following an incident; or in the community with young people who have seen friends hurt or injured. Organisations are working to capitalise on these “moments” and encourage young people to reflect on their choices and receive any necessary support. These projects, such as the provision of youth workers in trauma centres, should continue to be supported while they can demonstrate such positive impact.

In the longer term, the Mayor’s commitments and the tactical responses to serious youth violence will need to adapt as the threat, risk and harm evolves. There are several ambitions that experts would like to see considered as the Mayor develops his strategies. 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 minimised²⁸

The Met and other public services recognise that “we are not going to enforce our way out of anything”, and that the full confidence of communities is needed to help prevent serious youth violence both in terms of communities having the confidence to come forward with information about young people who are at risk, and to deal with issues at a local level, because “it is the community that is going provide guidance for the young people” when agencies are not there.²⁹

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Endnotes

¹ Metropolitan Police, Serious Youth Violence across the MPS between 01/04/2011 to 31/03/2016

² Metropolitan Police, Serious Youth Violence across the MPS between 01/04/2011 to 31/03/2016

³ John Poyton, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016. Major Trauma Centres are for patients with multiple serious injuries that could result in death or serious disability. Youth workers are provided at major trauma centres through organisations such as Redthread, an organisation that supports vulnerable young people and helps them to access services such as youth work, health care, and education.

⁴ Chief Superintendent Dave Stringer, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

⁵ Graham Robb, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

⁶ London Assembly Plenary meeting, [6 July 2016](#)

⁷ Letter from Commander Duncan Ball, MPS to the Police and Crime Committee, 2 September 2016

⁸ Includes those individuals who have been accused of an offence and proceeded against, resulting in a detection (i.e. charge, summons, fixed penalty notice, taken into consideration or caution). A perpetrator of Serious Youth Violence could be proceeded against for multiple offences but would only be counted once.

⁹ Matt Watson, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

¹⁰ John Poyton, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

¹¹ John Poyton, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

¹² Matt Watson, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

¹³ Metropolitan Police, Serious Youth Violence across the MPS between 01/04/2011 to 31/03/2016, Victims of SYV data

¹⁴ Metropolitan Police, Serious Youth Violence across the MPS between 01/04/2011 to 31/03/2016, Victims of SYV data

¹⁵ MOPAC Challenge presentation, [February 2016](#)

¹⁶ MOPAC, [MOPAC Challenge – Gangs transcript](#), February 2016

¹⁷ Metropolitan Police, Serious Youth Violence across the MPS between 01/04/2011 to 31/03/2016, Victims of SYV data

¹⁸ Graham Robb and John Poyton, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

¹⁹ Graham Robb, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

²⁰ Commander Duncan Ball, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

²¹ Commander Duncan Ball, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

²² Commander Duncan Ball, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

²³ On 18 August 2016 an amendment to the Criminal Justice Act 1988 banned the sale, manufacture, rental or importation of knives often referred to as 'zombie knives', 'zombie killer knives' and 'zombie slayer knives'. The Metropolitan Police issued guidance about "zombie" knives, saying that there is no specific shape or style, but they are very ornate and intended to shock; they vary in length and often have a serrated edge; the knives carry logos or words that glamorise and promote violence; and they are often sold as collectors' items online and in some shops

²⁴ Matt Watson, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

²⁵ Graham Robb, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

²⁶ Mayor of London, Mayor puts young victims at the heart of work to tackle knife crime, 13 July 2016

²⁷ Sadiq Khan manifesto, [A safer and more secure London](#)

²⁸ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016

²⁹ Commander Duncan Ball, meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 14 July 2016