

# Gang life

**As an inspector with West Midlands Police it was Kirk Dawes' job to arrest gang members who broke the law. Today, it is his job to try and stop them killing each other. Tina Orr Munro reports on his work.**



 The former police officer now runs the West Midlands Mediation and Transformation Service which tries to reduce inter-gang conflict by mediation. It works closely with the police and other partners in Birmingham to reduce gang violence.

Kirk Dawes became interested in mediation two years before his retirement when he carried out some work on gangs on behalf of the National Black Police Association.

'We looked at what could be done other than enforcement. When are the times when we really speak to these people? Enforcement is always there and at times that is the only route, but there is also a role for mediation.'

It is a controversial approach, but one that can already claim

successes. Recently Mr Dawes and his mediators liaised for hours via mobile phones between rival gang members after a dispute had escalated into threats to kill. Serious public disorder still occurred, but not on the scale that was feared, says Mr Dawes.

'Yes, there was trouble, but no-one was killed and we viewed that as a success.'

### Gang violence

Gang violence has plagued parts of Birmingham for a number of years. Two main groups dominate the scene; the Burger Bar Boys and the Johnson Crew which were formed about 20 years ago and are named after cafes where they would meet. The violence between the two gangs plumbed

new depths when, in 2003, teenagers Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare were gunned down in a botched revenge killing. In March 2005, four men were convicted of their murder. They were members of the Burger Bar Boys.

Mr Dawes and his team hope that by opening the lines of communication with some gang members they can use their relationship with them to diffuse potential trouble and ultimately save lives. He says that treating gang members as people was their starting point.

'We use the human factor. We treat them as human beings. None of them want to die. We will talk to anybody to get the job done, even some of my old enemies. We go and knock on doors

and we engage with them and we build a rapport.'

One of the trump cards the mediation service uses is the fact that several of those who work for it have had personal experience of gangs. One is a social worker whose own son was shot. Two of the mediators have both served long prison sentences.

'It means they can share common experiences with those they are talking to. Our mediators understand them. They've been there themselves. That is a huge benefit,' says Mr Dawes.

The West Midlands Mediation and Transformation Service costs £250,000 a year to run which Mr Dawes argues is good value for money considering the average cost of a murder inquiry.



'Murder investigations cost £1.1 million which means there are huge potential savings to be made if we can use mediation to stop revenge killings.'

But the problem of gangs is not confined to one area and neither is it any worse than it has been in the past, says Simon Hallsworth, a lecturer from London Metropolitan University.

He says it is important to explode the myths surrounding gangs which have been fuelled by headlines claiming that gun crime amongst the young is 'out of control'.

'There is no evidence that gangs are more prolific, prevalent and dangerous. The gang is not new, it has simply been forgotten,' he says.

Research shows that few young people carry knives and that ball bearings, not bullets, are most likely to be fired by guns possessed by the small population of young people who carry them.

**Gang life**

However, he says weapon use is a grim fact of urban life for some and certain areas are more susceptible to gangs than others.

'In poor deprived areas group life can take a pathological turn, including gang formation and we cannot be complacent,' he says.

As the second most deprived borough in England, Hackney in East London is one such area. A quarter of its population is under the age of 15 and a quarter of 16 24 year olds do not have a steady income. There are four main criminal networks operating within and from Hackney. The temptation to join a gang is clear.

'Kids are getting into gangs because it feels safe in a gang,' says Det Ch Supt Lewis Benjamin from the Met's Specialist Directorate.

In the last few years, 13 murders in London have been associated with gangs. The

Met's Operation Cruise aims to tackle the whole issue of gangs in inner city areas. Another operation, Stabiliser, has been set up to deliver a systematic multi-agency approach to dealing with crime networks and criminal gangs in Hackney.

Det Ch Supt Benjamin says the Met's approach to tackling gangs is based on a combination of enforcement and prevention. He says that while the police can go after gang members, the key is to stop young people getting involved in the first place.

'It has to be a systematic approach. If you are going to tackle gangs you are going to have to do a whole lot of other things. If you just take out that top level, other people will just come up and replace them.'

'There needs to be a combination of disruption and prevention at the lower level and enforcement at the top level.'

'Prevention is the biggest part of Operation Stabiliser. Kids are getting into street gangs and the answer can't just be cop led. It has to come

from a whole range of partners. We have to hit every level to keep the pressure on.'

**Prevention**

Prevention comes in many guises in Hackney. It includes poster campaigns, the safer schools initiative, street pastors, attached to the church, and even a specially set up cycle squad that has proved particularly successful in engaging young people in a positive way.

But when prevention fails, enforcement also needs to be delivered in a systematic and measured way to achieve maximum results. Recently sixteen arrests were made from just one gang.

'You can't arrest gangs or drugs, you have to go after individual people. Our philosophy is you have to match the person against a bespoke set of tactics. For some that's enforcement. For others that's prevention,' says Det Ch Supt Benjamin.

Financial investigations and identification of prolific and persistent offenders who are often key members of gangs are just some of the enforcement activities that are happening in Hackney.

The Home Office agrees that using a range of measures to tackle gangs is the way forward.

As a result of a number of high profile cases, the Home Office set up a special unit to deal with this, including knife crime.

Carole Eniffer, head of gun and knife crime for the Home Office, says: 'It is a complex issue

requiring complex solutions. Young people are carrying weapons for protection. These weapons can then be used against them. There won't be a one size fits all to solve these problems. They won't be solved by any one agency. We have to work together. We need to identify what works and why it works.'

New legislation is aimed at tightening the laws on guns and knives. New powers could see head teachers allowed to search their pupils for weapons and using a person, such as child, to conceal weapons, could become an aggravating factor in sentencing. The Home Office is also looking at the internet auction sites where weapons can be bought and is working with internet service providers to try and tackle this.

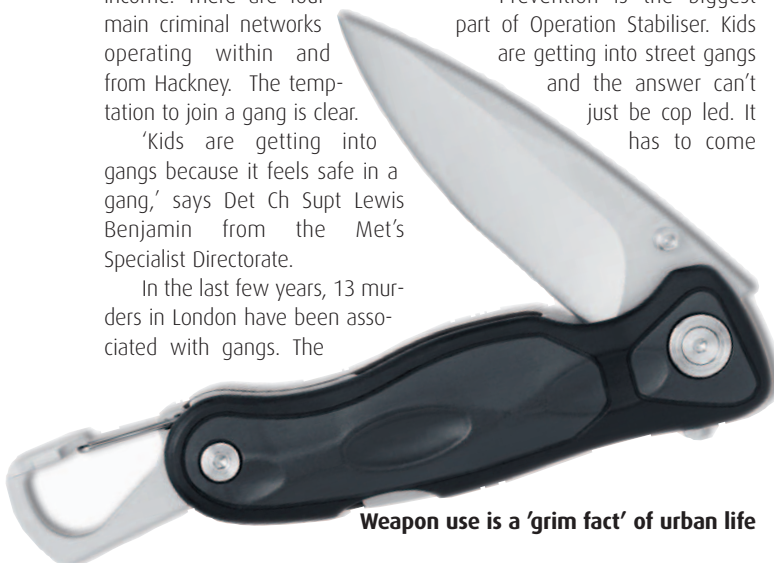
On the prevention side, the Home Office's Connected Fund provides financial support for small community groups. The first round of funding was in May last year and provides £250,000 for schemes and activities to divert children from knife and gun crime, including projects like the Eastside Young Leaders' Academy in Newham, which runs a series of workshops on gun crime for young people considered at risk by their schools and social services

But there are still many challenges to be faced. Intelligence suggests London gangs are no longer confining their activity to the inner cities. Drug runners from Hackney are beginning to operate outside of London and some have already been arrested in the Home Counties. Gang-related crime is still under reported, possibly because of the fear of reprisals.

As Det Ch Supt Benjamin says: 'If left unchecked people will develop and move on to the next level where it becomes more difficult to catch them.'



● **Kirk Dawes, Simon Hallsworth, Det Ch Supt Lewis Benjamin and Carole Eniffer were speaking in London at last month's Policy Spotlight conference on Knives, Guns and Gangs.**



**Weapon use is a 'grim fact' of urban life**