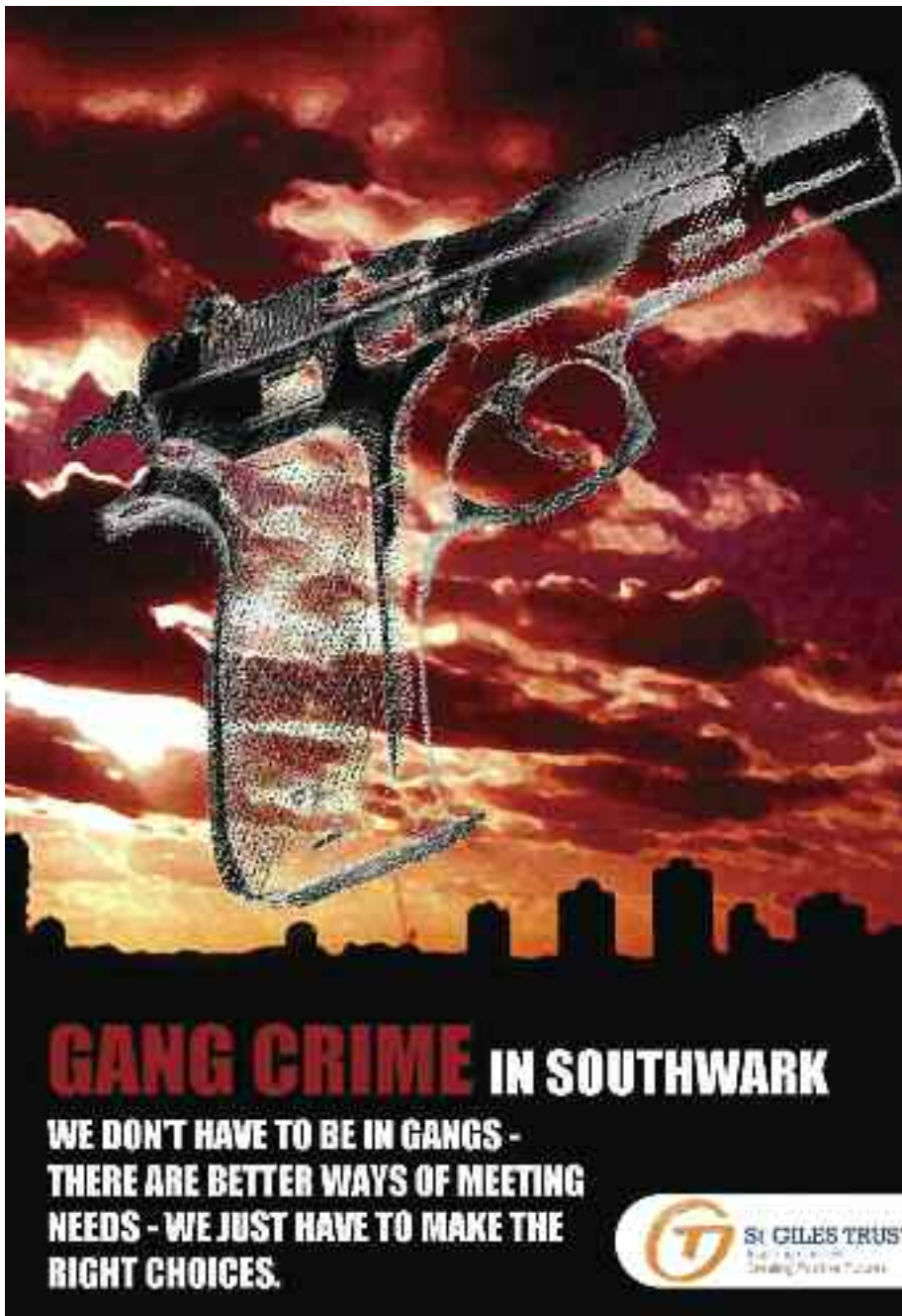


The untouchables?

As newspapers carry increasing reports of gang violence and teenage murders associated with gang culture, Syreeta Lund speaks to a former gang member trying to halt the trend through an innovative project.



How did one man go from being a gang member, instilling fear into those he met, to mentoring those who took the same path in order to steer away from a life of gang violence and crime?

Former gang member Junior Smart's world began to crumble the day he was arrested. He was sentenced to more than a decade in prison for his crimes and his prospects didn't look good. He is still on licence so we cannot go into the details of his crimes but he has since turned his life around and is helping to do the same for others.

A mixture of his own tenacity and support from the St Giles Trust, a charity who work with ex-prisoners, led to the 33-year-old setting up the Southwark Gangs Project, known as the SOS Project under the umbrella of the Trust.

Junior concedes that many *Police* officers will see the same faces time and again when it comes to gangs and related crimes and have a pretty cynical perspective. But he tells Police that if there is one thing he has learned from the project, it is to treat people as individuals.

"The SOS Project is the first project of its kind to engage with serious repeat offenders and prolific offenders. It's the first project that is ex-offender led. When I was in prison this project did not exist, people thought we would not make good employees or be able to mentor people but here I am," says Junior, who was involved in a gang himself back in 2001 and now works intensively one-to-one with gang



Junior Smart: making a difference

members to give them options to change their lives.

He is the sole main project worker who deals directly with active gang members, and has worked with more than 60 ex-offenders in the last two years. The ages of his clients range between 16 and 30 and they are based in the Southwark area and are vulnerable to going back into gang life and committing crime. Only five of those have reoffended since getting

involved in the programme. Nationally, Nacro, the crime reduction charity, reports that 67 per cent of offenders go on to reoffend when they leave prison.

The project is currently targeted at those completing sentences at Kent Prisons with a Southwark connection and provides a bespoke service for clients. They identify young people already in prison who are involved in gang-related crime or at risk of becoming involved. Funding is

provided by Southwark's Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, part of the Vulnerable Young Adults programme.

The service supports offenders while they are still in prison, helping them reintegrate into the community, often involving the person's family within the process and providing awareness of how the victims of their crimes are affected as well as their communities. They aim to reduce reoffending and provide a more positive future for those involved.

When Junior himself was in prison he found out about a project called The Listeners connected to The Samaritans but run by trained offenders inside the prison who could speak to other inmates about some of the issues they were facing.

“Junior recalls his experiences: “When you are in a gang surrounded by negative people saying, ‘J, you are untouchable, we’ve never seen anyone like you, the police will never catch you,’ you start to believe it. But that phrase rings in my head quite a lot.”

“I became a listener myself within the space of a week,” he says. Junior then moved on to helping to teach other inmates to read and write and then became a class mentor. His sentence was reduced to ten years on appeal and he was moved to an open prison where an opportunity came up to mentor at Rochester Young Offenders’ Institution.

“That was strange because I was travelling from an open prison to a closed one really. I was talking to them about issues such as what it would be like to be a father returning home after being away and I remember the penny really dropped with one kid. It felt like I was making a difference.”



Photography: Getty Images

Gang life: many members see their peers as 'family'

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Junior meets a client

He looked at projects working with ex-offenders and found little on offer so when the St Giles Trust began an advisory service at Rochester he said he simply kept 'pestering them to believe the project would work'.

He believes the holistic approach is not a 'soft touch', that the path to changing your life completely is never easy, particularly for those who are often already vulnerable and have grown up with gangs who can be like family to them. But what changes one man may not work for another and Junior reiterates that it is down to the individual making the decision to change their own life; his programme can only help empower them and provide options out of gang life.

The project provides support, advice and guidance and works alongside the Criminal Justice System, Youth Offending Teams, Social Services, probation and parents. On a practical level this can involve advice and help with housing and jobs etc.

"To address the issues you have to find out why they [the client] joined a gang and finding sustainable change isn't always easy. I have moved back to the same area, for example, and for some clients this is catastrophic because of their associations."

He says he needed support to change his life and adds, "It wasn't a walk in

the park and I still made mistakes."

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Then in his early 20s, Junior had his own reasons for getting drawn into gang life, things took a down turn when his mother died and he suffered from sickle cell which made him prone to sickness and slight in build, a target for bullies. He does not use these

factors as excuses, just contributors to taking a different path.

"Everyone joins [gangs] for different reasons. It could have been the need for financial gain or simply to create fear. I did have lots of angst and a background of being bullied and need for approval. For some people it's exclusion, for some people it's the need for support.

"I can relate to young people and where they are coming from. This is one of reasons why the project is quite successful but across St Giles there are lots of ex-offenders that bring their experiences in, that's why we are so unique – the client is at the centre of everything."

He says that there are a number of factors, highlighting the 'four a's' which increase the likelihood of young people being more at risk of becoming involved in gang violence: arguments, alcohol, armoureds, such as a knives or guns and associations with gang members.

He adds: "It's like a fire needed different elements to keep burning, like oxygen. If someone is drunk carrying a weapon such as a knife then things can get exacerbated. You can get called in to protect someone during an argument and that's where associations with gang members or friends can draw you in. I do have compassion but you also have to take responsibility for your actions and to turn it around."

Parents who are worried their kids may be involved in gang violence often need advice about how to read the signs:

- Gang symbols or tags on schoolbooks, bags, bedroom posters and personal possessions
- Clothing - sometimes young people wear clothing to align themselves to specific groups.
- Postcodes and unsafe areas - this is harder to spot but sometimes young people align themselves to postcodes and have no-go areas.
- Truancy - have you spotted anything or has the school raised any concerns? If they are not at school, the question is where are they?
- Police - is your child getting into trouble with the police? Be ready to challenge any signs of unnecessary or unacceptable behaviour. Make a compact and have consequences if it is broken.
- Other organisations which offer help:

From Boyhood to Manhood Foundation - www.usatfbmf.com

Eternal Life Support Centre - provides a wide range of support to young people and parents including one-to-one mentoring, counselling, and life skills training. www.elscuk.com