

WITNESS

# A summer of stabbings

BY DAVID ROBINS

*It is not clear whether gun and knife crime is on the rise, but it does seem to be increasingly concentrated among resentful young males in thrall to the cult of cool*

What drives the recent wave of knife and gun killings involving young people? Some speak of spiralling violence associated with the drugs trade, others trace it back to the abolition of the “sus” laws, which makes it harder for the police to stop and search youngsters. Older commentators will remember the 1950s—flick knives, the rise of the juvenile delinquent, the teenager as the cuckoo in the nest of the postwar working-class family. And then there is the “cool” commercial culture—hedonism, a narcissistic concern with appearance, a macho detachment—to which many of today’s teenagers adhere.

But is knife and gun crime actually on the rise? Home office figures show 50 fatal shootings in England and Wales in 2006, compared with 66 in 1995. There were 243 fatal stabbings in 1995, but 212 in 2006. Tony McNulty, a home office minister, says there is no evidence of a rise in knife-related homicides in the past ten years. According to a survey from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, anything between 22,000 and 58,000 young people were stabbed in 2004—an indication of just how hard it is to ascertain the exact extent of knife crime.

It is all very confusing. But most experts agree that knife and gun crime, fatal and non-fatal, is increasingly concentrated among disaffected youth. There are around 170 violent youth gangs in London alone, according to Scotland Yard. There also appears to be a new targetting of the “winners” by the “losers.” The homicide rate has doubled since 1970, a rise that some criminologists attribute entirely to the most deprived young males. We are seeing something more than a re-run of the switchblade era of the 1950s.

In my own neighbourhood of Kentish Town, a socially mixed area of north London, the local press proclaimed the

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A memorial to murdered teenager Billy Cox

crime rate “worse than the Bronx” in the summer of 2006. Even middle-class boys carried knives “for protection,” feeling like chickens ready to be plucked. There were assaults on, and occasional executions of, complete strangers. A street challenge followed by ritualised insults followed by assault/death was the usual scenario. An armed young man on a short fuse with no self-control: “He looked at me wrong... didn’t show nuff respect.” A young man was fatally stabbed following an altercation on top of a double decker bus. A Somali engineering student—a cousin of an Italian Serie A footballer—was brutally murdered at a busy bus stop in Camden by an enraged mob of knife-wielding young Africans out to settle some obscure vendetta. His assailants

included the son of the former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. (The attackers tried to escape on a bus, but the driver locked the vehicle until the police came.)

There have been many other fatalities. A tourist was fatally stabbed after coming out of the wrong tube stop and asking directions from passers-by. Kiyon Prince was stabbed to death outside his school gates in Edgware. From a supportive and industrious family, and in trials for QPR, Prince was murdered after trying to break up a fight. Adam Regis, 15, also from a successful and supportive Caribbean family, was killed by unknown assailants on his way home one evening.

But not all the killings were by strangers. After he stabbed his best mate in the chest following a Saturday night altercation over a crack-laced spliff, Jerry asked the bar of the Sportsman pub in Kentish Town to order a minicab to take Akim to the local A&E. On arrival, Akim was already severely weakened from loss of blood and died shortly afterwards. Jerry turned himself in, and while on remand tried to end his own life.

Sunday morning, and there was a familiar blue and white police ribbon around the Sportsman. The first mourner to arrive was a crop-headed, fit-looking young man with gold earrings, shirt and shorts emblazoned with the union flag. He told me he had driven all the way from Southgate to pay his respects. The deceased had been a friend of his sister, who was too distraught to come. “What a waste,” he said.

Akim was no angel. A drug dealer, he was known to the local young offenders team. But like many rudies with big personalities, he was popular. Some girlfriends wove a green and gold Rastafari flag embroidered with a huge marijuana leaf and a photo of a smiling, dreadlocked Akim. For a few weeks, they just kept on coming to the Sportsman—grieving boys and girls of all ages and backgrounds. They formed circles, arms draped around each other’s shoulders,

and pinned farewell messages to the flag. A huge bank of cellophane-wrapped floral tributes crept up the wall of the pub and slowly rotted in the summer heat.

A couple of blocks away from the Sportsman, Lloyd and Terry were also busy being best mates. They had grown up together on a big estate. Teachers and youth workers recall the boys as a "bit of a handful," mainly because of their love of riding their bikes and later mopeds around the estate. Then came the parting. Lloyd owed Terry £20. Terry may have been growing weary of his friend.

They met one evening at a local pub and soon took their argument outside. Terry removed part of the starter mechanism from Lloyd's moped and threatened not to return it unless the debt was settled. Seeing his beloved moped violated, Lloyd lost it. He pulled a knife and threatened to "cut" Terry. Terry ignored this ritual challenge. Lloyd stabbed him, fatally, ran from the scene, hid out for a couple of days and then turned himself in.

A Diana-style floral tribute followed. Terry's family were long-term residents, active in the tenants' association, pillars of the community. There were hundreds of mourners at his funeral, which took the form of a Victorian coach and horses parade. The cortège was emblazoned with Terry's favourite Nike brand. Meanwhile, Lloyd lies in his cell wasting his life, visited by his loyal girlfriend. Funerals give pause to remember those who have fallen in a pointless war. Listening to the young mourners, you sense that they feel that there is something malevolent on the streets and the best a boy can do from an early age is to undertake a process of premature toughening and maintain a paranoid vigilance.

**F**rom 10pm to 4am at weekends, Kentish Town is one big youth party, serviced by numerous nightclubs and dancehalls and by a reliable night bus service. Young people from all backgrounds join in, mostly safely. But when people like Glenroy are around, it is best to be on your guard.

Glenroy has a permanent look of self-satisfaction; he moves among his mates as if enclosed in a fog of self-regard, interrogating them about their trainers and jewellery. He bolsters his own status by doing others down; sexual relations are about exploiting others. In a warlike and traumatised social environment of gangs and postcode territories, predators like Glenroy come into their own. Satisfaction

depends on taking what you want instead of waiting for what is rightfully yours.

Glenroy's neighbour Joseph was the same age and background as Glenroy, yet he was studying for A-levels and hoping to go to university. Such striving can breed resentment. Fortunately, Joseph was a well-built lad and could handle himself. But the jealousy and contempt that Glenroy and his kind feel extends not just to fellow students but to organisations that have served the community well, like youth projects that are more than a means of keeping kids off the streets.

One night that summer of 2006, at North London Sixth Form Centre, Joseph and a group of students, teachers, parents and friends gathered for an A-level drama evening. An examiner was present. To the horror of the organisers, Glenroy and his cohorts invaded. Armed with baseball bats, they were looking for someone who had dissed someone's girlfriend. Joseph faced down Glenroy, calling him a disgrace to the community. It was an act of great courage, and a sign that the community is fighting back.

As lamentation gives way to anger, there are marches, demonstrations, prayer vigils; organisations like Mothers against Gun Crime spring up; there are media campaigns and numerous Say No to Knives initiatives, and television appearances by bereaved and shattered relatives. But some, less constructively, decide to take matters into their own hands. In some communities, culprits who are known to locals are set upon and beaten, even executed, rather than be handed over to the police.

Most of the children I have spoken to feel that the situation with knives is getting worse. "Most boys carry knives... it's nothing," said one. This perception is supported by the apparent failure of the police to achieve higher clear-up rates. "People are doing things and not getting caught. People see others getting away with things, so they are not thinking about their actions."

Many young people have ideas for addressing the issue. Some suggest workshops with family members of fatal knife victims. Videos of stabbing incidents and role-play are also popular suggestions, as are visits to prisons, courts and A&E units, self-defence classes, group discussions, metal detectors and police officers in schools.

Others are pessimistic about any of it working. To grow up in the inner city is to experience things continually getting

## **"The cool pose is a defence against failure at school, in jobs and in relationships"**

out of hand. Every generation claims that "things are getting worse." Skinheads in the 1960s used to assure me that "these days 14 year olds don't care what they do."

**M**eanwhile, many young people, some from respectable homes, are caught up in the drama and misguided sense of status that come from being a "gangsta." Their desire to be cool makes them capable of killing someone merely for looking at them the wrong way. They have no understanding of the value of human life. It is not something they are likely to learn from gangsta rap and commercial hip-hop culture, which teach that the only things that matter are to survive, get what you want and be cool.

The cool pose makes young people appear confident and invulnerable, but the reality is that many use it as a defence against the prospect, real or imagined, of failure—at school, in jobs, in relationships. Yet the insulation against failure that cool provides is a chimera, because a cool lifestyle requires expensive goods—cars, iPods, clothes. Thus, for many marginalised young people, it merely exacerbates the impact of economic inequality. Cool is all very well for the middle classes, but not for those who have to resort to crime to secure its trappings. Meanwhile, in prisons, youth offender institutions and on the streets, it seems that the only competitors for the hearts and minds of the disaffected young are the fundamentalists, Islamic or Christian.

The cool attitude has become the dominant ethic among part of the younger generation in developed countries. Understanding it is a matter of urgency for parents, teachers and police officers. The home office has announced that it is looking at the possibility of cracking down on gang membership and enforcing the supposedly mandatory five-year sentence for illegal firearm possession. But none of this will make violence or guns uncool. Until we tackle the "cool mindset," the killings will continue. ■

*Some names and location have been changed.*

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