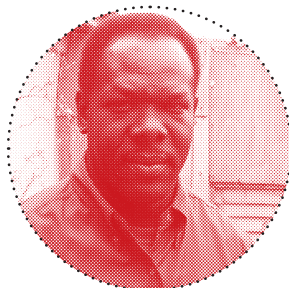


Sharp Words

A policy of 'early intervention' saw pupils at a school in Berkshire hear from mentor Kelly Oyebola, whose boxer brother James was shot dead in a nightclub. Here, three of the pupils talk about knife crime, and the pressures to get 'tooled-up'



Thousands of children learn about the dangers of carrying knives or weapons in school as part of their lessons, yet many still feel the need to bring a weapon into the classroom, or to carry one outside the school gates.

There is increasing recognition within schools for early

intervention, not only to educate children about knife or gun crime, but to help them navigate the problems they may face at home, be it from family, friends, gangs or in the community.

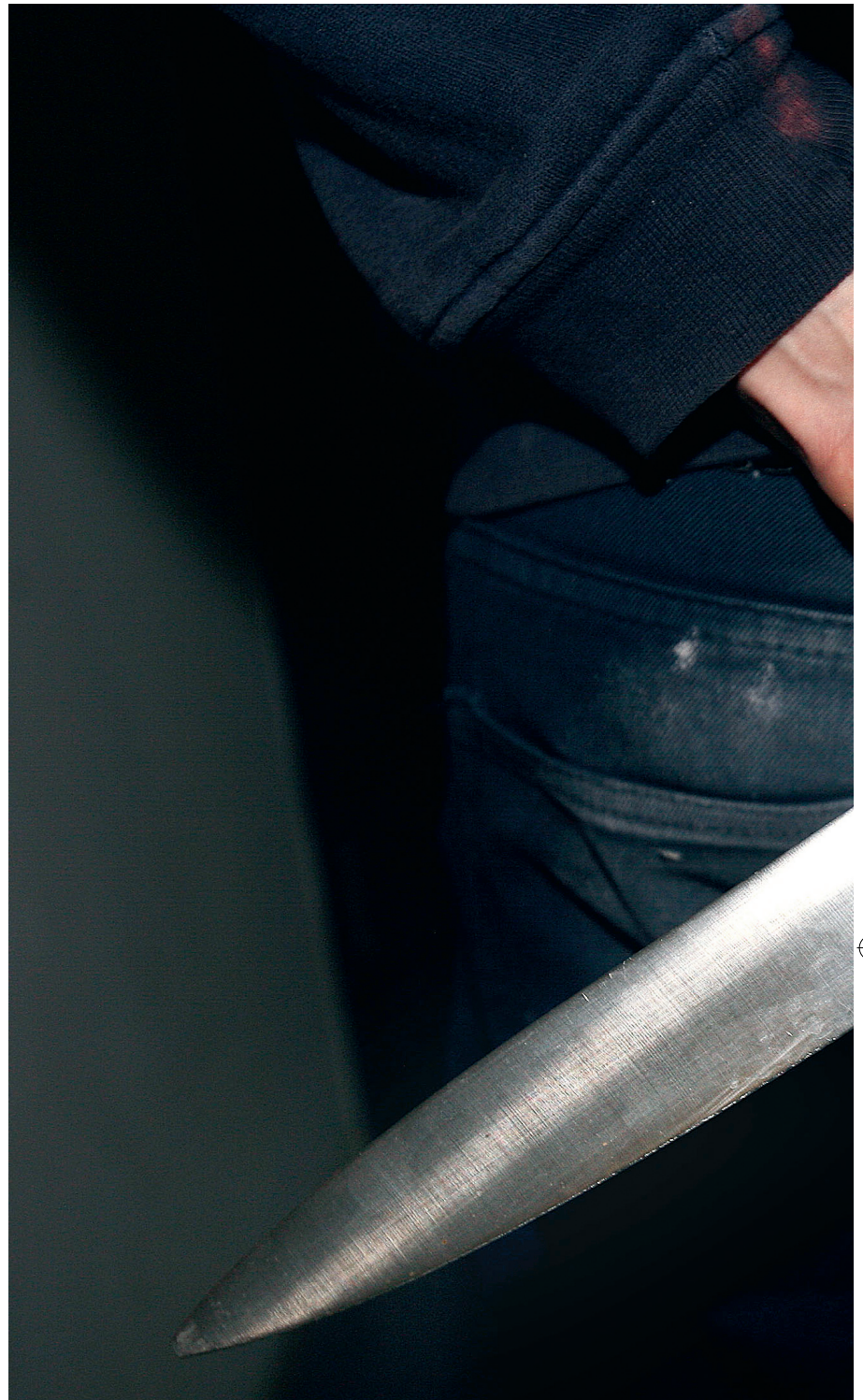
Millside School, a boys-only pupil referral unit in Slough, Berkshire, is one place where early intervention is becoming key to helping children manage their often difficult lives. The school operates a mentoring system. Recently, mentor Kelly Oyebola – the brother of former boxer James Oyebola, who was shot dead in a London nightclub after asking revellers to put out their cigarettes – visited the school to talk to the pupils.

In listening to his moving story of losing his brother, the boys reflected upon the dangers of carrying a weapon, but they also talked about the pressure on them to be 'tooled-up' after the final bell rings. The pressure is very real and, say many pupils, hard to avoid. Here, three teenagers talk to the Big Issue about their day-to-day lives, and why they might carry a weapon even when they know what the consequences may be.

Kyle Jeffs, 15

"I think people carry knives for security and because they want to look hard in front of their friends. I once knew this boy who went out to a boy's house who he had beef with. The boy chose to go but he also chose to carry a knife. His friend who went with him chose to carry a bat. When the boy told me this I asked him if he used it. He said 'no', but apparently it fell out in the boy's house. He also said he felt big when he was carrying a knife – it felt good.

PHOTO: PA PHOTOS



If your friends carry knives you are more likely to carry a knife or be stabbed. Another friend of mine went out with his friends into town. They were all messing about and one of them pulled out a knife and threatened him. He thought the guy wouldn't stab him, but he did stab him in the leg. I asked him if it hurt, and he said, 'Not really, it was a small knife.'

Youths think that carrying a knife gives them status and sometimes they don't care where they pull it out or who is there. One of my friends carried a knife to town and he was walking through the shopping centre. The knife was stashed up his sleeve. The sleeve was loose and the knife fell out and he was chased by the police. He said he always carried one, but it rarely fell out like that.

When my friends are in school and they are asked by the teacher if they have ever carried a knife, they say 'no'. They say that because they do not want the police or their parents to find out. They also don't want to be told off by the teachers.



Kids may feel protected at school but not on the streets

The decision is not when or if you use it, it's when you decide you want it in your pocket

They also don't want people to know about their habits. I think that many youths do carry knives even if they don't admit it."

Charlie Samuel, 15

"Being at school gives you chances to think before you act. When you're in school you have more time on your hands, and there are people that make you think. When I was younger I carried a knife because I had beef [trouble]. I wouldn't do that now because I think before I do something. The decision is not when or if you use or pull it out, it's when you decide you want it in your pocket."

Luke Hodgson, 15

Kids are protected in school rather than on the streets. They don't want teachers to suspect any trouble outside of the school gates. Peer pressure could be another reason. I know several who have carried weapons like knuckle dusters, knives and baseball bats. I never really understood why they did.

I have realised that I was quite wise to quit hanging around with these low-lives. I feel I should have said something or asked why they bothered 'tooling-up'. It may have something to do with video-games, films, music or even their neighbourhood, but I don't really know the real reason why.

Kelly Oyebola runs Potential Mentoring (www.potentialmentoring.org.uk), a community-centred organisation that works with 5- to 19-year-olds at risk of social exclusion, offending, re-offending, gang membership, or being excluded from school. If you are interested in mentoring or volunteering, contact Kelly Oyebola at info@potentialmentoring.co.uk

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