



'Beyond The Gate'

A school based approach in response to the society issues of youth violence
& gang culture

A Case Study of a School Based Approach

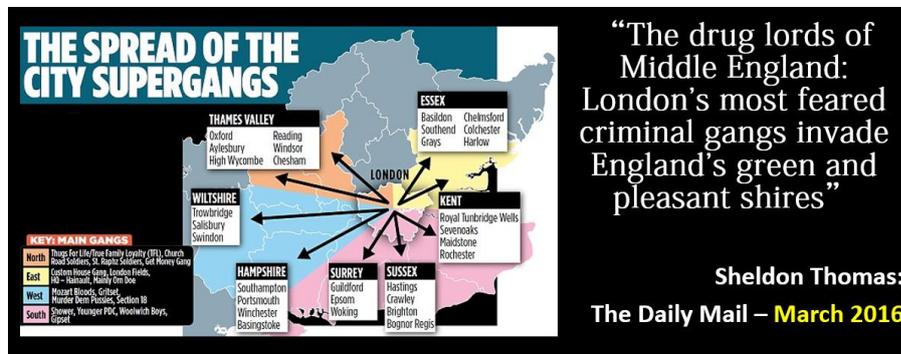
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'Beyond The Gate' – Part I: Origins

In March 2016 Sheldon Thomas (@SheldonThomas3) wrote an article in the Daily Mail entitled 'The Spread Of The City Super Gangs' in which he warned "*The drug lords of Middle England: London's most feared criminal gangs invade England's green and pleasant shires*"



Sheldon was right. Yet, without the crime figures to back this up and with other more pressing agendas, this warning went unnoticed by educators and policy makers.

Fast forward to June 2018, and as Gary Younge (@GaryYounge) in his article 'The Radical Lessons of a Year Reporting on Knife Crime' in The Times, stated, "*the knife crime crisis is national*". This time the evidence is damning.



Aside from the almost weekly news reports of another murder, research now suggests that more than 30,000 children aged between 10 and 15 now say that they are in gangs, whilst the Children's Commissioner for England & Wales, Anne Longfield, said analysis by her office showed that a total of 70,000 young people aged up to 25 are feared to be part of a gang network (June 2018). Nationally, this means that for an average secondary school, some 60+ students could be affiliated to a gang. The current murder toll in London, now statistically deemed to be more dangerous than New York, shows an ever increasing obituary of knife related deaths and spiralling levels of violent crime.

The 'crisis' can no longer be viewed as an urban issue. The explosion of 'county lines' and glorification of the trappings of gang life on social media have, amongst other factors, pushed the boundaries beyond the city limits into affluent green belts and beyond. For example in our North London rural – urban fringe - youth on youth robbery within the Borough of Broxbourne is up 114%; on our doorstep this figure has increased by 145%; student and parent anxiety has reached unprecedented levels. Similar patterns are reflected across the County, with Hertfordshire now reporting a 44% rise in knife related crime over the past 3 years – the largest increase nationally during this time.

Yet, within education, there remains a significant void on this issue at a time when we should be educating our students, as they must all now be considered at risk – all as victims, and some as perpetrators. As society continues to hide behind a blame culture pinpointing, amongst other factors, poor parenting, lack of schooling, funding cuts, a 'broken society', social media and drill music, we need to challenge these perceptions and view the current crisis as a public health issue - the view advocated by Craig Pinkney (@RealActionUK) amongst others. Schools need to let go of the perceived stigma – no school wants to be labelled the "school with the gang problem" - and parental backlash that they risk facing by recognising and tackling this crisis. After all, we teach students about the



dangers of smoking or how to manage their mental health, so why not, for instance, the realities of gang life or likely consequence of carrying a knife crime.

In response to this, our approach, titled “Beyond the Gate”, has evolved. This is a model to raise awareness and share an understanding of youth violence within schools. My focus in particular is

on developing a toolkit to inform early identification and a graduated early intervention response.

Certainly schools that I am visiting and the agencies we are now working with across Herts are starting to push this on to their agendas – as one school commented in response to some awareness training *“Youth violence & gang culture is not a topic we have spent much time considering... it is not something we should shy away from; it is real & it is already happening”*.

‘Beyond The Gate’ – Part II: Evolution

Having worked with a number of schools, safeguarding leaders and governors throughout the Summer Term to share our understanding and response on youth violence and gang culture, what has become very apparent is the lack of knowledge and understanding on the issues that draw young people towards violence and gang involvement, let alone any strategic whole school response.

Contributory factors such as father deficit and social marginalisation are overlooked whilst indicators such as cultural deviance, poor attendance, stress, anxiety, behavioural changes, and sexualised behaviours are misunderstood by many professionals working within schools charged with working with, and safeguarding, young people. County Lines are met with surprise and shock.

Quite simply, with this knowledge and understanding vacuum, how can students be adequately educated and the counter narrative delivered with any credence if those charged with this are, unsurprisingly, in the dark themselves? Instead, it is left to a small number of specialist agencies such as The St Giles Trust (@StGilesTrust) or individuals like Alison Cope (@ali_Cope).

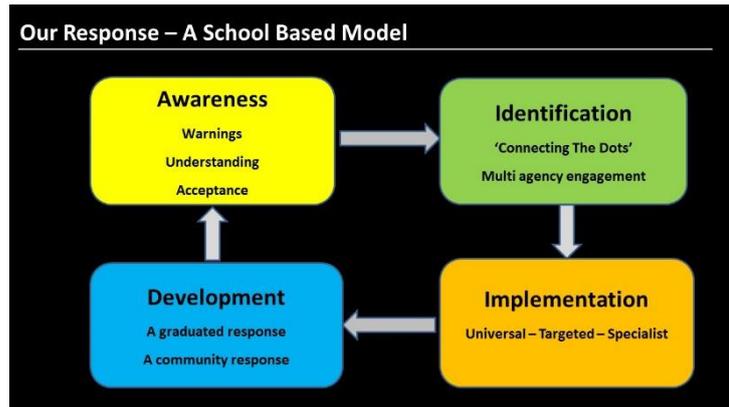
Well established research from any number of academics and agencies working in this area identifies that there are many social, economic and familial factors contributing to youth violence. While the potential influence that parents, family members, and other adults can have in pushing a young person toward violence is important, the influence of schools and in particular of peer groups is also significant in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of students toward violence.

So evolved ‘Beyond The Gate’ – our school based model to tackle the societal problems of knife crime, youth violence and gang culture that are stemming from the communities that we and other local schools serve.

This is based on a public health approach, in that it focuses on the causes as opposed to dealing with the consequences and recognises that no single school, agency, service or organisation can tackle this in isolation.

Based on well-established public health approaches, our school based model focuses on 4 stages:

- Awareness
- Identification
- Implementation
- Development



Further explanation of this model will be given in future blogs, but underlying our approach are the principles that:

- No school can operate in isolation – a multi-agency approach is needed
- Early identification of ‘at risk’ students and early implementation of intervention programmes is vital
- All those working in schools need to develop their knowledge and training around these issues (as part of statutory safeguarding)

Supportive and trusting relationships and interactions between students, schools, community and the Police are key to success

‘Beyond The Gate’ – Part III: Acceptance

As a leadership team we were nervous about overtly tackling the topic of youth violence within school for fear of causing alarm or panic amongst some of our students and parents, whilst risking a negative perception from within the communities we serve. It also raised the question about the extent to which we as a school can influence what is a much wider problem within society, extending way ‘beyond the gate’.

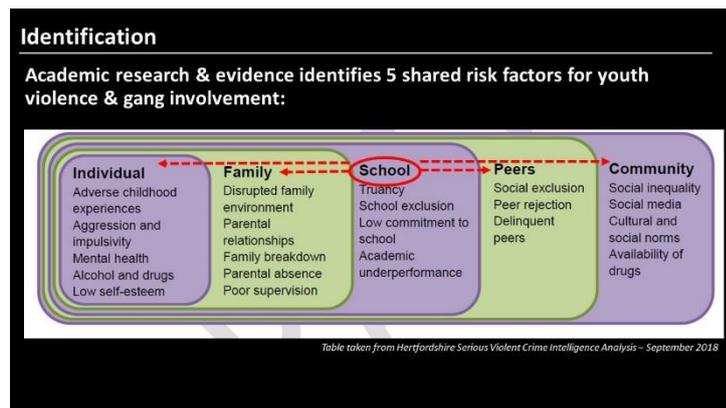
For many of our students, we are their security and represent stability and somewhere they feel valued and safe. Recognition and acceptance of the issues facing our students outside of school could have been easily overlooked, but with safeguarding at the forefront of our work, we have taken the plunge and so evolved ‘Beyond the Gate’ – our school based approach to the societal issues of youth violence.

From the outset of this work, it was very apparent that most of our teachers (as is case in every school I have worked with since in this area of work) were simply not informed of the contributory factors and indicators for those most at risk of youth violence, let alone be in a position to identify these students. And so, for us, we began a programme of training for all our staff.

We also worked with a number of local organisations to develop our understanding, thus enabling a framework for multi-agency partnership to be established. This included early engagement with Broxbourne Borough Council and Community Police as well as TYS and YC Herts.

'Beyond The Gate' – Part IV: Identification

My point is simple - - academic research and supporting evidence identifies 5 areas of risk factors that heighten the risk of involvement in youth violence and gang culture (see below).



Any school should know students as individuals; family history & dynamics; student influencers & peers; the community it serves; as well as its own pastoral & academic data. This places schools perfectly to identify risk factors and inform early identification – another key element of reducing involvement in this area.

Based on academic research – largely informed by Craig Pinkney @RealAction UK – we have developed a toolkit to ‘connect the dots’ and inform in the early identification of those considered most at risk.

The criteria below is by no means exhaustive, and certainly is worthy of a more in depth narrative from those with a deeper understanding than myself, but it seeks to highlight a number of key areas of understanding that are particularly relevant within a school context and include:

- **Community:** All schools should have an awareness of what is happening within the communities that they serve and the impacts that this may have on their students
- **Family:** It is essential that schools have updated knowledge on the family composition of each and every student. Factors such as, for instance, father deficit, known family links to gangs or involvement with police heighten the risk factors
- **Peers & Influencers:** Monitoring of friendship groups and/or changes to these can be an early indicator of heightened risk
- **Behaviour:** Changes in behaviour can sometimes reflect student experiences outside school. For example - typically in boys - changes around Year 9 include increased defiance and aggression which could be signs of heightened risk, whilst within girls this tends to manifest itself later, usually in Years 10 or 11, through sexually risky behaviours
- **Marginalisation:** For some students they are drawn to gang involvement in response to needing a sense of belonging and acceptance. Identifying those students who are on the margins of the school community can be an early indicator of heightened risk
- **Cultural Deviance:** As with marginalisation, those students who do not necessarily conform to their cultural “norm” can also be an indicator
- **CSE:** One common feature of gang behaviour is the sexual exploitation, particularly of girls and those most vulnerable. Those students who have a history or demonstrate risky or highly sexualised behaviours should be considered highly vulnerable and at risk of such exploitation

- **Attendance:** Schools are well placed to monitor attendance. Short periods of unexplained absences could be an indication of County Lines involvement, whilst regular truancy and poor attendance could suggest a heightened risk
- **Vulnerability:** Often those linked to gangs will prey on those most vulnerable. As schools, the close monitoring of our most vulnerable students, particularly those with SEN, is essential
- **Drill Music:** So-called ‘Drill Music’ is used by Gangs to make threats towards other gangs or boast about their actions. It is often highly sexually explicit and contains racial, homophobic and inflammatory language, and seeks to glamourize gang life through its lyrics and linked videos. Listening to this is the ‘norm’ for many students, particularly those most at risk, and as such can be a further indicator of heightened risk
- **Social Media:** As with drill music, this is used extensively to glamorise gang life. Ultimately responsibility for the policing of this has to sit from within the home, yet as schools we need to develop the counter narrative to challenge this
- **Gang Slang:** The street language used by gangs originates from the need to remain ahead of law enforcement, and as such it is constantly evolving. Care also needs to be taken as many of the terms used have found their way in to the colloquial language of students today.
- **Multi-Agency Involvement:** Information sharing between schools and across agencies is an area of ongoing frustration – not helped by GDPR! It can, however, yield significant and relevant information that can flag early identification and inform intervention. I would advocate the sharing any information between professionals that supports the safe guarding of our students – although know that this is not universal!

In considering each of the above, please be advised that I am not saying, for instance, that any student who listens to drill music or has an absent father is in a gang. However, using this understanding as a foundation to “Connect the Dots”, it can be used as an effective mapping tool to track applicable risk factors and identify those students who are considered most at risk.

Identification “Connecting The Dots...”

- Development of **Mapping Toolkit** – using staff as our best resource to identify “at risk” students

"Connecting The Dots"												
Behaviours	Father Deficit	Marginalised	Cultural	Deviance	Social Links	Family Links	CSE Risk	Attendance	SEN	Safeguarding	Police	Social Media / Language

Intel		
Herts Police	Broxbourne	YC / TYSS

Our experience has also found that this toolkit supports a more targeted and informed dialogue with other agencies – such as the Police: Borough Council; TYS; Youth Connexions.

'Beyond The Gate' – Part V: A Graduated Response

Our school response falls very much under the 'safeguarding' umbrella, reflective of the foundations of our 'Beyond the Gate' initiative is keeping our students safe, both in school and in the communities in which they live.

We have developed a dual response, aimed at supporting both our students and our school community. Our student interventions builds on a graduated approach, ranging from a 'universal' whole school approach through to 'targeted' small group work and on to 'specialist' one to one intervention. All of our targeted and specialist interventions are informed by our mapping and understanding of the risk factors.

Examples of our response include



- Whole school awareness activities – these are run with the support of other agencies and have included, for example, guest speakers; whole school assemblies; police drop ins; parent / carer updates and advice; bike marking; Council run diversionary activities
- Safeguarding Through The Curriculum – using the PSHCE curriculum to raise awareness of risk factors and encourage students to make informed and correct choices; ensure all students know how to keep themselves self; promotion of on line safety and development of the counter narrative
- Our 'Aspire Beyond' Programme – this is designed to raise aspirations and awareness amongst groups of 'targeted' students and includes activities such as group interventions on topics such as drug use, CSE, risky behaviours and County Lines; careers advice; support with college visits & applications; CEIAG visits to local businesses
- Programme of 'specialist' 1:1 Mentoring - this links in with the AB Programme, but also provides targeted students with long term weekly support

As part of a wider community response we have also:

- Delivered whole staff and Governor training to embed an understanding of the underlying risk factors and to inform early identification – our staff know our students, their families, communities and influencers best and as such as well placed to identify risk factors
- Focused on establishing really positive relationships with all our students, particular those most at risk, to foster their engagement in education and encourage them to be aspirational in their outlook
- Increased our staff presence at end and start of the day to beyond the school gates to support student safety within the immediate vicinity of the School and within the communities through which our students travel
- Regular police drop ins and activities (e.g. bike marking; community patrols; teacher 'ride along') to promote positive interactions

- Introduction of a Search Policy and Guidance to support all our community in feeling safe in school
- Proposed termly Parent / Carer forum to raise awareness of local and national issues; develop a shared understanding; provide both school and multi-agency support for parents / carers

'Beyond The Gate' – Part VI: What Next?



Our work to date in developing our 'Beyond the Gate' approach has identified that there is a fundamental lack of understanding on the issues and a real reluctance from many (most) schools, particularly those outside the major urban areas, to recognise and strategically develop as response to the societal challenges facing young people today.

In our work we maintain that a public health approach has to be adopted within education – we need to tackle and educate on the cause and not punish or reflect on the response.

I would advocate two initial areas for development:

- Embed for all those working in education (and even children and young people) a basic understanding within statutory safeguarding training of the risk factors and underlying ACE factors (Adverse Childhood Experience) that heighten the risk of engagement in youth violence
- Urgently address the current information sharing protocols between schools, agencies and the Police

There are of course wider much discussions over other issues such as funding and statutory guidance, but for those of us in schools we are now on the front line – we need to be proactive, to deal with the 'here and now' and lets ensure that we do everything we can to keep our students safe.....



Acknowledgments:

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- Herts TYS
- YC Herts @BroxbourneTeam
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- Alison Cope @ali_cope
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- Ross Morrison McGill @TeacherToolkit
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