

'We're stuck in a knife crime mire'¹

Leigh Boobyer, *BBC NEWS*, November 2024. (Adapted)

Recent fatal stabbings of teenagers and adults have left a mental scar on Bristol's communities. In the days after two teens were killed in a case of mistaken identity in January, hundreds of people came out onto the streets of Knowle West calling for an end to knife crime in the city. Ten months on, and with five people now facing prison for the murders of Max Dixon and Mason Rist, leaders in Bristol say communities are finally coming together but that change is slow. Their main concern is that the systems in place that are meant to serve and protect vulnerable children simply don't.

Desmond Brown founded Growing Futures, an organization to engage with young people involved in serious youth violence, including those affected by knife crime, and disadvantaged communities. "When we have serious violence and the murder of children by other children, what we see is wringing of hands² and people getting very upset (...) What we see after that is the medium to long term planning to how we solve these issues suddenly go out the window and there's a lull, and nothing ever happens. I think we're still stuck in a mire," he said.

Following the deaths of Max and Mason, the city's media, community leaders and campaigners joined forces to sign an open letter calling for more action on fighting knife crime. This led to leaders meeting to figure out how best to tackle the issue, raise awareness of knife crime's links to education and social exclusion, and start lobbying local and central government for change. Mr Brown, who was one of the letter's signatories, said schools need to reduce the number of permanent exclusions which can result in young people being exposed to exploitation and potentially becoming involved with serious crime.

"I met a young person who was in a youth estate, and he was in there for quite serious crime," Mr Brown said. (...) Isn't it better they're in school... learning and being protected rather than being dashed to the streets and being involved in some sort of serious violence?"

Anti-knife crime campaigner Leanne Reynolds, who has been working to get emergency bleed kits³ rolled out across Bristol and Somerset, said community groups have "realised that we need to listen more". She founded the Bristol Bleed Campaign after knowing two young men who were killed while she was working in education. Ms Reynolds said vulnerable children feel like "they're being pushed around" due to there being multiple agencies dealing with them, which is causing "more trauma". "The support is not there when they need it. The systems are too slow. Everything takes a long time, and that's when you'll potentially lose that child to the street - while you're doing the paperwork."

Bristol City councillor Mohamed Makawi signed the open letter on knife crime after his friend Adam Ali Ibrahim was fatally stabbed in January 2023. He said the reopening of youth services that closed in the last 14 years would "make a big difference" in reducing knife crime. He pointed to the closure of Eagle House Youth Centre in Knowle West, near where Max Dixon and Mason Rist were killed, adding "we need to have those back" in the local authority's hands, with government funding.

Weeks after yet another fatal stabbing, Avon and Somerset Police launched Operation Hardy to crack down on the spate of knife crime. Within six months officers arrested 78% more people for possession of a bladed article compared to the previous six months. The force also seized drugs worth several hundred thousand pounds, and conducted more than 40 high-visibility patrols in areas where they believed there was a high risk of violence. Bristol Commander Superintendent Mark Runacres said keeping young people engaged in "constructive activities" is one way the risks can be reduced. He added that officers are working with young people and organisations such as schools and gyms to get them involved in "those positive activities that take them away and provide them with stability, which reduces the risk for them".

But most leaders agree, it can't just be up to the police - all agencies need to be working together. (700 words)

¹ mire : un bourbier

² to wring hands : rester assis à désespérer

³ kit de premier secours en cas d'hémorragie