

Rising youth crime reflects wider societal problems.

Catherine West MP calls on a special fund for children at risk of school exclusion, while Steve Phaure says community responses are the best way to protect young people at risk. Plus letters from Don Macdonald and Norma Hornby.

The number of primary school children in pupil referral units (PRUs) in England has more than doubled since 2011, as part of a wider surge in the number of permanent exclusions in England and Wales over the past decade (Steep rise in under-11s excluded from school for being disruptive, 1 April). This is a symptom of wider societal problems; young people in disadvantaged areas, who are suffering as a result of cuts to their schools and youth services, understandably feel disillusioned and as though they've been abandoned. When disillusion occurs, crime, particularly youth crime, goes up.

One thing I'd like to see is a special fund for children at risk of school exclusion, as a high percentage of perpetrators were excluded from school in their early teens. It's something I raised with the secretary of state for communities and local government recently and David Lammy MP, and I will soon be meeting with him to discuss further. Such a fund would help families who might be struggling and would provide a continuity of care and support to children at risk of exclusion, which could help to combat the "PRU to prison pipeline" of disengaged young people in PRUs getting into a cycle of violence.

All too often, excluded children bounce around the system while falling further away from mainstream education. This fund should also include targeted support and training for school staff who are on the frontline of what can be incredibly difficult situations at the same time as they are seeing their funding slashed.

Catherine West MP

Labour, Hornsey and Wood Green

- The Home Office consultations on serious youth violence highlight police powers to stop and search, and call on public sector bodies to step up their duty of care in safeguarding young people (Teachers could have to report knife fears, 1 April). But if tackling the root causes of knife crime remains the priority, it's time to invest in community responses – from the smallest neighbourhood activities to the specialist voluntary sector services – as the surest way of surrounding young people at risk, and their parents, with support structures that listen to their experiences, speak to their needs and act on what works for them.

Steve Phaure

CEO, Croydon Voluntary Action

- Government plans to tackle knife crime may be unfair to teachers (Knife crime plan unfair to teachers, unions say, 2 April), but they are more unfair to young people. Stop and search does not work, alternatives-to-custody projects have stalled, and youth service provision has been cut drastically, while school exclusions rise. We need some

real action and additional funds at the grassroots, not high-level summits with photo opportunities for politicians.

Don Macdonald

Chair, LFJ Youth Integration

- Statistics relating to the sharp decline in youth services in London are only the tip of the iceberg because this vitally important service has been systematically decimated across most of England from 2011 onwards. There is a clear correlation between rising youth crime, young people's involvement in county lines drug-dealing and the near decimation of professionally delivered youth services (Youth clubs shut across London as funds dry up, 23 March). When David Cameron set up the National Citizen Service along with his "big society" initiative in 2011, there was no indication that the NCS would eventually siphon off youth service budgets: this four-week summer citizenship scheme cannot be considered a valid substitute for year-round youth provision. In 2017, the MP's report claimed that the high cost of the NCS cannot be justified. The House of Commons public accounts committee expressed concern about NCS exceeding its per-capita budget and it was confirmed that only 12% of eligible teenagers signed up for NCS in 2018.

There is no doubt that the NCS provides some young people with a positive summer experience and participation in provides a boost to Ucas applications and higher education, but in my experience it is far removed from the reality of the world of young people involved in knife crime or who are being exploited by adult criminals. The Local Government Association recently expressed concern about the government's allocation of £10m to improve the NCS brand image at a time when so many young people are isolated and seeking safety within street gangs or are excluded from their schools, bored and vulnerable to abuse. The £10m would have been better invested in youth outreach work and after-school provision. An independent inquiry into NCS and an analysis of NCS recruitment in relation to our poorest communities is needed as a matter of urgency and Sian Berry is right to call for reinvestment into our most valuable asset – our young people.

Norma Hornby

Warrington, Cheshire

News is under threat ...

... just when we need it the most. Millions of readers around the world are flocking to the Guardian in search of honest, authoritative, fact-based reporting that can help them understand the biggest challenge we have faced in our lifetime. But at this crucial moment, news organisations are facing a cruel financial double blow: with fewer people able to leave their homes, and fewer news vendors in operation, we're seeing a reduction in newspaper sales across the UK. Advertising revenue continues to fall steeply meanwhile as businesses feel the pinch. We need you to help fill the gap.

We believe every one of us deserves equal access to vital public service journalism. So, unlike many others, we made a different choice: to keep Guardian journalism open for all, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. This would not be possible without financial contributions from those who can afford to pay, who now support our work from 180 countries around the world.

Reader financial support has meant we can keep investigating, disentangling and interrogating. It has protected our independence, which has never been so critical. We are so grateful.

We need your support so we can keep delivering quality journalism that's open and independent. And that is here for the long term. Every reader contribution, however big or small, is so valuable. **Support The Guardian from as little as \$1 – and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**