

Speech: Home Secretary announces Launch of the Serious Violence Strategy

I want to start today by taking you back to the night of the 20 February in Camden, North London.

A distraught mum watches her teenage son die after he's stabbed outside a shop.

She only realises it's him after she calls his phone and it rings from his jacket pocket behind the police cordon. This young man is Abdikarim Hassan and he's only 17.

Less than 2 hours later – a separate incident.

A promising accountant leaves a tragic voicemail for his mother after he too is fatally stabbed with a samurai sword just a few minutes' walk away from the first murder.

The victim tells his mum – “I'm wounded, I got wounded”.

This second victim is Sadiq Aadam Mohamed and he's the third in his family to be stabbed to death.

His mother later tells a journalist that the family escaped to this country from Somalia for peace but “found only blood”.

The family also release a statement.

Violence is a “constant theme in our community” they say.

“We have a lot of questions and need answers. Somebody has to listen to us”.

And more recently – more tragic news.

Devoy Stapleton stabbed to death in Wandsworth on Easter Sunday.

Tanisha Melbourne-Blake gunned down in Tottenham.

Amaan Shakoor fatally shot in Walthamstow.

And Israel Ogunsola fatally stabbed in Hackney.

In each of these cases the recurring question has been “why, why, why”?

And as Home Secretary, I've been searching for the answer.

That's why last October, I commissioned a review into violent crime to explore why it is that there has been an increase in homicides, knife crime

and gun crime and what we should do about it.

I knew then, just as I do now, that this is a problem which we must get a grip on.

And today I am pleased to announce that I am publishing our Serious Violence Strategy. This marks a major shift in the approach to recent rises in knife and gun crime and is being supported by £40 million of Home Office funding.

This strategy represents a real step-change in the way we think about and respond to these personal tragedies which dominate the front pages of our newspapers with seemingly depressing regularity.

But before I tell you what the evidence shows, I want to start by addressing head-on some of the theories that have been circulating.

One of the contentions is that there are not enough officers on the streets. The evidence however does not support this. In the early 2000s, when serious violent crimes were at their highest, police numbers were rising. In 2008, when knife crime was far greater than the lows we saw in 2013 to 2014, police numbers were close to the highest we'd seen in decades.

And the head of the Metropolitan Police has said she does not believe the recent spike in attacks is due to cuts to police budgets either.

Equally, to those who blame the recent spate of violence on changes to the provision of youth services, I say that that too is far too simplistic.

And in my view, simplistic arguments are no substitute for a serious strategy. And that's what I want to spend my time talking about today.

In our Serious Violence Strategy, we explore the reasons behind serious violence.

We find that there is a strong link between drugs and violent crime and that changes to the drugs market appears to be the biggest driver of the increase in violent crime.

We know that since 2014, over half of all homicides involved a victim or a suspect using or dealing drugs. We know that the use of crack-cocaine is rising in England and Wales and that there's a strong link between violence and crack-cocaine.

We also know that 'county lines' drug dealing has become an increasingly popular way of dealing drugs around the country.

This involves gangs grooming and using children and vulnerable young people to traffic drugs using dedicated mobile phones or 'deal lines' into new locations outside of their home areas.

The wider the reach of the gang, the further their violence, drug dealing and exploitation spreads.

So this is the situation we are faced with.

Serious violence is on the up, and in many cases, drugs are an important contributing factor.

So first off, our response to violent crime must address the misuse of drugs.

Last year we launched our new Drugs Strategy and we will be going further.

We will focus on reducing the number of people who take drugs and we will also increase the number of people who recover from drug dependency.

We will also work towards putting a stop to the 'county lines' gangs who are selling drugs around the country. A few weeks ago I was talking to the Chief Constable of Norfolk Constabulary and he made it clear what a problem this is for local police forces. In fact, 70% of police forces have reported significant increases in violent crime linked to county lines. And what we're talking about here are murders, torture and other types of extreme violence. For example, in one reported case, a man in Liverpool had his hand severed by a machete and both legs broken in a punishment attack.

That's why I'm pleased to announce that this government will provide £3.6 million to support a new National County Lines Co-ordination Centre which is currently being developed by the National Police Chiefs' Council and the National Crime Agency to support more effective action against these types of gangs.

This will help the police catch the perpetrators and will also support measures to protect vulnerable people who have been drawn into county lines drugs dealing networks. It will also provide vital intelligence about illegal drugs markets across the country and it will support police forces to close down the mobile phone numbers used for county lines drugs dealing.

In addition to this, we will be running a nationwide campaign in partnership with the charity Crimestoppers, to raise awareness of the problem of county lines and to prevent and protect more people from being exploited and drawn into these gangs.

And while I do not think we can arrest our way out of the problem of violent crime, I do believe the police have a vital role to play in tackling it.

I've heard what the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick and others have said about officers losing confidence in using stop and search, and I must say that really worries me.

Let me make my position absolutely clear. I stand fully behind stop and search and I see it as a vital tool for the police.

Of course, stop and search will always need to be used appropriately – like any other police power – but thanks to the introduction of body-worn video across police forces, I have greater confidence than ever before that this is the case.

I believe that a combination of stop and search, hot spot policing strategies to focus on those areas where crime is concentrated, as well as a better use of data so police forces can routinely monitor, adjust and test their response to violent crime – will make a difference.

But I also want to make the police's job easier by making weapons harder to come by. I've seen what's going around our streets – the zombie knives, axes and bayonets. And let me tell you, it might have had a place in medieval warfare but it certainly doesn't have a place on our city streets.

That's why I will be introducing new laws within weeks that make it harder than ever before to purchase and possess guns, knives and acid.

There will be new restrictions on online sales of knives to make it harder for under 18s to buy them. This will include stopping them from being sent to residential addresses. There will also be a complete ban on the possession of offensive weapons like zombie knives. In addition, we will make it easier to prosecute cases of threatening someone with a knife.

And to reduce the risk of acid attacks, we will make it a criminal offence to possess corrosive substances in public and prevent sales to under 18s. I will also consult on extending stop and search powers to enable the police to search for and seize acid from suspects carrying it in public without good reason.

But policing, legislation and making weapons harder to come by just isn't enough. A crucial part of our approach will be focusing on and investing more in prevention and early intervention.

We need to engage with our young people early and to provide the incentives and credible alternatives that will prevent them from being drawn into crime in the first place. This in my view is the best long-term solution. Because what better way to stop knife crime than by stopping young people from picking up knives in the first place?

And I've seen first-hand that early intervention really makes a difference.

I recently visited New Horizons, a youth centre in Camden which helps young people who are often caught up in violence, to build more positive futures. Whether that's by helping to find them housing, counselling or a job. One young man I met had exchanged being in a gang for fashion and was being supported to build his own clothing line.

And earlier today I visited Leap Confronting Conflict, an organisation which successfully intervenes even earlier – helping young people who face multiple challenges in their lives to manage conflict before they can be drawn into gang activity.

This is exactly the type of work I want to see more of.

That's why I'm pleased to announce a new £11 million Early Intervention Youth Fund to help communities run early intervention and prevention programmes for young people at risk of getting involved in violence.

Because I want local communities to be front and centre of our response to violent crime.

This £11 million fund is in addition to the money we are committing to other projects helping young people start off life on the right track, including £13 million for the Trusted Relationships Fund, £40 million for the Youth Investment Fund and £920 million for the Troubled Families Programme.

But it's a sad fact of life that there will always be people who pick up knives or other weapons. I need to make sure that they put them down again before they cause irreparable damage.

That's why I've just launched a new online advertising campaign – #knife free – to raise awareness about the risks and consequences of carrying knives and to inspire young people to do something more positive instead. But those of us in government aren't the only ones who should be doing work online.

As I speak, gangs are posting videos and music online that document, encourage and glamorise violence and goad and threaten others.

And the repercussions can be deadly.

For instance, last August 15-year-old Jermaine Goupall was knifed to death in South London in the climax of a feud between rival gangs posting mocking videos on YouTube.

It is already an offence to incite, assist or encourage violence online and I expect to see social media companies standing by their obligations to remove this kind of content as necessary.

But that alone isn't enough. Social media companies must do more. So today I am calling on them to review their terms and conditions and make it clear that they will not host any content linked to gangs or gang violence. Some might say that this is impossible. But when I called on social media companies to deal with terrorist content on their platforms, they listened and took action. I'm asking them to do so again. Because it's the right thing to do.

Because fighting crime and keeping each other safe isn't just the responsibility of government, it's everybody's responsibility.

And based on what I've said here this morning, I hope you'll agree that there's a full programme of work ahead. This morning I met with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, the Mayor of London and representatives from key agencies to outline my plan and to listen to their views.

I will also urgently convene and lead a new, cross-party Serious Violence Task Force which will bring together PCCs, representatives from the voluntary sector, local government, the police and other key sectors as well as MPs from different parties, to make sure that everything I have talked about today is being delivered effectively.

And I'm pleased to say that Chuka Umunna is the first Labour MP to agree to

take part.

The cross-party dimension to this work is important.

Because as tempting as a blue versus red spat can sometimes be, the safety of our neighbourhoods is just too important and we cannot afford to be distracted by party politics. I want to hear some solutions from the opposition front bench, rather than just the constant shouts of "cuts, cuts, cuts".

I will also host an International Violent Crime Symposium to bring together leading international academics and experts to understand what else is known about trends in drivers of violent crime and what sorts of interventions are working around the world. Because we are not alone in having seen a spike in violent crime. In fact, serious violence trends have been similar across many developed nations, suggesting there's a global component to it. I truly believe that while there is more to learn, what I have outlined today is an important start.

We will take the comprehensive approach necessary to make sure that our sons and daughters are protected and our streets are safe.

As a government we will never stand idly by while acid is thrown or knives wielded.

And I am clear that we must do whatever it takes to tackle this so that no parent has to bury their child.

Thank you.