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Dithering ministers must tackle knife crime

RACHEL SYLVESTER

Reducing the number of pupils who are permanently excluded from school will save lives and money in the long run



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It's as if the NHS turned away patients who'd suffered a heart attack or the fire service refused to attend burning buildings. The education system is abandoning the most vulnerable children with appalling social consequences. The rise in exclusions, and the failure to educate pupils who have been expelled from mainstream schools, is a scandal that is contributing to the surge in knife crime.

These children are being thrown on to the streets by an education system that prioritises exam grades over humanity. There they become easy prey for criminal gangs. Exclusion should be an alarm bell that triggers intervention by the state. Instead it has become the "off" switch for government involvement.

Sajid Javid, the home secretary, last week announced new knife crime prevention orders for children as young as 12, which are designed to tackle the surge in street violence. But the Department for Education is presiding over a rise in exclusions that is

exacerbating the very same problem. More than 40 children are expelled from schools in England every day. In 2016-17, there were 7,720 permanent exclusions — a rise of 56 per cent over three years — and many more pupils are unofficially thrown out.

Yesterday, Anne Longfield, the children's commissioner, published figures showing that almost 60,000 children are being home-schooled. She blamed schools for “off-rolling” pupils to prevent their poor results showing up in league tables. “No one knows how a lot of these children are doing academically or even if they're safe,” she told me. “Children who fall through the gaps in the schools system are often those most vulnerable to exploitation by gangs and as such are often deliberately targeted.”

According to the Metropolitan Police, 41 per cent of those being caught for knife crimes across London are aged between 15 and 19, with 8 per cent as young as 10 to 14. Excluded pupils are over 200 times more likely to have been involved in a knife-carrying offence and more than half of prisoners have been expelled from school. In focus groups with the parents of both perpetrators and victims of knife crime, Ofsted inspectors were told that some pupils had been encouraged by adult gang members to carry weapons to school for the sole purpose of triggering an exclusion, which would give them more time for drug trafficking.

Although it is impossible to completely disentangle cause and effect — kids who are thrown out of school for fighting are more likely to become violent adults — the state should be trying to break the vicious circle rather than putting children on a conveyor belt to crime.

Of course, head teachers must be able to expel pupils who are impossibly disruptive or are putting other children at risk, but too many schools are gaming the system to boost their reputations. The children who are removed from mainstream education are then left to fend for themselves or dumped in the educational equivalent of “sin bins”. Those in alternative provision are half as likely to have qualified teachers as those in mainstream schools and only 1 per cent get the five GCSEs they need to find basic employment.

Many pupil referral units (PRUs) offer only a reduced timetable to teenagers who desperately need structure. Perversely, parts of the alternative provision sector are unregulated and not subject to Ofsted inspection. Amanda Spielman, the chief inspector, has repeatedly urged the government to tighten the scrutiny of these

institutions but ministers have so far refused to do so.

A report by the St Giles Trust, a charity that works with young victims of knife crime, found that PRUs have become fertile grounds for gang recruitment and that the number of children excluded from schools is a “highly significant” factor in the rise of street violence. The “twilight hours”, when pupils are only required to attend for an hour in the late afternoon, left teenagers with plenty of time to get involved in county line drug-dealing.

Older gang members stand outside the gates of PRUs looking for vulnerable teenagers. One social worker told me that weapons or drugs are often found hidden in the bushes nearby. “Working with these complex pupils should be seen as the brain surgery of teaching, but all too often demographics predict destiny for these pupils,” says Kiran Gill, who has set up a charity called The Difference, which is recruiting high-flying teachers to work in PRUs, just as Teach First sends graduates into inner-city schools.

There are some brilliant alternative provision schools. I recently visited the Boxing Academy in Hackney, which encourages often violent excluded pupils to channel their aggression into fighting in the ring. It is on the front line of the gangs: a few days before my visit, a boy was stabbed on his way there. But by combining small classes with discipline and high expectations, it has astonishing success in diverting pupils from crime. A 14-year-old who had been caught carrying a knife before starting at the academy said boxing had taught him to control his anger. “Now I feel sorry for the people in gangs,” he told me. “You’re trapped.” Many of the children described the school as their “last chance” in an education system that had otherwise failed them.

Unfortunately, good places are the exception rather than the rule. Robert Halfon, Tory chairman of the Commons education select committee, describes the rise in exclusions as “the greatest social injustice” in our country. The government should be pouring resources and attention into improving alternative provision for those who need to be removed. There are not that many children involved: only 0.1 per cent of all pupils are permanently excluded. It costs £76,000 a year to send someone to a young offenders’ institution, so investing in breaking the link between exclusion and crime would save money as well as lives in the end.

And yet Damian Hinds, the education secretary, seems more interested in promoting

faith schools and grammars than in helping the children who end up in gangs. Coalition plans to require schools to retain responsibility for the pupils they exclude (which would have discouraged off-rolling and created a market in good alternative provision) have been shelved. The Department for Education has refused to set up a “home-schooling” register or to tighten the regulation of alternative provision. A review of exclusions by the former minister Edward Timpson has been repeatedly delayed. Whitehall is stumbling in the Brexit fog while children are stabbing each other in the street.
