

Feral youths: How a generation of violent, illiterate young men are living outside the boundaries of civilised society

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In January, Gordon Brown called for a 'national crusade' to break down class barriers; he was even contemplating making it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of class.

The first time I saw Tuggy Tug, he was standing on a street corner in Brixton with half-a-dozen other 15-year-old boys. They were scowling at anyone who walked past

Every now and then, they shrugged up their hoodies to make themselves look more threatening. 'Everyone who bumps into us says sorry,' boasted Tuggy Tug.

His tracksuit was so big that he seemed lost inside it. Under his black hoodie, he wore a red one - in case he needed a quick change of identity.



Crisis in youth: Thousands of teenage boys are failing to make the successful transition to manhood (Teenager posed by model)

He was, he admitted, on the lookout for someone to mug. 'I want no one recognising me after I done my business,' he explained.

At 15, Tuggy Tug is still officially a child - but he is already dangerously disconnected from society and its values. What forces have put boys like him in charge of our streets?

And how are we to deal with them?

Despite being barely literate, Tuggy Tug was eloquent about the reasons he'd turned to crime. Indeed, his words provided a harrowing insight into why

increasing numbers of boys are more likely to do a mugging than a piece of homework.

None of the teachers at his own school in South London paid any attention to him, Tuggy Tug told me, so he hardly ever turned up for lessons.

And his young single mother never disciplined him because he was 'bringing home the bacon' - up to £200 a day from running errands for older drug dealers.

Nor could he see any alternative to crime. 'If you do it the government way,' he said, 'you will wait until you're 80 by the time you can buy a nice, decent tracksuit.' He paused for a moment, 'I probably be dead by then.'



Roaming the streets: A generation of young men are set on the path of social deprivation: prison, an early death or a lifetime on benefits

His heroes were rap stars and the older drug-dealers in his area - 'I know a man of 21 who owns five houses and he never went to school.'

And he judged himself by his lack of fear, willingness to use violence and the number of all-important 'links' he has in order to pull off the next drug deal.

After five years, though, he planned to go 'legit', buy a house in the suburbs and play golf all day.

Whatever our opinion of Tuggy Tug, his ambition stands as a rebuke.

The middleclass dream is as distant a prospect for him as becoming an astronaut might be for the rest of us.

He is already set on the path of social deprivation: prison, an early death or, at best, a lifetime on benefits. His life is already wasted.

Today, Britain is facing a crisis with its youth. In every town and city, boys like Tuggy Tug are failing to make the transition to manhood and a successful adult life.

This has terrifying implications for us all. 'Serious youth violence,' says the head of Scotland Yard's Violent Crime directorate, Barry Norman, 'is the biggest problem we have today - with the possible exception of terrorism. 'Nothing frightens people more - and when that violence takes place in a group setting, it is all the more shocking.'



Jobless: Youth unemployment has just hit 726,000 the highest level for 16 years costing us more than £90 million a week (posed by model)

Nine months ago, I started investigating why so many boys are turning into feared gang members and criminals.

During my travels across the country, I talked to more than 50 teenage boys from low-income families, as well as dozens of men in their 20s and 30s from the same background.

I sat in on lessons in school, talked to teachers and encouraged youth-club leaders, school inspectors and charities to reveal the real reasons why so many young men are going to waste.

Tuggy Tug's chances of having a decent childhood, it became clear, had been weighted against him from the start. As a black boy from a low-income Caribbean background, he belongs to one of the two categories most likely to fail at school and least likely to break out of poverty.

White boys from low-income families perform worst: 63 per cent are unable to read and write properly at 14 (compared with 43 per cent of white girls from a similar background).

Black working- class boys do not do much better: at age 14, 54 per cent cannot read or write properly.

The scale of the crisis in our education system is going unrecognised - but we ignore it at our peril.



Smoking gun: Many teenage boys' heroes are rap stars and drug-dealers

Between 2000 and 2007, almost four million pupils left school without gaining the basic qualifications of five good GCSEs, including English and maths.

Nearly a million pupils left with less than five GCSEs of any grade.

Unlike previous generations, the boys who spill out onto our streets don't quickly grow out of delinquent behaviour.

What happens in school smashes their lives, leaving them antisocial-semi-criminal and dependant on welfare.

Which means we, the taxpayers, have to pay astronomical sums to keep fit young men idle. Youth unemployment, which has just hit 726,000 - its highest level in 16 years - is now costing us well over £90million a week.

And that's not all, of course. Illiterate young men with no other way of proving themselves or of making a living are likely to turn to crime. In 2004, the annual cost of youth crime in Britain was calculated at more than £1 billion - and it will be far higher now.

Worst of all, the number of violent crimes carried out by children and teenagers has increased by a third in just three years.

The number of boys under 18 who were convicted or cautioned over violent offences jumped by 37 per cent over the same period - compared with a rise among adults of less than one per cent.

And most of those who were caught went straight back to crime: 82 per cent of these boys aged 15-18 were reconvicted within two years.

THE DAMNING STATISTICS

- **BOYS** aged 10 to 16 commit 40 per cent of all street crime, 25 per cent of burglaries, 20 per cent of criminal damage and one-third of car thefts — all during school hours.
- **IN THE** street, the person most likely to be equipped with a knife is a boy aged 14-19.
- **FOUR** out of ten muggings are committed by children under 16 — and that's just the 50 per cent which are reported.
- **ONLY** 34 per cent of Britons say they'd be willing to stop a group of 14-year-olds vandalising a bus shelter. Nearly 40 per cent said they were afraid of being attacked, 14 per cent feared reprisals and 12 per cent weren't prepared to take verbal abuse.
- **IN ENGLAND**, almost 60,000 children skip lessons every day.
- **CHILDREN** from disadvantaged homes are five times less likely to get five good A to C grades at GCSE than those from affluent backgrounds.
- **WHITE** working-class and black Caribbean boys are the least likely to go on to university. Only 6 per cent of white boys eligible for free school meals opt for further education and 16 per cent of black Caribbean males. Compare that with Bangladeshis (29 per cent), black Africans (30 per cent), Pakistanis (33 per cent), Indians (58 per cent) and Chinese (60 per cent).
- **FIVE** million British adults are functionally illiterate and 17 million cannot add up properly.

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It's not just crime that can have long-term repercussions. Youth disorder on this scale represents a kick in the teeth to accepted conventions of respect and responsibility to others - and it's likely to carry on for generations to come. Certainly, adults are now less ready to intervene and monitor young people than in the past - and they are right to be afraid.

A white 22-year-old youth called Darren, who lives in a small Lincolnshire town, told me that his gang waited months to take revenge on a middle-aged neighbour who'd objected to one of them sitting on his garden wall.

When the boy refused to move, the man shoved him off.

After that, Darren and his mates stood outside the man's house for two weeks, 'terrorising him and throwing rocks at his car'.

The police moved them along - but six months later, half-a-dozen of the boys surrounded the man outside a supermarket - 'and we kicked the s*** out of him'. It was only 'luck' they didn't kill him, Darren admitted.

Such incidents were far less frequent in the recent past. This is partly because the institutions that previously socialised and directed young men - the family, the church and school - have either lost or given up their authority.

And these changes have hit boys from poor backgrounds the hardest.

So, too, has the lack of adult males in their lives who can serve as role models.

The number of children living in loneparent households - almost all headed by a single mother - has more than doubled in 25 years.

And what happens when these boys go to school? Despite the billions thrown at education by the Government since 1997, nearly every one of the teenagers I interviewed, as well as quite a few of the men I met in their 20s and 30s, was unable to read or write properly - or had only learned in prison.

A black car mechanic in his 50s, from Brixton, told me:

'Back in the Caribbean, we were taught the three Rs, but that's gone out of the window. After that, everything breaks down.'

'I'm out of jail, but there is no way out for me'

This was certainly true of the dozens of teenagers I met.

Their school days had followed a similar pattern: unable to understand what was going on in lessons but desperate to prove themselves at something, they began to misbehave in the last two years of primary school.

At secondary school, their behaviour deteriorated further. Most either played truant or were excluded.

By 14, the majority of them were involved in crime and drugs - turning up to school only to sell drugs or stolen goods. For them, illiteracy had already turned into a life sentence on the edges of society.

Bigs, the former leader of a notorious Brixton gang who received his first prison sentence at 15, told me:

'Other people go from school to university. We go from school to prison. I thought I'd be dead by 30.'

Everywhere I went, I met men whose lives had been blighted by their failure at school. A former burglar told me he'd dropped out at 14 and received his first prison sentence at 18.

Now in his 30s, he lives in a hostel and supplements benefits with a little drug-dealing. He said sadly: 'I may be out of prison, but there is no way out for me.' A young man in his 20s, living on benefits in Kent said: 'There are things you don't know at 14.'

You need someone to tell you: "If you do this at 14, your life will be better." I'm really trying now, but it's so f***** hard because it is just too late.'

What kind of job can you get when you're illiterate? Forty years ago, a boy could get work in a factory at 16 and be supporting a wife and child by the age of 19.

When the middleaged Brixton mechanic left school, for example, he and his mates could pick from a range of factory jobs and apprenticeships. All gone now, he said sadly.

The loss of our manufacturing industry, combined with the growth of immigration, has particularly affected white and black Caribbean boys from poor backgrounds.

'Round here, Poles do all of the work'

Call centres, and other service sector jobs, demand personal and social skills that are alien to most of the boys I met.

Unlike their middle-class counterparts, they have never been taught the basics, such as shaking hands, speaking clearly or looking a grown-up in the eye.

Sometimes, it took me two or three attempts to understand what they were trying to say.

One teacher in a London inner-city school told me he considered this 'a massively serious issue'.

He went on: 'I have really gifted black boys who can't communicate. You see them struggling. It's quite often the reason they get really upset and frustrated.'

Yet he thought it 'patronising' to try to correct them.

Meanwhile, the arrival of large numbers of skilled immigrants willing to work for low pay has left disadvantaged working-class boys sidelined and unable to land a low-paid job that might lead to something better.

According to the Statistics Commission, of the 1.7 million new jobs created since 1997, a whopping 81 per cent have gone to foreign workers.

The Department For Work And Pensions is jawdroppingly candid about the reasons for this.

UK citizens are on the dole because of 'issues around basic employability skills, incentives and motivation' it says.

What a pity it has not passed this insight on to the Department Of Education And Skills.

In a seaside town, I spoke to a 22-year-old man called Dave about how these issues have affected his life.

Like so many others, he had failed to learn to read at primary school, dropped out at 14 and joined a gang.



Killing time: Unable to understand what was going on in lessons some boys begin to misbehave in the last two years of primary school
Now, however, he yearns for 'a decent job' and a home for his girlfriend and baby daughter.

Unsurprisingly, his lack of education has left him qualified only for menial jobs, which are hard to come by.

'When the council advertised two dustmen jobs,' he said, 'there were 100 applications.'

The local job agencies warned him he had no chance because he was English. 'Poles do all the jobs around here,' he told me.

When Dave did finally manage to secure a job for the minimum wage, he encountered the other major problem facing young men - benefits.

In fact, the financial adviser at the Job Centre - whose wages are paid by the taxpayer - gave him a staggering piece of advice. He told him to turn down the job.

'I'd have had to pay my rent, council tax and utility bills and lost my benefits,' Dave explains.

'At the end of the day, I would have been £30 worse off.'

Far from being 'work-shy', most of the young men I met were still eager to find jobs - but all were well aware that the welfare system hands out more than they can legitimately earn.

Meanwhile, the recession has increased competition for low-paid jobs.

Dave could clearly foresee his future.

'I know men of 40 doing nothing but drink and drugs all day. I don't blame them - but it's too early for me,' he said, shaking his head angrily. 'I don't want to be like that.'

All over Britain, men like Dave are disengaging from society for a reason: they see nothing in it for them. And they are quite right.

Sir Terry Leahy, Tesco's chief executive and a member of Gordon Brown's Business Council For Britain, put it bluntly:

'Too many children have been leaving school after 11 or 13 years of compulsory education without the basic skills to get on in life and hold down a job.'

On-the-job training could not act as a 'bandage or a sticking plaster' for the failures of our education system, he said.

So what is the Government doing to break this vicious circle?

A new report - by an all-party panel chaired by former minister Alan Milburn - spelled out:

'The problem is not a shortage of parental aspiration. It is a shortage of good schools.'



Nothing to do: Scores of disaffected youths like this hoody-wearing youngster (posed by model) have few diversions so they hang around shops

It contained a raft of proposals for helping disadvantaged-children, including a payment-by-results scheme for schools.

Whether these proposals will ever be taken further is doubtful. Labour has a track record of talking about reforms - and then doing nothing.

In January, Gordon Brown called for a 'national crusade' to break down class barriers; he was even contemplating making it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of class.

This is to miss the point. Class inequalities are not going to be fixed by a national crusade or legislation.

The problem lies in our schools, over which Labour has had complete control for the past 12 years.

In any case, most boys from disadvantaged backgrounds don't aspire to move to a different class; they rarely aspire to go beyond a few streets.

One young man I met in South London, for example, had never **crossed the Thames because he couldn't read the bus timetables.**

The head of careers at a school in Dagenham described his pupils as 'very estate-centric and reluctant to travel far'.

He added: ' Trying to get them onto a bus to travel a couple of miles for work experience is difficult enough.'

When boys are isolated, confined and ignorant, is a lack of aspiration really so surprising?

That opportunity exists in this country is clear from the experience of many recent Eastern European immigrants.

Four years ago, I met a young Pole who was then sharing a room in Ealing, West London.

He could barely speak English and was working for the minimum wage. He has now opened a beauty salon in St John's Wood, a smart area of North London.

But then, as Dave pointed out bitterly, 'the Poles have not been through our education system'.

When their children do, they will no doubt face similar problems to those of the indigenous workingclass.

'Working-class', of course, is an optimistic description. The point is that these young men - black and white - are not working, and probably never will.

The Government cannot do much about the loss of manufacturing jobs or the breakdown of families.

It can, however, tackle the problems in our schools and the perverse influence of our benefit system.

In a world recession and with unparalleled levels of debt, we simply cannot continue to waste so many lives, or to pay the escalating bill for these young men's benefits and crimes.

Instead, we should be concentrating on making them as skilled and motivated as the immigrants who are now taking their place.

Even Tuggy Tug longs for a better life - though his methods are more likely to land him in a cell than on a golf course.

After saying goodbye to him, I learned that I'd almost become his latest victim. He'd taken my escort aside to suggest they 'bang' me together and steal my watch.

'Well,' shrugged my escort, himself a former armed robber, 'he wants £1,000 to buy a Smart car. He sees stealing your watch as a career move.'