

Spate of violent crime on London's streets alarms policymakers

Police, frontline workers and politicians seek answers as death rate nears New York's

A man consoles the brother of stabbing victim Israel Ogunsola on Thursday at the scene of the stabbing in Hackney, east London © Tolga Akmen/FT

Robert Wright, Public Policy Correspondent 6 HOURS AGO

It has been a bloody Easter in London.

On Monday night, the city was shocked by the gunning-down of 17-year-old Tanesha Melbourne on a street in Tottenham, in the north of the city. Her murder was one of four in just two days over the holiday weekend. On Wednesday night, two more men were killed in the neighbouring London borough of Hackney.

The murder rate has soared in the British capital this year. Fifty-one people have been killed in the city so far this year — 22 in March alone, according to the Metropolitan Police. That is far more than 2017, when 116 were killed during the entire year, excluding those killed in terrorist attacks.

The victims have been young — more than half were in their 20s or younger — and poor.

London, which prides itself on being less violent than other global cities, has come close to passing the murder rate in New York, where 48 people were killed in the first three months of the year, compared with 44 in the British capital.

The [increase](#) comes after two decades of a steady decline in violent crime, and has left politicians, law enforcement officials and frontline workers struggling to find an explanation.

Ben Bradford, a professor of global city policing at University College London, suggested any number of causes might be behind the sudden increase in violence, including turf wars sparked by changes to illegal drugs markets, the use of social media to incite groups to violence, cuts to child and adolescent mental health services and the emergence of pockets of persistent poverty.

“Any or all of those things could have contributed to this particular rise in really extreme violence,” he said.

Flowers are laid on Chalgrove Road, Tottenham, where 17-year-old girl was shot and killed on Monday evening © PA

David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, suggested that new patterns of drugs trafficking were helping to fuel the problem. He said London was the start of a supply chain known as a

“county line”, with junior dealers used as couriers to take drugs to provincial areas.

“The young people who are being killed are but foot soldiers in a much, much bigger turf war,” he said.

Tom Gash, a former Downing Street official who advises police forces on strategy, warned it was unclear whether the jump in killings was a short-term spike or the beginning of a longer-term trend. “It doesn’t make sense to look at crime over anything other than a year,” he said.

But the growing toll has alarmed politicians and law enforcement officials. Cressida Dick, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, said on Thursday that a new [violent crime task force](#) of 120 officers would target drug dealers, muggers and violent individuals in crime “hotspots”.

“We are seeing more concerted attacks by groups with a real determination to kill and that is very, very worrying,” she told the Evening Standard newspaper.

Detective Chief Superintendent Richard Wood, head of the force’s homicide and major crime command, said the force would make full use of its contentious stop-and-search powers to tackle the problem.

“Right now our officers are on the streets and will make more arrests for violence, take more knives off the streets and prevent violence,” Chief Supt Wood said. “Our intelligence-led operations, use of stop-and-search, proactive targeting of specialist teams into areas seeing high levels of violence, will all continue.”

David Lammy, the Tottenham MP, visits the murder scene in Link Street, Hackney. He believes that new patterns of drugs trafficking are fuelling the killings © PA

Opposition politicians have called for increased funding for police and other public services to tackle violence. [Police budgets](#) in England and Wales have fallen by an average of 20 per cent since 2010.

“Public services are struggling to respond, other than to their absolute statutory obligations,” Mr Lammy said.

There is consensus, however, that policing alone is not the answer to the violence, with even Chief Supt Wood of the Met acknowledging that a multi-pronged approach is needed. “All of London’s agencies and every Londoner must be part of a long-term effort to turn our young people away from knives,” he said.

Mr Gash agreed that a tough law-and-order approach alone was not the answer.

“We’ve played that hand in the UK and we need to be careful about spending more and more

money on our already overcrowded and dysfunctional prison estate over the coming years,” he said.

Instead, he and other officials say that patient, long-term work to divert young people away from violence is the only way to eradicate the killing.

Hackney CVS, a widely praised charity based a few minutes’ walk from the scene of Wednesday night’s murder, works with young people to overcome issues such family dysfunction and deprivation, and helps them prepare for job interviews or other opportunities.

Recommended

“If you’re going to a job interview with all that baggage, you’re not going to perform well,” said Jake Ferguson, the group’s chief executive.

Mr Ferguson said that his organisation’s focus on treating young people’s social problems could work even with gang members, who are seen as especially difficult to reach.

“The biggest eye-opener was when we talked to people about mental health and trauma,” Mr Ferguson said. “Trauma is a big risk factor for gang violence.”

He said his group’s approach had a far better chance of success than tougher laws and longer prison sentences.

“Does history tell us that enforcement improves the problem?” Mr Ferguson asked. “Not really.”

The randomness of London violence

Dami Okusaga, Kenny Ladipo and Emmanuel Akin in Hackney: they believe the violence has its roots in the hopelessness of some young black men © Tolga Akmen/FT

Kenny Ladipo smiled as he remembered his friend Israel Ogunsola.

“I used to play with him when he was younger,” he recalled. “I always used to see him.”

Ogunsola, just 18, was stabbed round the corner from his home on Wednesday evening, the 50th person to be murdered in London this year. On Thursday a forensic tent covered the spot where police officers had fought to save his life just hours before.

For Mr Ladipo, 24, and other young men who gathered on Thursday morning at Hackney CVS, a voluntary group based a few hundred metres from the murder scene, Ogunsola’s death illustrated the sheer randomness of much of this year’s violence in London.

“He really wanted to do well for himself,” said Emmanuel Akin, 20, who also knew Ogunsola. Mr Akin added that Ogunsola might have been seen with gang members but was not a member himself.

“You don’t necessarily have to be in a gang to be a target, to be a victim,” Mr Akin said.

Mr Ladipo, Mr Akin and Dami Okusaga, 25, who was also at the centre, all agreed that the violence had its roots in the hopelessness of some young black men.

“I think there’s a big disconnect with the youth and the community, the older members of the community,” Mr Okusaga said. “That can start from the schools, with the police, even within the home.”

Yet all three also expressed determination to improve the situation. Losing friends to violence prompted Mr Ladipo to become a youth worker, and through this he hoped to inspire young people to aspire to a better life.

“I just feel that young people are misguided,” Mr Ladipo said. “At the same time, the rest of society isn’t helping.”

Two 17-year-old boys have been arrested on suspicion of Ogunsola’s murder, according to the Metropolitan Police.