

Editorial:

Teenage Killings: Loss, Trauma and Abandonment in the Histories of Young People in Trouble

Rachel Wingfield

On 16 November 2007, I heard the news that seventeen-year-old Etem Celebi had been shot and killed on the Smalley Close Estate in Stoke Newington. He was a student at nearby Stoke Newington School.

This news was particularly poignant for me because I had worked therapeutically with boys in distress and trouble at Stoke Newington School, Etem's school. We need to keep in mind the real human beings involved and the immediate and pressing nature of these tragedies – these are issues we have to do something about, right now.

Etem's murder marked the twenty-third killing of a teenager in London in 2007. In 2008, by July, there have been twenty-one killings by knife crime alone. Etem Celebi was shot by other teenagers thought to be gang members from Stamford Hill. They thought someone from the Smalley Close estate had stabbed their friend, and had come down to Stoke Newington looking for retaliation. They came upon Etem and his friends, sitting talking, and asked, 'Are you from this estate?' When Etem said yes, the boys started firing – in all they fired nine shots, and didn't care whom they hit. Etem tried to run, and hid crouching behind a nearby car, but he was shot in the lower back and died hours later. A seventeen-year-old boy has now been arrested for his killing, as well as three other teenagers.

The press coverage of Etem's death was very focused around the issue of whether Etem himself was a gang member. There have been reports that he was involved in drug dealing and the sale of arms. The subtext of this is the question: was Etem an 'innocent' victim? One newspaper report read, 'We should all be concerned about this killing, because these acts of violence are starting to involve the rest of us, who have no involvement in gang warfare'.

It seems that society has developed a new form of social stratification for young people. There are normal people, innocent people whose lives and deaths matter, and a group of second class citizens – throw away young people – who will not really be missed, whose lives are cheap.

How does the death of one of our young people end up being dismissed in such a way? I also want to think about how another seventeen-year-old boy ended up shooting Etem in the back and killing him, simply because he happened to live on a particular estate.

I have been thinking about the theme of young people in trouble from two very different perspectives gained through therapeutic work: first, therapeutic work in schools with young boys in trouble, and second, my work with offenders in prison, much further down the line, after they have committed violent crime (including murder). What has been striking for me, as a psychotherapist, is how often I am dealing with the same or similar narratives: eleven- and twelve-year-olds I have met in schools tell the same stories and voice the same distress as the twenty-five and thirty-year-olds (and older) that I meet serving life and other long sentences in prison.

What brings this level of violence and danger into the everyday lives of young people? Or draws them into involvement in gangs and organized crime? Dominant contemporary narratives about young people who commit crimes remain rooted in genetic fundamentalism ('he or she was born like it') or drenched in stereotypes ('black people from poor families are criminals') and quasi-religious language ('these people are just evil').

So who are these evil monsters we are talking about?

It deeply concerns me that, so many years after the birth of attachment theory, an understanding of the impacts of separation, loss, and trauma are still missing from any understanding of disaffected or so-called anti-social behaviour in young people. The current media focus and moral panic about violence committed by young people can lead to quite a distortion in our perceptions. It can also lead to political solutions that are based on fear and prejudice rather than being backed up by facts.

We are part of a culture in which a generation of young working-class people is being criminalized. Black and minority ethnic young people are particularly focused on as potentially dangerous, and over-represented in statistics at every stage of the criminal justice system – including those stopped by police, arrested, and then prosecuted for crimes. Recently, the government has begun to develop policies aimed at identifying children from 'socially excluded' – read poor, or black families – whom they feel are at risk of becoming the dangerous criminals of the future. But evidence suggests that the issue of violent crime involves the whole community – both in its cause and its solution.

Violent offences involving young people aged 10–19 *actually fell by 18% last*

year. Police are concerned about the rise in the number of teenagers being murdered, the majority in gang conflict.

I am aware, with the young offenders I have worked with, that by the time they commit their index offence a number of serious crimes have been committed against them. Yet those who subjected them for years to violence and abuse have very rarely been caught or prosecuted for these crimes and are sometimes even seen as responsible citizens.

What the risk statistics actually tell us is about those who are at risk of *being caught*.

As we know, the vast majority of serious harm is committed in family or interpersonal relationships through domestic violence. Two women are killed through domestic violence per week, yet there is no equivalent public outcry. In addition to domestic violence, the crimes of violence that are most prevalent in our society are violence between peers, violence through child sexual abuse in the family or social network, and violence through rape. The vast majority of these crimes is committed by partners, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, or family members.

Much is being said about crime levels dropping. But in these categories, which cause the most harm to their victims, there is no evidence of any fall in rates. And when it comes to rape, convictions are dropping although reporting is rising, and survey evidence backs up the fact that levels of rape continue to be much higher than those reported.

Rape remains one of the most widespread crimes and one most likely to cause serious long-term harm to victims. And those who commit rape do not fit any neat profile. Think, for example, of "Frat Boy" initiation ceremonies in the USA, which involve white middle-class students, who go on to become respectable members of the establishment, raping freshmen students, the numbers of rapes on university campuses by fellow students, and women raped by professional colleagues they ask in for a drink. Most of these offenders will never come to the attention of the authorities, and even if they do they are very unlikely to be convicted.

We might not be too surprised by this if we take into account that young people's attitudinal surveys regularly report high levels of social and peer approval of rape. The recent Amnesty International survey revealed that many young people felt there was a whole range of circumstances in which it is legitimate to rape a woman.

This is a question of levels of social permission. This is not just about identifying individuals. This cannot be tackled by narrowing down those we perceive to be a danger to us into a small group of socially excluded teenagers whom we can assess for risk and keep under control. This is a social myth, a myth that aims to deal with our fear of harm.

But we do need to address how to bring about change in the rising levels of

young people killed through gun and knife crime. And we also urgently need to address how we can bring about change for young people drawn into the criminal justice system, and how to prevent re-offending.

If we are serious about trying to help young people come out of the criminal justice system, and particularly if they have been serving a custodial sentence, proper resources need to be put into addressing the issues of trauma, neglect, attachment, and loss. This means longer-term interventions by skilled attachment therapists. This would require a reduction in custodial sentences *per se*, in order to allow those seriously at risk of harming others to have the resources in custody to do the work needed to bring about change.

More than fifty years ago, in his ground-breaking paper '44 juvenile thieves', John Bowlby presented us with insights into the aetiology of crime and began to provide an evidence base on the impact of disruption, separation, and loss in early attachment relationships and the costs for children and wider society.

The portrait of Bowlby's forty-four thieves provides us with an image of children with little or no sense of belonging to a secure social network and to consistent adult attachment figures. This is most extreme with the affectionless group specifically, with their traits of truancy and 'wandering', and their history of multiple shifting care-givers, or of being 'looked after' children. This concurs with contemporary statistics that show that a third of people currently in prison grew up in the care system.

Instead, Bowlby highlights our basic need for each other as human beings, our need for secure relationships, and the necessity for society to provide a culture of stability, inclusion, and belonging for its children. When this is absent, we see a rise in young people getting involved in gangs and cults.

We could be forgiven for thinking that Bowlby's work had fallen on unlistening ears when we consider the current climate in relation to young offenders. The emergence of 'antisocial behaviour orders' (ASBOs) has criminalized young people acting out in traditional adolescent peer cultures, while those prosecuted or convicted for more serious crimes, leading to harm against others, have become the target of harsher custodial sentences and increasing vilification in a retributive post-Bulger climate.

My experience of working with violent offenders in prison revealed histories of profound abandonment, betrayal, and trauma. This includes offenders whose crimes have been sadistic, and so apparently lacking in empathy that they have literally become inhuman to us, hence the labels of beasts and monsters so common in media coverage of their crimes.

But, for every murder committed by young people, there is another earlier murder, perpetrated by those who had abused and violated their basic human rights. In my clinical work, I felt the murderous hate and rage of these perpetrators in the room with me and my young clients. On the one hand, there is

the murder of a vulnerable human being who is on the receiving end of all the rage the young person was carrying, and on the other, a much earlier murder, one of Shengold's 'soul murders', in which a child's life was destroyed and stolen by what others did to her. External reality might be able to tell us that my client's fingerprints were at the scene. But, as with many other acts of crime and violence I had worked with, the internal narrative told me that those really responsible for the death of my client's victim might only have been ghosts at the scene of the crime.

This narrative gives us the information we need to bring about long-term change for injured children and adults. Putting it into practice would have to include changes in our approach to looked-after children, our mental health system, and our education and criminal justice systems. Most fundamentally, it requires from us a new understanding of the necessity for the whole community to share responsibility for meeting needs for attachment and belonging, rather than scapegoating individual mothers yet again.

Two days after Etem Celebi's murder, seventeen-year-old Biendi Litambola became the twenty-fourth teenager to be killed in London in 2007. Four young people were arrested for his murder. He was beaten to death in Canning Town, in broad daylight. His friends spray-painted 'E6 Gangstas', the local gang believed to have killed him, on the wall of the estate where the arrested boys live. His brother spoke out desperately, saying that he hoped this would be a wake-up call to the black community, that black on black violence has to stop.

The newspaper report, by a white writer, was concerned that next time it might be 'one of us' who is killed. In the meantime, how many young people's lives and deaths will be written off as 'gang violence', and written about as throw-away lives? How many socially excluded young people will keep ending up in prison or psychiatric hospitals?

A scroll through the records of missing and murdered teenagers in London in 2007 and 2008 reveals a list of socially excluded youngsters – those who have been in care, on heroin, in prostitution, or homeless. In her work on prostitution, Andrea Dworkin writes about how our society has two classes of women – innocent victims of murder and rape, and women whom we feel somehow deserve it more. She says society takes the view that you shouldn't rape or be violent to 'us' but you see those women over there, prostitutes, illegal immigrants, junkies, care leavers offenders and ex-offenders 'you see that woman? You see that woman over there? Do it to her. It doesn't matter if you take her. We won't miss her.' But WE DO MISS HER. WE WANT HER BACK.

We want these young people back. The ones we can keep alive, we want them alive. The ones who deserve to be part of our community, who deserve to have lives and careers and people who love and care about them – we want

them back. We do not want them excluded from our society, thrown away, in prisons, psychiatric hospitals, hostels, on the streets. We honour the lives and deaths of every single one of them and need to pledge to fight for their right to a future.