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By Harriet Sergeant

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It's the most disturbing social issue of our age - why Britain is plagued by a generation of violent, barely literate young men living outside the normal bounds of society. For nine months, a leading investigative journalist has been examining their world for the Mail. In the concluding part of this landmark series, she looks at the rise of gang culture.

With their hierarchies and strict discipline, street gangs are nothing more than a distorted mirror image of the house system common in private schools.

Loyalty and team effort are all-important. As one young gang leader from Kilburn, North-West London, told me chillingly. 'You have to know the people, you have to trust the people, because you do everything together. When you stab, you stab together.'

Most boys who join gangs aren't irredeemably evil. They are teenagers from low-income families who have been let down by their schools, their parents and other adults.

And in gangs, they find what they crave: a close-knit group, protection and an occupation into which they can pour all their energy and enthusiasm.

In areas of extreme deprivation, said Barbara Wilding, chief constable of South Wales Police, 'tribal loyalty has replaced family loyalty - and gang culture based on violence and drugs is a way of life.'

This is certainly true of Tuggy Tug and his two closest friends, Mash and Crumble - aged 15 and of black Caribbean origin - whom I met on a street corner in Brixton, South London.

Like most of the deprived teenage boys I interviewed, they are used to relying on themselves. 'We are all linked together. We all bring something to the table. One got a knock-out punch. Another good with a knife. We all got our little role,' said Tuggy Tug, who belongs to a gang of 20 youths involved in drug-dealing and robbery.

He pointed to Crumble, who looked no more than 12.

'If I ever get into a problem, it's him I look to. This one, he finish the problem. He go the full 100 per cent. He shank (stab) the man.'

Like any private school sports master, the boys believe in team spirit. In their case, though, failure can mean death.

They steal mainly from teenagers slightly older than themselves - and vengeful 19-year-olds have no inhibitions about using guns in broad daylight.

Crumble has been shot at twice outside the B&Q in Norwood. 'The car pulled up on this big, high road,' said Tuggy Tug, 'the sun shining, and then pop, pop.'

A friend and fellow gang member, aged 16, had been shot in front of them the week before I met them.

Crumble commented: 'You never seen anything like it in your life. Half his head had gone.'

Despite their chilling street tales, all three boys looked pinched and small for their age. When I asked if they were hungry, the bravado abruptly vanished: 'We're always hungry,' they admitted.

No adult appeared to look after them - let alone feed them.

'My mum sometimes gives me money for a packet of crisps,' one volunteered.

Others in their 20-strong Brixton gang had been kicked out of home by their mothers or taken into care.

Outraged that no adult was even feeding them, I took the three boys to a restaurant, where they explained over chicken and chips what being part of a gang meant to them.

'I get more from these two than I ever did from my family,' said Tuggy of his companions.

In the absence of parents, the gang clearly offered them all both protection and emotional support.

Tuggy Tug and his friends are not alone in feeling let down by parents. British children spend less time with their mothers and fathers than any of their counterparts in other European countries.

In a recent MORI poll, 24 per cent of British children complained that their parents were not always there when they needed them.

In another survey, 49 per cent of parents did not know where their children were, whom they were with or what they did after school, at weekends or during the holidays.

The absence of a caring parent has a profound effect on teenagers.

In a Prince's Trust survey of young gang members, 58 per cent said they had joined a gang to acquire a sense of identity, while a quarter were in search of someone to look up to.

To Mash, parents merely represented a roof over his head - though not for much longer.+ 'My mother always said to me, "From 16, you're gone,"' he told me.

For some boys from poor backgrounds, the effect of this lack of parental concern is compounded by the absence of a protective authority figure outside the home. In short, teenagers join gangs because they are afraid.

'You don't start off as a killer,' said a 19-year-old gang leader from Kilburn, 'but you get bullied on the street. So you go to the gym and you end up a fighter, a violent person. All you want is for them to leave you alone, but they push you and push you.'

Another boy, aged 13, explained that in his area in West London, boys 'would do anything' to join a gang because it would make people 'look at them differently, be scared of them'.

Every one of the teenagers I interviewed had been mugged at least once.

Some spoke of older brothers involved in regular violence and shootings, and one boy had been stabbed twice in the arm on the night I met him. They said they felt unprotected by the adult world.

They are right to be fearful: those most at risk of being victims of violent crime are young men aged between 16 and 26, according to the Home Office. And recently, a Freedom of Information request to each of the 43 police forces revealed that four out of ten of the muggings reported were committed by children under 16.

Even school offers no guarantee of protection these days. Cecil and Nathan, both aged 13, told me that, at their inner-city London comprehensive, they were usually either afraid or on edge. When bigger boys arrive at school with knives, they aren't searched.

When boys fight, 'the teachers just wait and watch,' they said. 'They don't intervene because they don't really care about us.'

The majority of the teachers at this school are women - a quarter of them quite young and scared, according to Cecil and Nathan. One teacher had been beaten up and another stalked by pupils.

Even the male teachers offered little safety. Nathan and Cecil recalled an older boy walking into their class and punching another in the face. 'There was blood everywhere.'

The male teacher, fearful of disciplinary action if he touched the assailant, told three of the bigger boys to pull him off.

In the topsy-turvy world of the state-school system, it's obviously quite all right to use 13-year-olds to break up a fight.

At Cecil and Nathan's comprehensive, where there is no after-school sport, there are regular fights between boys from rival schools and gangs.

These take place on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. At a nearby comprehensive attended by a 13-year-old called David, they kick off most Friday lunchtimes.

All three boys said the police were rarely called - and then usually only the day after a fight. 'The

teachers are scared,' said David with contempt.

Shockingly, both these inner-city schools were passed as 'satisfactory' in their last Ofsted inspection reports.

In fact, Ofsted has branded nearly half the schools in the country 'satisfactory' or worse - so the scale of the problem is clear.

One assistant head shook his head and told me: 'All we're doing is containing the children and keeping them off the streets, and we're barely doing that.'

Last year, classroom disruption was running at record levels, with schools sending home 2,200 children every day.

As well as failing to teach them how to read and write properly, too many schools are failing to protect boys from low-income families, to socialise them and to open up the world to the brightest. More than 200,000 were expelled or suspended the year before for violent, threatening or aggressive behaviour directed at teachers or other pupils.

It is, of course, extremely hard to learn - or teach - in this kind of environment.

Tuggy Tug said he hardly bothered to turn up at school any more. 'The teachers don't even try - they only care about the wage at the end of the year,' he said dismissively.

'You can sit on the desk with your shoes off, your socks hanging out, on the phone, doin' your ting [drug dealing] and the teachers won't give a toss.'

Many other boys talked of selling drugs and stolen goods at school. A thick-set 16-year-old from West Norwood in South London, told me: 'School made me a lot of money. Anything I got my hands on, I sold there.'

In Streatham, South London, a black teenager said. 'If I say go away and leave me alone, the teacher leaves me alone sitting at the back of the class, planning our next drug deal.'

It was the same story from a white boy, who has since left his school in the Midlands: 'We got away with making drug deals in class. They knew what we were doing, but they did nothing,' he said.

Too many schools are displaying a similar indifference to the wellbeing of their pupils.

The result is that more and more of these boys are joining violent gangs - and they are likely to remain in them. After all, as Mash remarked, what are they qualified for other than 'drug dealing and robbing'?

It is not hard to give teenage boys what they need to grow into successful men. It's not hard to steer them away from crime. The worst crime of all is that we are turning large numbers of potentially decent young men into misfits and criminals.

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1215389/Abandoned-parents-betrayed-schools-young-boys-turning-criminal-gangs-protection-sense-belonging.html#ixzz0RvAXd5UB>