

'Man's the Talk on Road'

A dialogue with young black people on their experiences of gun crime

Ejos Ubiribo

Ejos Ubiribo looks at the issues behind gun crime.

Before my own brother's murder in 2002 I was already very concerned about the slaughter of black British men at the hands of their own brothers. At any given opportunity I would raise these concerns, which more often than not would be on the phone in conversation with two of my girlfriends (the only two that kindly endured my marathon diatribes). In trying to make sense of the madness which for me was the near weekly accounts of the murder of black young males, I became conscious of the deep rooted apathy about this in both the black community and wider society. Black men killing black men did not matter. Feeling powerless I resigned myself to just talking about it. However, it is something that is extremely difficult to ignore when the accounts are of people you know.

My first experience of gun crime was in 1998 watching a news report of a young man gunned down in Willesden, north west London. Although barely catching the victim's surname, there was something familiar about it. Less than an hour later I learned that it was Rudy King, the cousin of a friend. Then in July 1999, my friend's boyfriend, Dean Roberts, was shot dead in Harlesden, again in north west London, three weeks before the birth of their son. In the

following few years I came to know (both directly and indirectly) many young black males involved in shootings. But it was the beginning of 2002 that would change my life forever. At a New Year's Eve party in Hackney, I, among other partygoers, witnessed the murder of two men. A single shot was fired. The bullet went through one man, ricocheted against the wall and entered the head of a second man. The following day I found out that the second man was my friend's brother.

For months after I was disturbed by the death of these young men. What had started off as isolated incidents in the commonly recognised black areas, such as Brixton and Hackney, fast became a daily occurrence of random shootings. I became insanely frightened for my brothers. In July that year my fears were realised, with the murder of my eighteen year old brother. Gun crime had now become my own reality. I joined the chorus of lament for the deaths of sons, brothers, fathers and lovers. But I also wanted to understand what was happening and why. Commentary in the media has tended to be sensational scare mongering; often with barely concealed racial overtones. What sympathetic coverage there has been - a few TV documentaries and broadsheet features - has failed to develop an analysis which puts the phenomenon of young black men killing other young black men into a wider political and economic context.

The accelerating occurrences of gun crime in Lambeth, Brent and Hackney have resulted in a slew of community, police and government partnership programmes. However, because there is no centralised system that can measure or assess their performance, it is difficult to discern their true impact. The young people I spoke with did not cite any of the plethora of anti-gun crime initiatives as a factor in diverting them from crime. In fact, their overwhelming belief was that gun crime was inevitable. While I do not wish to discount the significant and necessary work of anti-gun crime programmes, the question of their effectiveness needs to be addressed - and I hope that it will be in the forthcoming Metropolitan Police Authority's Gun Crime Scrutiny Review.

Having said that, it has been a significant development that the establishment has recognised that the social and economic condition of inner city children in general, and black children in particular, is a major factor leading them to engage in crime. It has led to proactive work aiming to redress

the social and economic imbalance through education, training and employment. These are areas which have previously failed disaffected black people. However, in my own personal experience, disaffection does not apply to all black people from impoverished backgrounds. Many young black people have transcended social and economic deprivation and there is much to be learned from how they have achieved this. For example, what can we learn from black girls' positive attitude towards education (although not necessarily toward school)?

I want to make a start on developing an understanding of gun crime by first giving a voice to those at the centre of the problem - black young men and women - and seeing what they might be able to tell us. All the extracts which follow are taken from discussions with people from the south London borough of Lambeth, which is one of the Metropolitan Police's Operation Trident 'hotspots'.

I ask Robert who is sixteen what it was like growing up in Brixton.

Robert Hard. Say we're going out, we can't go nowhere without police following behind us or just stopping us on the road.

Ejos From what age did you start experiencing that?

Robert Nine, ten. The way I used to go on on road was not like a bad boy, but we were young, so we just carried on how kids would act. But they'd just think 'they're bad boys, they've probably got drugs or guns on them'. So they'd just pull us over and stop us.

Shareen and Nadia, both young women, aged 18 and 14, describe a gun culture they perceive as widespread.

Shareen and Nadia You know, gun crime has risen to the point where everybody on the street these days have a gun. Boys as young as 12 are carrying guns. That's what people do.

Ejos We say it so naturally but that's not what everybody does. Who are we talking about?

Shareen and Nadia Friends, family, people we know. Either they've got a gun, they know someone that's got a gun or they're involved in a gun crime.

Ejos Is it just for protection or is it for stripes?

Shareen Yeah it is for protection, but it's also for, 'yeah I'm a bad boy I carry a gun'.

Ejos Black men, or men in general involved in street culture, feel that they have to take on that 'I'm not afraid of anyone' persona.

Shareen Otherwise you get taken for a boy - and when I say taken for a boy, people take the piss if you don't react the way they want you to react. They will take you for a boy, that's how they see it.

Nadia If you ain't got money you're a prick.

Shareen Then you can't get a girl, because you can't buy her things, and you can't purchase things to make you look good, to even get a girl.

Kane was convicted and imprisoned for a firearm offence. He illuminates the complexities that black males face in our society.

Kane I tell you what, money goes to your head, and with a gun on top of that you start getting that extra power. Money, power, respect. You can gain respect from people if you've got money. I'm not saying every man's got to be that way. That doesn't make you a man. But the man I want to be, that's what it is.

Kane echoes the sentiments of all the young people I spoke with. For them money is the only tangible marker of success, and as disenfranchised black people, particularly black men, they can rarely access this through legitimate work. They seek other alternatives, mainly through 'hustling'.

Kane I grew up on an estate and the role models are the people that are doing well for themselves, because everyone's living in, you could say,

poverty. So, you look to who's ever looking good, who's ever making life looking interesting. When you get to the stage where the usual stuff boys do is getting boring now, you either want girls or money, or both. I was more like I was going to get money. I saw the older guys and they were doing their thing. And that's who are your role models when you're on an estate.

Ejos Would you say you were poor?

Kane I wouldn't say I was, but what I say to my mum when she say's she tried the best for us is, at the end of the day we live in an estate and you've got to face that everyday, so you've got to be a certain way to survive. So if you did so well for us why we still living here? If my dad was a successful person I wouldn't be living on an estate, would I? We'd be living in a nice house, going to a private school and all that stuff. But obviously that didn't happen. So to me he's not the best role model, because he hasn't got what I consider to be the qualities of life.

Ejos What are the qualities of life?

Kane When I see people that have had a good education, and the way they look at life and the things they get up to, it looks a lot - I don't know - *easier* for them. Their parents are always willing to help them out, through Uni and stuff. We didn't have all that stuff so we'll always look for an alternative.

Ejos What's the alternative?

Kane I suppose you want the fast money now. You don't want to go the long way. I think it is much more of a struggle for someone who hasn't got a rich father to go through Uni. And when you're going back and forth to Uni every day, you come home and see this guy down the road who seems to have everything that you want and you're trying to strive for. It depends what you want. I'm talking more material things, but then I suppose I'm more materialistic because I've seen what material things can do.

Respect and conflict

The culture of respect plays an important part in escalating conflict between young men. To try and make sense of it I am speaking with James who is 16, and Trevor who is an older man and his mentor. James was born in Jamaica and came to England in his early teens. He offers a unique transcultural perspective of gun culture from his first-hand experience of gun crime, which begins in his early years in Jamaica and continues when he migrates to England. Our conversation takes place in Trevor's car as we drive across South London.

Ejos How much did your gun cost you to get?

James My dad gave it to me.

Ejos So you were how old?

James About 12.

Ejos Have you ever shot after anybody?

James Yeah.

Ejos Have you been shot?

James Yeah I've been grazed.

Ejos I'd be shook if I thought somebody was trying to kill me.

James I never cared whether I died or not.

Ejos Why is that?

James That was just my mentality then!

Ejos You didn't value your life?

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James Nope.

Ejos Did you enjoy your life?

James Yeah.

Ejos So the thought of you being taken away from that life didn't really matter?

James I never had that thought.

Ejos Were you in a crew? How many of you were there?

James 30. I built the crew.

Ejos So did that make you the top boy?

James Nah, it never made me the top boy, I was just like anyone else.

Ejos What did you do?

James Everything like bad boys, like rude kids do, like going out beating people up, shooting after people, running up on people, all of that. Just for fun - nothing better to do.

Ejos Was there money involved?

James At first when we started it was just for fun, until some of us realised what we could get out of doing it, so we just started doing it on the regs, on the regular.

Ejos Is it from street robberies to jacking people?

James Street robberies, big robberies like running up on shotters [drug dealers, usually class A drugs] and stuff like that.

Ejos So, running up on shotters your age?

James Nah, shotters all ages. Big man like, big guys in the business. I ran up on man and take his ting - they're boys.

Ejos For me, if you're gonna run up on certain man they're looking to dead you. There are just certain man you can't - I don't know, you tell me.

James You can run up on anyone, you just have to know what you're doing.

Ejos Did it ever get to a point where people suspected you?

James Yeah, that's why we had to shoot after people. We had to stand our ground because they suspected it was us, because it was only us that had the crew, so they figured it out.

Ejos You make it sound quite organised. It's the same kind of thinking you apply to setting up your own business - getting the staff together, having your daily objectives. Did you plan it?

James Yeah we did.

Ejos What would you do with the money?

James Buy whatever I wanted, buy trainers, buy clothes. I'd squander my money.

Ejos What made you change?

James I was getting older, and the more older the more dangerous, the more things that would happen, so I just left it, cut that game.

While we're talking a group of young boys in school uniform are fighting on road corner. They capture our attention.

Trevor They're playing about.

Ejos No they're not! They're battering the shit out of him. Is that how

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boys play about?

James They're play fighting.

Trevor They're not doing nothing but play fighting.

Ejos Ok, but that kind of play gets serious.

Trevor I know that. I don't play with friends like that, me na ramp wid people at all. Exactly it just get serious and people think they know your strength because maybe they've handled you a little way. Before you know it they wanna try and bully you now, because they think they're stronger than you. So I don't play none of that. But they're youngsters, so they have to live and learn.

Ejos I was going to ask you what your relationship is like with the men in your family?

James My relationship with my whole family is cool.

Ejos How does your mum feel about your lifestyle?

James Obviously she don't like it. No mum would like that. She can probably see some of the places it's coming from. She keeps asking me why do I do it. I can't tell her why I do it. I used to do it for the fun of it, just for the excitement - and for the reputation, obviously, because you get a reputation from doing it. I had my reputation before I started doing it because the way my mentality was - I don't care, I could die any day, so not anyone could say anything to me and I would just flip. But now I look at it differently. That's how I got stabbed in my face twice in two months.

Ejos What was that over?

James One was over a girl, a next one was over my brethren popping a chain - just a madness.

Ejos When you say it's over a girl I just find that interesting, because there's no men fighting over me - not that I would want them to. So I just want to know what's going on?

James His girl must have slept over at my house and my girl found out, and told her brethren. Her brethren text her and told her that was a violation, because her brethren thought I slept with her. The youth's brethren saw the text in my girl's phone, went back to his brethren and told him I fucked his girl. He came on the hype.

Ejos What are you going to do?

James What am I going to do to him?

Trevor He ain't doing nothing.

James I ain't doing nothing man.

Ejos So where has that change in mentality come from? I can imagine that five years ago you would have wanted to kill him straight?

James I would've dead him. Once he had shank [stabbed] me, I wouldn't have dead him, my boys would have done it. But I told them to allow it, because when he did it people had straps [guns] on them, and they were like 'here, here, do that', and I was ... we just had a little madness. I never knew he shank me because it was a bang. I never knew he shank me till after. One day I caught him and I was gonna burst him, but, true say, it was in Brixton and I left it.

Ejos Why, is Brixton hot?

James Yeah, Brixton's hot, there's cameras in Brixton. There was too much people there. I just left him. He called me and said, 'Why are we beefing?'

Ejos I think ultimately he's shooked, because he's phoned you and apologised. So in essence, if it's a winning, don't you think you've won?

James Yeah basically.

Ejos So why the need to scuff?

James He bust my lip! No one can bust my lip, that's my face. With someone else it would've been a minor, but that's my face.

Ejos From what I hear, you saying you come from a family that's got a rep. When you were growing up did you feel that pressure?

James Nah, I never felt that pressure because I never needed to. Once they knew my family background it was like, 'nah I'm not touching that kid!'

Ejos So is it like you said, you just wanted to do it?

James I just wanted to do it.

Ejos It's about power. You didn't use that word, but I've come to that understanding from reading theorists and the ideas of people. Often with men in general, and black men in particular because of the way society is structured, from when you're young you're socialised to believe that it's natural for boys to fight. We accept that's how boys are raised.

Trevor Don't cry, be hard. You're always telling your boy child, 'Don't cry, be hard!' You arm the young boys with the skills for them to survive within the society. I've got a son, I've got a daughter, and it's the same thing, they don't grow the same. My son gets armoured with the skills, so a lot of the things that my daughter might brush off my son can't brush off, get used to, because it's a hard world. So, yeah, from a young age boys are given, this - not violence tendency, but they're given this hard exterior. Society demands it.

Ejos Well I understand that from my brothers' experiences. With my older brother, he built a reputation on the streets, so by the time he first went inside his reputation was solid in West [West London], and I later learned that he was known in other areas as a kind of street legend. When he went

inside my four remaining brothers were 14, 15 and two of them 13. My parents took the two older ones to Nigeria because they saw what was coming, leaving the two 13 year olds behind because they thought they were still young. But as one of them was coming up he felt the pressure and he went about establishing his own rep.

The reason why we started this conversation was because of power. Within this society black men don't have that 'real' power that they seek. Most men are socialised to seek power, in the belief that power validates their manhood. It's how much money you have, if you can provide for your family.

James It depends the power that you want. You can have power of running the streets, you can have power of running your family, you can have power of running the whole world.

Ejos Ultimately, the power I'm speaking about is to be able to provide for yourself and provide for your family.

James That's what makes you man, when you can provide for your family.

Trevor A man is a man who can defend what is his, which includes his family and anything that belongs to him. I tell you, that is what the youth really want. When you hear them talking about power - maybe he can't explain himself properly or maybe he ain't breaking it down - but I've seen with young people especially, what means the most to them is that power, not self respect but people respecting them. So that's the most powerful thing to a young person. A lot of them don't make a dime. Money! They don't ever make money. Money! What do they know about money? They make chump change. To them, as far as they're concerned, if someone's stepping to them and invading their space and disrespecting them, they're willing to kill over that. They don't kill over their family, a lot of them don't care about their family, because if they did they wouldn't put their mum through a lot, and their brothers and sisters in harm's reach - because a lot of the time, when they're in beef it's their brothers and sisters who get it. So to me they are totally misguided in their principles, or what they say is important to them, and that's a fact!

Ejos James what's your response to that?

Trevor It's a macho thing.

James That's the mentality of everyone. Once they know you've got a gun they won't want to step to you. Once you've got a gun and anyone steps to you, you're gonna use it. That's the advantage you've got.

Trevor That's the disadvantage to it!

James It's a disadvantage as well.

Trevor That every time you have an argument you're gonna use it.

Ejos James believes it's an advantage because it affords him power. Trevor sees it as a disadvantage because he knows that ultimately you're gonna end up dead or in prison.

Trevor Definitely. I've been there, done it. Everything James is going done, I've done it a million times over. I'm 38. I've spent seven and a half years of my life in prison. There ain't no crime I haven't committed or been involved in. I've lived in Brixton all my life, so what these young people go through, for me, unless there's an ulterior motive that's productive - we're talking about making money and investing it into a legitimate business and getting yourself out of the game - as far as I'm concerned, they've lost the plot totally. Young people nowadays, you heard James say it as well, he squandered money.

Ejos James you're very articulate, I have to say that, but I don't expect any less anyway. Once I was speaking with my brother and he was trying to school me on cultural books. I was like, 'Listen mate I've read those books'. But I was surprised because he was reading books that I was reading at university. He was reading them because he was interested in them - so I'm not surprised. I say this all the time, the same drive that you lot apply on road is the same drive that you must and can apply to do something positive.

James That's why I've cut my road life earlier than some people have. The earlier you cut your road life the better it is, you have more opportunity. For some people there's an end. For some there's not. Some people do it because they have to do it, some people do it for the reputation and just for the fun of doing it. You've got some people, when they fire guns, the way they love firing guns, they'll keep on firing it and firing it, and they'll either end up dead, in prison, or they'll kill bare [lots of] people. I always say this to people. It's not about what you do and what comes straight after, it's the consequences you pay after what you've done that hurts most. Because if you've killed someone, you've got to live with your conscience for the rest of your life - that, rah, I've taken that person's life and any day someone can know that it's you, and someone else just run up on you and take yours. Then where's that gonna leave your family? Even though you done already mash up one family, your family's gonna get mashed up. You could have your own kids and that, their Dad get killed, and if your kids are big they're going to want to retaliate. Everyone makes their choices, everyone's got a choice in life. If you want to follow the road life, you can follow the road life. If you want to go straight, you can go straight. I've seen it. There's 'nough of my brethrens dem that I wish I'd followed when I was younger. But I can't turn back the hands of time. So all I have to do now is try to change from now for the future, because I can't change the past. What I did I've done. I can't go back and say I'm going to give back that person all the money that he gave to me, because I don't know how much money he gave to me, that's how mad it is. I have been through so much things and seen so much things, I've seen 'nough people get killed, I've seen people getting killed and shitting themselves as they're dying. I've seen all that. I've been in shoot outs with man. It's what the consequences are, because if someone was to shoot me and my people know who it is, I know that person's gonna die if they catch him. But the way how my life is, there is so much enemies that I've got, if someone was to kill me no one would know who it is, but yet still someone else would die for it - even if it's not them, someone will die.

Ejos If you were to die would you want your people to retaliate?

James I can't really say because I don't really know my view on that right

about now. Obviously I'm not matured enough like you lot are, but from my point of view, yeah, I would want someone to die back for it. But maybe if I was a bit older and understanding life a bit more, probably no I wouldn't. I'd have the same views as you. But because of how young I am, obviously my view's going to be different from yours.

Ejos Where do you see yourself in five years?

James In five years I want to be playing football, that's what I want to be doing, but I can't definitely say that I will be playing football. Obviously my dream is to play for Manchester United. I want to but I'm not going to say I will make it, because the way how life is, it might not turn out the way I want to.

We're back in James's neighbourhood and, as Trevor is about to drop James off, there are a group of young men standing on the corner of the road. James informs us that he is in conflict with them, so Trevor continues driving. James immediately becomes defensive, assuming a hyper-masculine posturing.

Trevor Do you want to be dropped somewhere else? I'm not dropping you here.

James Why not? They've seen me!

Conclusion

In 2005 gun crime rose by more than 50 per cent despite huge efforts by Trident and the black community to combat it. And as it has risen so has the number of black males imprisoned for these offences. There is now an alarming number of young black men facing life imprisonment. I am not suggesting that these men should not be made accountable for their crimes. But the judicial system pathologises black males, and rarely ever gives serious consideration to the impact of their social and material condition. There is a fundamental need for long-term solutions that will alleviate the social and economic conditions that lie at the root of gun crime. In the meantime the most effective kinds of intervention are those in which the lived experience of the young men is understood and embraced. Black men, particularly those from the streets, and who most likely have a criminal experience, are pivotal in influencing the hard-

to-reach young people. Both James and Robert cite Trevor as a major influence in diverting them away from crime.

But alongside economic change and community intervention, we need to challenge patriarchal ideas of masculinity. All the young men concurred that men are socialised to accept violence as a norm. Kane explains: 'In our culture we seem to accept violence as a way of disputing things, to argue things out'. Explaining why he carried a gun, he says:

I'm not the instigator. I've got no reason for that, I'm a business man, it don't make no sense. But you've got to try and protect the investment. If someone's trying to do you something, you've got to be able to defend yourself, and there's no point putting out fists these days, because that's not gonna get you nowhere.

And with the gun comes power:

But one thing is, when you start, it brings a sense of power, and when the power comes you feel the man. No one can fuck with you, you feel invincible.

Kane realised that street crime only gave him false power, limited to the streets. But instead of adopting a more consciously critical position, he now seeks affirmation of his manhood through material wealth. He is playing the capitalist game, pursuing the same power that the white middle class have. In his attempts to counter the stereotypes of black male identity he has ended up adopting an ideal of success not very different from the Thatcherite individualism of the 1980s.

Men who, refusing to be victims of a hierarchical political economy, have sought alternative means of economic production to provide for themselves and their families, have done so at the price of losing their souls, and their lives. Kane expresses the pain and crisis that black males face in their struggle to be self-determining:

Ejos Were you not afraid when the gun was being pointed at you?

Kane No, I weren't afraid of none of that, truthfully.

Ejos How does it happen - you just don't think about it?

Kane You know what it goes back to ... I never really felt love, in a sense of - I don't know, how can I explain it - inside, deep down, nothing really bothered me. I can't really explain it. It's just a feeling within ... I feel, when you hold it deep inside, it just makes you want to give out pain. You don't really care about other people because you might be going through things yourself that are making you feel pain, and you feel no-one cares about you. When you've got that sort of anger inside you, it will make you easily not care about others.

Ejos Do you think you had a lack of respect for life?

Kane Definitely - if you have all that anger inside, you act on instinct rather than think things through.

If we are to alleviate gun crime, we must do the brave and radical work of interrogating patriarchal masculinity and a culture of domination - as well as advocating new avenues for self-actualisation that foster the emotional well being of disaffected black people. Just as many women have found agency in the therapeutic discourse of dialogue, so can men.

In loving memory of Junior

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