Brothers in Arms:

An explorative study of turning points on the life path of young males involved in firearms offending

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This thesis is submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of

Doctor of Criminal Justice

of the

University of Portsmouth

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DECLARATION

I confirm that, except where indicated through the proper use of citations and references, this is my own original work. While registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusion embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

Signed

Susan. E. Prior

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DEDICATION

The journey to completion of this thesis has been a long one with many highs and lows along the way. As life’s challenges goes it has been one of the most difficult ones I have undertaken and there are many people to thank in assisting me in reaching my goal.

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The last few years have been extremely challenging times for both my sister Jan and myself. Thanks for all your support and words of encouragement Sis, I couldn’t have done it without you . . . . .

This is for you Sissy x x
ABSTRACT

Under the Government’s austerity programme staff and budgets cuts have been experienced across the Police Service. Restructuring of the Metropolitan Police Service in 2012 saw the dissolution of the successful Operation Trident Command, providing a more focussed approach to gang crime and the passing of murder investigations within London’s black communities to the Homicide Command.

After a period of decline, gun crime in London rose sharply in 2016-17. The greater part of empirical research on gun crime has been broad in context. Much focus has been on ‘how’ the criminal careers of these offenders have progressed and the lifestyles and cultures that have encouraged gun crime offending.

The aim of this research is to gain an understanding of ‘why’ these young men become embroiled in gun crime and ‘what’ influences their journey to gun crime and thereafter their decision to try and desist from crime.

A mixed methods approach has been adopted utilising official police data and in-depth semi-structured interviews with five young men previously involved in firearm offending in London. Analysis examining risk factors, turning points and significant events is undertaken through their life phases. These are; (1) childhood and pre-offending, (2) offending years and (3) decision and attempt at desistance.

Overwhelming factors to emerge from the analysis were a lack of support and opportunity for these men throughout their lives. Poor parenting, a lack of positive role models, inadequate support from schools, council, social and probation services are identified.

As important within this context desistance is confirmed as a process where meetings with influential people or a severe personal shock prove to be pivotal. Conversely the illegal drugs market was identified as hugely instrumental in encouraging offenders returning to crime.
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ABBREVIATIONS

CRIS  Crime Reporting Information System
HMPS  Her Majesty’s Prison Service
MPS  Metropolitan Police Service
NOMS  National Offender Management System
NVQ  National Vocational Qualification
PNC  Police National Computer
SRAU  Strategic Research and Analysis Unit
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene

Angry armed young men are one of the most feared elements of any society. Yet in reality they also have the most to fear. Irrespective of the country they live in, they comprise a disproportionately high share of both perpetrators and victims of serious gun violence. Annually half of global firearm homicide victims are males aged fifteen to twenty-nine years (Berman et al., 2006, p.295).

Firearm-involved homicide rates are notably higher in countries where firearm access is easily available to the civilian population (Squires, 2008, p.16). Empirical research has consistently identified that gun crime is higher in areas which experience both deprivation and high unemployment (Kennedy et.al., 1998, Marshall et.al., 2005, p.15, Hales et.al., 2006, p.61, HAC, 2007, p.358, Squires, 2008). Recent research on gun crime globally by Squires (2014, p.37-38) confirms this. Squires (2014, p.38) succinctly identifies a correlation between gun homicides and income inequality worldwide in figure 1.1 below.
Figure 1.1 above identifies the high homicide and income inequality rate for South Africa, Jamaica and the south American countries. The easy availability of firearms in the USA is reflected in the high rate of homicides per 100,000 people portrayed in Figure 1.1. It can be seen clearly that England and Wales registered a comparatively low homicide rate compared to other similar European countries (Squires, 2014, p.38).

Offences involving the use of firearms\(^1\) in England and Wales are a rare occurrence and comprise around 0.2 per cent of all police recorded crime (ONS, 2014). In 2012/13 a fifth resulted in injury\(^2\), falling further to a sixth when offences using air weapons are dismissed (ONS, 2014).

Firearms offences are highly concentrated in small pockets of England’s major metropolises (Bullock and Tilley, 2002, p.iv). Of the 5,182 firearm offences\(^3\) across England and Wales in 2015-16 thirty per cent occurred in London, eleven per cent in Birmingham and nine per cent in Manchester (ONS, 2016).

Recorded crime across England and Wales involving firearms has shown a steady decline since 2007 as demonstrated in Figure 1.2 below. However, an upward trend is clearly visible for 2016 and 2017 (ONS, 2017, p.40).

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\(^{1}\) Offences recorded by police where a firearm has been fired, used as a blunt instrument or in a threat

\(^{2}\) In 2012/13 1,668 offences involved injury, 359 committed with air weapons

\(^{3}\) Excluding air weapons
A twenty-three per cent rise in firearm offences was witnessed nationally in England and Wales during 2016-17 with 6,375 crimes recorded (ONS, 2017, p.39). This increase was noticeably higher in London where there was a significant forty-two per cent in increase in gun crime during 2016-2017 (BBC, 2017). It is to England’s capital city that our focus on gun crime will now turn.

1.2 Historical gun crime trends across London

Firearms offences in London began to show an upward trend from the mid 1960s with both gangland killings and armed robberies (McLagan, 2005, p.17; Pitts, 2008, p.68; Squires, 2008, p.11). Armed robberies continued to increase through the 1970s and 1980s (McLagan, 2005, p.17). In the late 1980s and early 1990s a new sinister gun crime, in the form of brutal murders perpetrated by ‘Jamaican Yardies’, began to emerge that was to have a far-reaching impact on gun crime in England’s capital city into the new millennium (Davison, 1997, p.29-52; McLagan, 2005, p.17; Pitts, 2008, p.16,67). These brutal drug related attacks were linked back to historic violence in Jamaica (McLaghan, 2005, p.17).

Firearms murders and shootings continued and as the new millennium approached the perpetrators and victims of the gun violence began to change to the indigenous young black population which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter (HAC, 2007, p.363).

1.3 The Jamaican influence

Gun culture and the use of firearms has been at the heart of Jamaican ‘badness’ since the 1970s (Davison, 1997, p.3). The history of the problem is bound up with politics and the introduction of cocaine (Gunst, 1995, p.117). In the 1980 general election the two major

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4 Yardie is the term applied to Jamaican-born gangsters operating in UK and refers to criminals from impoverished back yards of Kingston, Jamaica (Davison, 1997, p.3)
political parties, the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) and the Peoples National Party (PNP), utilised armed “posses” in order to bring in votes. This resulted in the murder of hundreds of people as the “posses” fought for control of the garrisons and drugs markets (Davison, 1997, p.93-112; McLaghan, 2005, p.23).

Even prior to the election Jamaican drugs “posses” had begun migrating to the USA and afterwards the flow increased further (Gunst, 1995, p.xv; Davison, 1997, p.116-138; McLaghan, 2005, p.24). By the mid-1980s the violent, organised gangs were operating the crack cocaine market all over the USA (McLaghan, 2005, p.24). This influx of Jamaican posses and crack cocaine coupled with high youth unemployment saw gangs, drugs related shootings and murders increase dramatically in the USA (Pitts, 2008, p.43). Bowling (1999, p.531), in his study of New York murders, attributed the 1980s ‘murder spike’ to the expanding crack cocaine ‘epidemic’.

With Jamaican nationals not requiring a visa to enter the UK and their illegal drug dealing and violence becoming the focus of the USA law enforcement agencies it was only a matter of time before the drugs posses turned their attention to new territory (McLaghan, 2005, p.24; Pitts, 2008, p.79). Jamaican gangs and cocaine came to England, and London in particular, in the mid-1980s and soon became an increasing problem (McLaghan, 2005, p.24). This was a marked contrast to the earlier predominantly white British gangsters and robbers use of guns. England’s major cities were now beginning to mirror the increase of violence attributed in the USA to the ‘three D’s’, drugs, deadly weapons and demographics, in the mid 1980s (Sheley and Wright, 1995; Bowling, 1999, p.531).
1.4 The London Policing response

Concentrated in some of London’s most deprived boroughs, firearms violence in the late 1980s was mainly the consequence of crack market disputes within the black communities (McLaghan, 2005, p.33).

In 1987, in response to the increase in gun crime, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) set up Operation Lucy in an attempt to quell the Yardie and crack cocaine phenomenon (Davison, 1997, p.29,139; McLaghan, 2005, p.33). Their remit was to target major drug dealers within the black communities in the London boroughs of Brent, Lambeth and Hackney (McLaghan, 2005, p.33).

Mindful of the 1981 Brixton riots fuelled by the policing tactics during Operation Swamp, an initiative to tackle street crime, the Operation Lucy team were conscious of the racial sensitivity involved in targeting the black community (McLaghan, 2005, p.33). However, Operation Lucy, nicknamed the ‘Yardie Squad’, was disbanded after just eighteen months amid criticism of racism from black activists (Davison, 1997, p.29; McLaghan, 2005, p.35).

Several of the Operation Lucy officers transferred to a joint Police and Customs Crack Intelligence Unit, but this too was closed down a short time later in 1990 (McLaghan, 2005, p.35).

Drugs related shootings continued, and the Metropolitan Police Service responded by setting up Operation Dalehouse in 1991 to combat Jamaican gangs such as the ‘Shower Posse’5 (Davison, 1997, p.139). Operation Dalehouse utilised intelligence from the Crack Intelligence Unit and over an eighteen-month period made almost two hundred and fifty arrests before being disbanded in December 1992 (Davison, 1997. p.164; McLaghan, 2005, p.37).

5 Named ‘Shower Posse’ because they showered people with bullets (Gunst, 1995, p.225)
The Metropolitan Police Service did not have a strategy to best deal with Jamaican criminality and during these various operations, particularly with their use of informants, had alienated the black community (McLaghan, 2005, p.37-39).

The Metropolitan Police investigation into the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in south-east London and suggestions of police racism and corruption only compounded the issues and their relationships with the black community (McLaghan, 2005, p.49).

This shocking brutal drug related violence continued and again made news headlines in June 1998 with the execution style murders of young mothers Avril Johnson in Brixton, south London and Michelle Carby in Stratford, east London. Both young women were at home with their children when they were tied up by Jamaican gangs and callously shot in the head (McLagan, 2005, p.11-13; HAC, 2007, p.357; MPS, 2013).

Over the next two years shootings across London continued to rise as the crack cocaine problem escalated resulting in a dramatic and controversial response from the Metropolitan Police Service as they sought to recognise their failings to London’s black communities (McLaghan, 2005, p.49).

1.5 Operation Trident as a Policy response

On 24th July 2000 the Metropolitan Police Service launched Operation Trident whose brief was to tackle ‘black-on-black drugs and gang related violence’ (McLagan, 2005, p.73; Squires and Kennison, 2010, p.149). The name Trident was chosen to reflect the unit’s three-pronged approach of intelligence, investigation and pro-activity (McLagan, 2005, p.74-75). Just a year later in 2001 Operation Trident’s remit was refocussed to deal with ‘all firearm murders and shootings within London’s black communities’ (HAC, 2007, p.368). The unit’s terms of reference changed again in 2004 as they took on the investigation of all London’s non-fatal shootings (MPS, 2013). Under the re-structuring of the Metropolitan Police Service
Police Service, Operation Trident was re-launched as the Gang Crime Command in February 2012 expanding its responsibilities to include proactive tackling of gang crime (MPS, 2013; Young et al., 2014, p.171). The re-structuring also saw all firearm murder investigations within London’s black communities move across to the Homicide Command (MPS, 2013).

1.6 London shooting trends this millennium

Firearm murder and shooting incidents in England’s capital city peaked in 2002-2003, before showing a steady overall decline over the next decade, reflecting the national trend of offences involving firearms (Trident, 2013).

During the decline in gun crime there were mini peaks in firearm murder and shooting incidents in 2005-2006 and 2009-2010 which are mirrored in figure 1.3 below which shows the level of all gun crime (excluding air weapons) across the Metropolitan Police area since the early 2000s. However, 2016-17 saw a sharp increase in London gun crime with lethal barrelled discharges in 306 incidents (BBC, 2017; MPS, 2017). This increase in gun crime, coupled with an increase in knife crime and put violent crime firmly back on the political agenda (BBC, 2017), thus making this study both topical and timely.
Recorded incidents involving the discharge of a lethal barrelled weapon are a relatively rare occurrence. In 2009-2010 the Metropolitan Police Service investigated just 358 shooting incidents, almost one a day, across England’s largest city (Trident, 2013). Of those incidents fifty-five per cent saw individuals hit by the discharge (Trident, 2013).

Historically the majority of Trident shooting incidents have occurred on the poorer inner-city London boroughs of Lambeth, Hackney, Southwark, Brent and Haringey (McLagan, 2005, p.67; HAC, 2007, p.358). Recent years have seen the London boroughs of Waltham Forest, Lewisham and Newham also come to prominence (Trident, 2013).

As the first decade of the new millennium unfolded the profile of the gunmen and their victims began to change. Younger British born males became involved, thus making it an increasingly ‘home grown’ problem (Prior, 2005; HAC, 2007, p.363). During this time the great majority of shootings occurred within London’s black communities with approximately three-quarters of both the suspects and the victims being of black ethnicity (HAC, 2007, p.360). This is a trend that has continued (Trident, 2013).

Illegal drug market disputes continue to play a significant part in many shootings. However, in recent years there has been an emergence of territorial or ‘post code’, gang related and ‘respect’ related shootings (Pitts, 2008, p.114; Great Britain Home Dept, 2013, p.17).

This increase of gang violence prompted the Government’s ‘Ending gang and youth violence’ report which put forward a strategy covering the key areas of community support, prevention, pathways out of gangs, partnership working and punishment and enforcement (Home Office, 2011, p.6-7). In line with this Government strategy the Metropolitan Police re-focussed the remit of Operation Trident in 2012 to pro-actively tackle gang crime (MPS, 2013).
A year later, in 2013, in a response to more organised gang crime and violence the Government published their Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (Great Britain Home Dept, 2013, p.8).

1.7 Working for Operation Trident

As a Metropolitan Police Service criminal intelligence analyst, first for Lambeth Borough and latterly for Operation Trident, the researcher witnessed numerous young men progress along the pathway from acquisitive crime to involvement in gun related violence. Observing many of these young men’s lives being ruined by life changing injuries or long custodial sentences the question arose of how and why they were enticed onto a pathway of crime that eventually led to gun violence.

This fascination whetted the researcher’s appetite to study this issue more deeply and formed the topic of a master’s dissertation “Soldiers” of Misfortune: Steps on the Life Path to Gun Crime in London (Prior, 2008). During this master’s research the criminal career paths and family background of fifteen young black male firearm offenders from south London were studied. Quantitative data was utilised from police intelligence systems, the prison service and the family records office. Additionally, through a contact in Her Majesty’s Prison Service (HMPS), a short-written testimony was obtained from Harry, a prisoner and Trident offender, about his life and offending. This complemented the research and provided a rich real-life input to the study. The influential factors that radiated from this master’s research were peers, gangs and drugs (Prior, 2008, p.68) confirming the findings of earlier studies by academics such as Graham and Bowling (1995), Bullock and Tilley (2002), Hales and Silverstone (2005) and Hales et al. (2006) which will be discussed later in this thesis.
1.8 Meeting Harry

In early 2011, as senior intelligence analyst for Operation Trident, the researcher was tasked to identify a firearms offender to interview for a project overseen by the Metropolitan Police Service Anti-Violence Board. Harry, who had previously written a short testimony about his life of crime, was serving a lengthy sentence for a Trident shooting and had indicated he wished to try and desist from future offending so would be an ideal candidate. An official request was made through the HMPS asking Harry to participate, which he agreed to, and arrangements were made to visit and interview him in prison.

Prior to the interview previous research on Harry was updated by interrogating police and HMPS databases and a time-line of his life constructed. In the interview Harry was asked to talk about segments of his life from his earliest memories right through to the current day. The rich and fascinating information garnered from this interview on his family background, upbringing, home environment, his criminality and personal views highlighted the enormous gaps that existed in the researcher’s master’s study. A far greater understanding of his life had now been gained, how and why he became involved in criminality which led to gun violence and why he now wished to try and cease his life of crime.

Meeting Harry and conducting this interview proved to be a compelling and rewarding experience (Atkinson, 1998, p.53). It was visibly noticeable how much Harry enjoyed telling his story and the therapeutic effect it appeared to have on him. It was as if pressure had been lifted from him (Shaw, 1966, p.19; Atkinson, 1998, p.12). At the conclusion Harry thanked the researcher for interviewing him and said, “No one has ever shown that much interest in me or my life before”.

That memorable day with Harry proved to be the catalyst for this Professional Doctorate research leaving the researcher eager to hear more life stories.
1.9 Developing the research a step further

To date the majority of research around criminal careers and firearm offending has been of a very broad context with large sample sizes. Much focus has been on ‘how’ the criminal careers of these offenders have progressed and the lifestyles and cultures that encourage gun crime offending. It is well established from empirical research and also confirmed in the researcher’s master’s study findings (Prior, 2008, p.68) that gang involvement accelerates drug use and the frequency and level of offending of young offenders. From then on illegal drug dealing is the next natural step in their lives and is seen by many as an attractive viable career enabling material aspirations and respect amongst peers to be realised. The acquisition of firearms occurs as a need for protection or to gain power or status (Bullock and Tilley, 2002, p.iv; Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.58-59; Hales et.al, 2006, p.xiii-xv). This then manifests itself in the commission of shootings.

While we have a good knowledge on the progression of offending and cultures that support it, there is a gap in our understanding of the personal aspect of these young men’s lives. This falls particularly around their family background, upbringing and influences in their lives. It is in a young person’s formative years that their lives are shaped and holds the key to understanding their progression to gun crime.

Additionally, there is a lack of research on desistance which examines why some of these gunmen have elected to try and turn their backs on this violent lifestyle. With gun violence within London’s black communities only emerging in the late 1990s (McLagan, 2005, p.17) and substantial prison sentences handed down to perpetrators there has been little opportunity to date for such research to be conducted in the UK.

There is great scope for analysis of these individuals focussing on ‘why’ their lives evolved in this way and ‘what’ were the significant personal factors, events and turning points on this journey (Denzin, 1989, p.22; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Only by speaking and listening
to these young men can we begin to understand their lives and discover the catalysts of gun crime in the UK.

1.10 Research aim

Working with a small sample of individuals, this study adopts a personal one-to-one approach with initial research followed up by in-depth interviews. The researcher endeavours to enter the ‘real world’ of these young men with the aim to better understand their lives and the challenges it has brought them.

The research will seek to answer two questions; (1) How and why the young men became involved in criminality and their route of progression to firearms offending; (2) Why the young men have chosen to try and desist from a life of crime.

By adopting a ‘life story’ approach particular focus will be given to events and significant turning points that have directed their life path into and out of offending (Sampson and Laub, 1993). By interviewing these men and asking them to talk about their life it is envisaged more in-depth detail about their background, upbringing, offending and prison life will be gathered which is not recorded on any official databases. It will allow for comparison between the men to identify similarities and differences in their life patterns.

The research objective is to identify key issues for the police and partner agencies to focus on to assist in the reduction and prevention of gun violence in England’s major cities. This study is particularly relevant to the Prevent and Prepare strands of the Government’s Serious and Organised Crime Strategy which sets out to substantially reduce the level of serious and organised crime such as gun violence (Great Britain Home Dept, 2013, p.8).

By unpicking the lives of these young men, it is envisaged the findings will assist in enabling identification of ‘embryo’ gunmen early in their criminal career. This will contribute to
increased partnership working between the police, schools, social services, probation and other partnership agencies to put early intervention in place.

It is anticipated the research and analysis will provide valuable knowledge in respect of desistance which could prove beneficial to mediation teams, prison staff and other crime prevention agencies. It may also add ideas and possible solutions to support the Prevent strand of the Government’s Serious and Organised Crime Strategy.

1.11 The Three phases of life
The analysis of this research is segregated into three distinct cycles of the participants lives; (1) childhood and pre-offending, (2) the offending years and (3) the decision and attempt to desist, with comparisons made as they progress along life’s pathway.

By researching, interviewing and analysing the lives of these young men the real essence of their life will be discovered allowing for comparison of criminal career progression and social background.

On an individual basis it will establish risk factors and significant turning points in their lives that facilitated their enticement onto the life pathway leading to gun crime.

By talking to these young men, it is hoped to establish the reasons leading to their decision to attempt to desist from crime. Assessments will also be made to ascertain where interventions could have been put in place to assist in their rehabilitation and diversion from crime.

1.12 Thesis structure
This thesis will provide a critical examination of the factors that caused these young men to embark on the criminal pathway, engage in violence and then make the decision to turn their back on their criminal lifestyle.
Chapter 2 reviews, evaluates and critiques some of the influential empirical studies on criminal career paths, firearms offending and desistance from crime. The literature review is structured to focus on the three stages of life-course offending, namely ‘onset’, ‘duration’ and ‘end’ (Farrington, 1992, p.521; Soothill et al., 2009, p.3).

Chapter 3 provides a detailed description and evaluation of the various data sources and methodological techniques utilised in this research. It also reflects on the challenges encountered in gaining access to and interviewing these young men and the demand of analysing the substantial rich life story data collected.

Chapter 4 is the first empirical chapter where the interviews with the five research participants are unpicked and analysed against the literature reviewed. This chapter focusses on their childhood and pre-offending years identifying themes, risk factors and significant events and turning points in their lives.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide further analysis and pinpoints important turning points and events in the offending years of these young men and in their decision to attempt to desist from criminality.

The final chapter draws together the key findings from the research, focussing on the three sections of the men’s lives, identifying significant themes and similarities. Discussion is made on issues raised with recommendations on areas to focus on to assist in the reduction of firearm violence in England’s major cities.

In summary while there has been significant research on criminal career paths and firearms offending there is a lack of in-depth research on the lives of young men involved in gun crime examining their lives from a personal perspective (Pogrebin et al., 2009, p.2). By utilising this one-on-one methodological approach, it is anticipated some of the current gaps in knowledge will be addressed. By gaining a closer understanding of the lives of these men and the challenges encountered it is envisaged the findings of this research will add
valuable evidence in support of the Prevent and Prepare strands of the Government’s Serious and Organised Crime Strategy and assist the police and key partners in their attempt to reduce gun crime and other violent offending.

With the current increase in gun crime and other violent crime, such as knife crime and acid attacks, it thereby makes this a relevant and timely study.
2.1 Introduction

The origins of criminal career path research go back to the pre-Lombrosian period when Adolphe Quetelet (1984 and 2003), published findings (in 1831) of a large-scale study examining the relationship between age and criminality. Since then criminologists, fascinated by criminal behaviour, have conducted numerous qualitative and quantitative studies endeavouring to interpret how, when and why such actions commence, continue and then cease (Piquero et al., 2007, p.1).

This study draws upon a variety of empirical criminological research studies. This includes longitudinal criminal career studies, biographical case studies, cross-sectional research on gangs, the nature of firearms criminality and studies on desistance from crime. While it is not possible to review all this literature, the chapter provides a concise critical review of the most significant and relevant empirical studies in respect of criminal careers, gun violence and desistance. It is should be noted that the literature review is not only confined to this chapter. Further empirical research will in fact be examined and referred to throughout the thesis.

This research study segments the lives of the participants into the three stages of life-course offending. These are pre-offending (‘onset’), offending years (‘duration’) and desistance (‘end’) (Farrington, 1992, p.521; Piquero et al., 2007, p.1; Soothill et al., 2009, p.3). To assist discussion and to aid comparison the literature review will adopt a similar format examining the three life-course stages as the different empirical styles are reviewed.
Section one examines the childhood years and what literature tells us about the risk factors that are influential in enticing young people onto their early steps to delinquency prior to the onset of offending.

Section two considers the progression of offending and the criminal offending years of young men involved in serious and violent criminality. This will direct particular focus onto gangs, street culture and gun crime.

Finally, section three reviews influential literature on desistance from crime. This examines the definition of desistance, theories and reasons for individuals ceasing to offend. Attention is also directed to the profile and ethnicity of the research participants.

**Section One – Pre-Offending**

2.2 **What leads these individuals to the pathway of crime?**

In the late nineteenth century Cesare Lombroso, the father of modern criminology, presented a theory of anthropological criminology claiming individuals were “born criminal”. He stated criminality was inherited and criminals could be identified by their physical appearance (Valier, 2002, p.14; Williams, 2004, p.129). In his publication *L’Uomo Deliquente* (The Criminal Man) he claimed criminals were akin to primitive man and similar in appearance (Lombroso, 1876). In his later research Lombroso incorporated psychological and environmental variables modifying his earlier work (Williams, 2004, p.130; Barkan, 2005, p.140). As criminological research evolved and became more scientific Lombroso’s avatist theory became less popular (Barkan, 2005, p.141).

In the mid twentieth century a new research methodology, the longitudinal criminal career approach, was introduced which commenced with an individual’s childhood years. These studies have played an important role in adding to criminological theory by increasing
knowledge about the sequence, frequency and progression of criminal offending (Blumstein et al., 1986, p.199; Farrington, 1992, p.533).

Criminal Career studies increased in popularity as the century progressed (Tracey et al., 1990, p.13-14). We will now examine some of the more influential studies along with other empirical works on the onset of criminality.

2.3 Longitudinal criminal career studies

One of the earliest and most influential criminal career studies was the pioneering work of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck carried out in Boston, USA in 1940s and 1950s. Since then, as a research method for criminologists, longitudinal studies have become increasingly popular particularly in USA, north-west Europe, Australasia and Canada (Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.29-36). The majority of these studies involved between five hundred and two thousand participants utilising both interviews and police criminal record data (Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.29-36). While this study is more in-depth, involving just five participants, it is useful to make comparisons of the analytical findings with the most relevant of these life-course empirical studies. Maruna and Matravers (2007, p.437) advocate ‘deep exploitation into the life narrative(s) of a single individual can generate at least as much insight into offending as getting to know a little bit about 200 or 2,000 human beings in a large-scale survey.’

Particular attention is also paid to the life-course studies of David Farrington who has been a major contributor to the Cambridge and Pittsburgh studies. The Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development commenced in 1961 with a cohort of 411 eight-year-old mainly British white boys, in a working class deprived area of south London. This longitudinal study has been repeated at intervals up to the age of fifty (Farrington et al., 2006, p.1). The Pittsburgh Youth Study started in 1987 and is a prospective longitudinal project on 1,571
inner city boys aged seven to thirteen, of whom over half were of black ethnicity (Loeber et al., 1998a, p.1). As all of the participants of this study having been raised in inner London boroughs, with four being black, making Farrington and Loeber’s studies highly relevant. We will now take a look at the factors that can be instrumental in an individual’s evolution to delinquency and criminal offending.

2.4 Risk factors

Research has consistently shown there is a progression from childhood aggression to adolescent violence to serious offending in adulthood (Farrington, 1998, p.421; Tolan and Gorman-Smith, 1998, p.81; Loeber et al., 2012, p.1137). The risk factors that predict this evolution can be identified in the early years of a person’s life. These predictors fall into four categories: biological, individual, family and environmental (Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.38). We will now review what empirical research tells us about these risk factors starting at the very beginning of life.

2.4.1 Biological factors

Over the years biological and medical research has suggested that criminal tendencies are inherited through family members (Walsh and Beaver, 2009, p.29). Research on twins reared apart and genetic molecular studies confirm a link between antisocial and violent behaviour and genetics (Raine, 2002, p.312).

Research has shown that hyperactive children born with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are at a high risk in becoming delinquents (Brennan et al., 1993, p.253; Butterfield, 1995, p.147; Wasserman, 2003, p.4; Bartol and Bartol, 2011, p.51).

Medical research has also identified that if during pregnancy a foetus is exposed to nicotine, drugs and alcohol this may lead to antisocial behaviour in childhood and adolescence.
(Dodge and Pettit, 2003, p.351). Additionally, maternal malnutrition during pregnancy or child birth complications, where brain damage may be caused, are risk factors that can lead to the offspring becoming involved in violent and persistent criminality (Bartol and Bartol, 2011, p.64).

Having considered risk factors prior to birth we will now examine the part that the individual may contribute to these predictors.

2.4.2 Individual factors

Personality traits such as impulsiveness, short attention span, poor behaviour and hyperactivity are all good predictors for child and adolescent violence (Farrington, 1998, p.443; Loeber et al., 2012, p.1144, Home Office, 2011, p.21).

It has been argued a child’s temperament surfaces before they reach the age of five with anti social behaviours such as physical aggression and anger often appearing before they are three years old (Wasserman et al., 2003, p.1,4). It would appear that bad behaviour, tantrums, anger, aggression, fighting and vandalism can be significant predictors of future delinquency appearing between the ages of six to ten (Loeber, 1982, p.1433; Butterfield, 1995, p.144-145; Wasserman et al., 2003, p.2-3; Loeber et al., 2012, p.1137). For many of these individual’s antisocial behaviour in childhood manifest in adolescence and adulthood (Robins, 1978, p.611; Caspi, 1987, p.1211; Laub and Lauritsen, 1993, p.239; Moffitt and Capsi, 2001, p.355).

Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (2000, p.90) “general theory of crime” supports these individual predictors which they link to poor parenting. Often adults will possess few parenting skills or neglect or abuse their offspring (Home Office, 2011, p.12). Interestingly Gottfredson and Hirschi have argued the individual’s low self-control “explains crime at all times”. Thus, environmental factors such as deprivation and delinquent peers are seen as irrelevant
(Hirschi, 1969, p.97; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p.117,237-238). They claim improved child rearing is the key to crime reduction.

Low intelligence is an important predictor of violent offending (Loeber and Dishion, 1983, p.68; Farrington, 1998, p.440; Lipsey and Derzon, 1998, p.97; Browning and Loeber, 1999, p.2; Barkan, 2005, p.155; Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.39; Loeber et al., 2012, p.1146). Studies have indicated that those individuals with low verbal and non-verbal intelligence tend to be aggressive and are involved in bullying and truanting at a young age (Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.40).

It has been suggested intelligence can be measured early in a child’s life through school IQ tests. Farrington and Welsh (2007, p.42) argue early IQ tests designed to judge a child’s educational potential do not measure an individual’s actual “intelligence”. Psychological research has identified IQ tests are culturally biased and can be impacted by educational, cultural and social background (Bartol and Bartol, 2011, p.45).

2.4.3 Family factors

Parents provide critical early resources helping children to grow, develop and achieve (Cabinet Office, 2007, p.4). A child’s formative years are spent primarily in the home environment, so it is natural their family structure and behaviour can strongly influence their early development. Anti social or criminal parents and siblings are a strong indicator for future offending with elder siblings often enticing the child onto the pathway to crime (Wasserman et al., 2003, p.6; Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.4, 57-59; Regan, 2011, p.54). Other features such as a large family size, a young mother, poor child rearing skills, low parental involvement and conflict between parents are also instrumental in predicting delinquency (Browning and Loeber, 1999, p.2; Wasserman et al., 2003, p.5; Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.58-68; Home Office, 2011, p.12; ACES, 2017). Trauma caused by the loss of
a parent can also have a negative impact and often boys who live with one parent or a step family indulge in delinquency (Graham and Bowling, 1995, p.xi; Lyon et al., 2000, p.1; Farrington et al., 2006, p.5).


Neglected, abused and troublesome children can often be put into ‘care’ where negative experiences can lead to truanting, low school achievement, delinquency and criminal offending (Taylor, 2006, p.40,83). Socialising with deviant youths, peer pressure and the feeling nobody cared about them being significant themes identified in research in this area (Taylor, 2006, p.85,176; The Kenny Report, 2012, p.22). A child in care may also emotionally reject their parents leaving them more vulnerable and likely to be lured into delinquency (Sampson and Laub, 1993, p.243-257).

2.4.4 Environmental factors

As a young person grows they may also be influenced by the environment that surrounds them (Loeber et al., 2006, p.162). It has also been argued that “The deadliest form of violence is poverty” (Ghandi, n.d.). Growing up in a low socio-economic family with a low income and living in a deprived inner city high crime neighbourhood is a strong risk factor.

From middle childhood they encounter further influences as they attend school and meet new friends (Loeber et al., 2006, p.162). The reciprocal influences on the child have now grown from just the immediate family as shown in figure 2.1 below.

![Diagram showing domains of influences on children from middle childhood onward](image)

*Figure 2.1 - Domains of influences on children from middle childhood onward – Loeber et al (2006) p.162.*

Research has demonstrated that young children who have exhibited conduct problems while in school have gone on to become violent offenders (Hodgins, 1994, p.50; Butterfield, 1995, p.xiv; Home Office, 2011, p.12).

A poor school environment where there is a high delinquency rate amongst peers is a strong predictor of offending (Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.4,83). Forming friendships with delinquent peers often results in truancy, expulsion from school and low school attainment (Graham and Bowling, 1995, p.49; Fionda, 2005, p.73,82; Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p.4,40; Home Office, 2011, p.12). Glueck and Glueck, (1950, p.153) found truants had a lack of interest in studying and resented school restrictions.

It is well documented that black boys perform less well in school and under-achieve which contributes to delinquency (Barn, 2001, p.35; The Kenny Report, 2012, p.22). Contributing
factors include cultural background and behaviours, peer influence and negative stereotyping of black boys (Reach, 2007, p.36-37). Schools are quick to exclude black boys without addressing the reason for their behaviour (The Kenny Report, 2012, p.7).

The Kenny Report (2012), referred to above and elsewhere in this literature review, was written by a young black male who was arrested for a Trident murder and eventually acquitted (Trident, 2013). He grew up in a deprived high crime area where many of his friends were gang members. The report provides a fascinating insight from an ‘insider’ into the crucial issues faced by young people growing up in the area and covers issues such as education, role models, employment, and their effect on gangs and serious youth violence (The Kenny Report, 2012, p.5-6).

Disillusioned with school and lacking stable family structures young people often turn to gangs to meet family needs (Thornberry et al., 2003, p.65; Walsh, 2004, p.120; Pitts, 2008, p.35; Home Office, 2011, p.12). Gangs are the core embodiment of underclass urban values, affording members opportunities to exercise “hyper-masculine behaviour” (Anderson, 1999a, p.77; Walsh, 2004, p.120). Gang membership provides companionship, motivation, opportunity for deviance and intensifies the severity and frequency of delinquent behaviour and violence (Wasserman, 2003, p.6; Farrington and Welsh, 2007, p81).

Boys growing up without fathers or positive role models often seek them from the world of fantasy or media (Reach, 2007, p.6; Regan, 2011, p.73). These idols are commonly powerful, high status males such as sports stars, movie stars, rappers and drug dealers (Fuller, 2001, p.22; Berman et al., 2006, p.308; Hayden et al., 2008, p.169).

Hagedorn (1998, p.402) and Jones (2000, p.54) suggests young people copy violence portrayed in films and on television. Research on violent television programmes, films, video games and music revealed violence increases aggressive and violent behaviour and
young men are the prime consumers (Berman et al., 2006, p.307; Swing and Anderson, 2011, p.103; Bartol and Bartol, 2011, p.131). In more recent years it has become fashionable for gangs to film and share violent attacks across social media channels such as YouTube (Heale, 2008, p.21,78; Regan, 2011, p.130; Independent, 2016; Mejeh and Parkin, 2017).

Closely linked to deviant peer friendship is peer rejection. Aggressive anti-social children often find themselves rejected by their peers (Wasserman et al., 2003, p.7; Bartol and Bartol, 2011, p.50). This exclusion can see them join a gang or live in social isolation (Jones, 2000, p.50). Research shows violent adolescent offending for these rejected young people is higher than other individuals and they are prone to continue criminality into adulthood (Wasserman et al., 2003, p.7).

Illicit drug use and substance abuse is another factor that can increase delinquency (Home Office, 2011, p.12). This can lead to violent crime with young people often lured into acting as ‘runners’ for illegal drug dealers (Bartol and Bartol, 2011, p.477-480).

Figure 2.2 below clearly shows how early individual and family risk factors can progress on to peer risk factors and delinquency.
Closely linked to risk factors within the environment are opportunities to commit crime and we will now briefly examine how such situations arise.

2.4.5 Situational factors

The risk factors examined so far are relevant to the development of individuals to potentially become violent offenders. Farrington (1998, p.449) suggests a further risk factor which is situational. Here, given a certain ‘situation’, the opportunity to commit violence becomes highly probable (Sanders, 2004, p.95). An example of this would be a robbery where, at a venue, at a moment in time, the offender encounters a suitable victim thus providing the opportunity to steal from them (Cohen and Felson, 1979, p.590). Other influences also come into play in contributing to situational factors such as boredom, anger and the influence of drugs (Farrington, 1998, p.456).

Having reviewed the risk factors that forecast criminal behaviour we will now take a look at the pathway that leads to the onset of offending.

2.5 Progression to the onset of offending

The probability of delinquency, violence and the onset of offending increases with the number of risk factors (Farrington, 1998, p.453; CCJS, 2009, p.17). Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) claim a child’s propensity to commit crime is established by eight years old. The most prolific offenders start offending early in life and Farrington believes these individuals can be identified with reasonable accuracy by ten years old (Farrington, 1994, p.566; Farrington, 2006, p.5).

Much research has shown a single pathway to offending in which violent offenders progress from infant hyperactivity to becoming problematic children exhibiting aggressive behaviour followed by truanting from school in their early teens. With delinquent friends
they often leave school before they are sixteen years old, join gangs, use and sell illegal drugs and engage in sexual intercourse at a young age (Elliott, 1994, p.11; Thornberry et al., 1995, p.225; Farrington, 1998, p.434; Farrington, 2002, p.658).

Loeber and colleagues suggested there are three pathways into delinquency and offending. These are: (1) an overt pathway; (2) a covert pathway; (3) an authority conflict pathway (Loeber and Hay, 1994, Kelley et al., 1997, Loeber et al., 2012, p.1137). Figure 2.3 below demonstrates these pathways and the order and increase in seriousness of behaviours as they progress onto delinquent acts and offending. Loeber et al. (2012, p.1137) has suggested individuals could progress along more than one of these pathways at the same time.

The age for onset of offending has differed between research studies over time due to the varying definitions of ‘onset’. Graham and Bowling’s (1995, p.29) self-reported study
identified an average age of fifteen years, the Cambridge study a peak age (on first conviction) of fourteen years (Farrington, 1992, p.527), the Dunedin study a mean arrest age of 13.7 years (Moffitt et al., 2001) and the Glueck study an even younger mean first arrest age of 11.9 years (Laub and Sampson, 2003, p.90). The Home Office Youth Style Survey (2000), a self-report study, provides an average age of thirteen and a half while recent National Statistics (2017, p.4) places the average first time arrest at 15.2 years. A previous study on fifteen young men involved in gun crime in London confirmed an average arrest age for the onset of offending as thirteen years and six months with the youngest arrest age eleven years and two months (Prior, 2008, p.47).

It has to be appreciated these studies were conducted in different countries and over a period spanning seventy plus years during which time there has been much social and economic change. It is therefore difficult to make any accurate comparisons.

When examining the youngest age for an individual’s first acts of crime the age of onset dropped further particularly for self-reported crime. The Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study showed fifty-six per cent of self-reported offenders committed crime before the age of twelve (Wikstrom et al., 2012, p.124). The Cambridge Study confirmed boys aged ten, the age of criminal responsibility, were committing criminal acts (Farrington et al., 2006, p.20). The Pittsburgh Study in USA identified boys as young as six as involved in serious delinquent acts and by the age of twelve almost half were partaking in delinquency (Loeber and Farrington, 1998, p.24).

The age of criminal responsibility varies worldwide (CRIN, 2017). According to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (chapter 37, part I, chapter I) the minimum age of responsibility in England and Wales is ten years old. This is far younger than the majority of European countries where the age of responsibility is fourteen years or over. Only Switzerland sets the age of responsibility at ten years old. In USA the age is set by each state with thirty-
three having no minimum age. The highest age set by a USA state is ten years old and the lowest seven years (CRIN, 2017). Research studies have confirmed that a minority of young boys commit criminal acts prior to the age of ten.

Violent males tend to have any early age of onset and are life-course persistent offenders (Moffitt, 1993, p.678; Farrington, 1998, p.431,436; Home Office, 2011, p.12) and it is these young men who we will focus on next.

Having reviewed the ‘onset’ of delinquency and criminal acts we will now consider the relevant literature which focusses on the criminal years of individuals, in particular those involved in violence and firearms offences.

**Section Two – The Offending Years**

**2.6 Introduction**

Over time a plethora of research studies and empirical works have been produced on the lives of criminals, the drivers and culture behind gangs and also on gun crime. These studies have included biographies, autobiographies, life stories, longitudinal studies, cross-sectional studies and interviews (Shaw, 1966; Anderson, 1999; Bullock and Tilley, 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003; Hales and Silverstone, 2005; McLagan, 2005; Farrington et al., 2006; Hales et al., 2006; Pitts, 2008; Squires et al., 2008; Pogrebin et al., 2009; Densley, 2014).

We commence the review of the offending years of these young men by looking at the route from delinquency to gun crime.
2.7 The progression of offending

One of criminology’s most consistent findings is the age-crime curve as shown in figure 2.4 below. The frequency of offending peaks in the late teenage years before declining in early adulthood and gradually tailing off (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983, p.552; Sampson and Laub, 1983, p.6; Farrington, 1986; Loeber et al, 2012, p.1136).

![Age-Crime Curve](image)

The curve for violent crime peaking in late teens and showing a slower decline through the twenties and into the early thirties (Farrington, 1986).

These findings were challenged by criminologists who argue there sits in the shadow of the age-crime curve individuals who are persisters, frequent offenders and desisters (Blumstein et al., 1988, p.32). Moffitt (1993, p.674) takes a slightly different stance claiming there are two types of offenders, adolescent limited and life-course persistent.

An Individual’s criminal career generally starts (aged ten to fourteen years) with property offences of shoplifting, theft, vandalism and burglary (Farrington et al., 2006, p.21). Progression is then made on to theft of and from motor vehicles and violent crime such as possession of offensive weapons, assault, robbery and drug dealing (aged fifteen to eighteen years) (Farrington, 1998, p.435; Budd et al., 2005, Farrington et al., 2006, p.33; Prior, 2008, p.114-117, Loeber et al., 2012, p.1140) with the offending rate peaking at the age of seventeen (Farrington, 1992, p.525).

Having traced the progression of offending and its increase in seriousness we will now consider the influence of gangs and the cultures that surround them.

2.8 Gang definition and structure

With gang and youth violence currently very much on the political agenda the definition of the term ‘gang’ has been the subject of much debate and change in definition in recent years. Hallsworth and Young (2004, p.12) and Bullock and Tilley (2008, p.43) warn of the dangers of labelling groups of young people ‘hanging around’ in public places as ‘criminal street gangs’.

The Metropolitan Police (2017) currently differentiate between gangs and criminal networks, which are involved in more serious, persistent offending.

The Metropolitan Police (2017) officially define a gang as a group of people who spend time in public places that:

- see themselves (and are seen by others) as a noticeable group, and
- engage in a range of criminal activity and violence;
- they may also have any or all of the following features
  - identify with or lay a claim over territory
  - are in conflict with other, similar gangs

However, if the majority of offending is of a lower non-violent level then they would be considered to be a peer group and not a gang.
A criminal network is defined by the Metropolitan Police (2017) as a group of individuals involved in persistent criminality for some form of personal gain, this includes profit and/or gain or demonstrate status which is causing harm to the community

- a group that keeps breaking the law to make money
- this law-breaking is causing harm to the community
- or, this law-breaking is a problem internationally (e.g. people trafficking)
- violence is used in order to make money (e.g. to scare people into giving them money)
- they are running an illegal business (e.g. drug trafficking)

Densley (2014, p.524) claims gangs evolve through four different stages as they progress from delinquent peer groups through to organised crime. This includes (1) a Recreational stage; (2) a Criminal stage; (3) an Enterprise stage; (4) finally a Governance stage. This view replicates Thrasher’s findings, who almost a century ago suggested gangs grew from “playgroups” to “solidified” criminal organizations (1927, p.58). The initial stage involves delinquency, fighting, vandalism, drinking, smoking weed and listening to music. Gang activity quickly progresses to fighting, illegal drug dealing and offending with financial implications and a need to defend themselves as threats from other gangs grow (Densley, 2014, p.526). The third stage sees the gang become a ‘business’ as they acquire territory, increase the seriousness of their criminality and have a need to protect themselves. Younger members are recruited as the gang splits into three levels of (1) controllers or “inner circle”; (2) middle level or elders; (3) lower level or youngers (Densley, 2014, p.532). A small number of gangs may elevate to the fourth stage where they control the illegal drugs and firearms markets in the area using violence and protection rackets to maintain their status. These organised gangs sometimes also set up legitimate businesses (Densley,
The progression in gang levels is well evidenced by the south London gang “PDC” who changed their name from “Peel Dem Crew” to “Poverty Driven Children” or “Pray Days Change” with businesses under the names of “PDC Entertainment”, “Pristine Designer Cuts” and “Public Demand Cartel” (Heale, 2008, p.61; Pritchard, 2008, p.269-273; Hackman, 2010, p.95; Densley, 2014, p.527,537).

The majority of street gangs in the UK are fluid in membership with no formal structure or leader (Klein, 2004, p.59). They meet in public places often referred to as ‘hanging on road’ or ‘road life’ (Gunter, 2008, p.352). Many are involved in illegal drug dealing (Aldridge et al., 2007, p.19).

2.9 Gang membership

Young people join gangs for a variety of reasons. These include a sense of belonging, protection, identity, status, financial gain and pleasure (Thornberry et al., 2003, p.78; Curry, 2004, p.14; Regan, 2011, p.56). Boys are often encouraged to join by older siblings who are involved in gang life (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996, p.233; Young et al., 2013, p.5).

Anderson (1999, p.132) asserts gang membership offers an opportunity for independence from family life. Rather than the term ‘gang’ these young men will refer to them as family, man dem, posse, massive or crew (Pitts, 2008, p.6).

Individuals learn criminal ‘skills’ from delinquent members which are passed on from generation to generation (Thrasher, 1927). Taylor (2006, p.88) suggests gangs are ‘universities of crime’. Delinquent low level criminality such as vandalism, graffiti or ‘tagging’, stealing and joyriding provide excitement and ‘sneaky thrills’ (Katz, 1988, p.53; Sanders, 2004, p.141,152,165; Swain, 2008; Rollins, 2011, p.25).

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6 “peel dem” is Jamaican slang for “steal from them”
Research has shown antisocial behaviour, offending, violence, weapon carrying, and drug use increase in number and seriousness when youths join gangs (Thornberry et al., 2003, p.122-125; Decker et al., 2008, p.153; Home Office, 2011, p.12; Melde and Esbensen, 2011, p.514; Ariza et al., 2014, p.188).

Moving on from property crime gang members are motivated to commit street robberies which generate money to buy designer clothes, trainers, jewellery, phones, cars, drugs and weapons to increase their status (Ruggiero, 2000, p.51; Sanders, 2005, p.48-52). Katz (1988, p.80,169) suggests a robber as being a ‘badass’ who fantasizes or develops a moral superiority over his intended victim. Messerschmidt (1993, p.40) describes this offending as ‘doing masculinity’.

The motivation for crimes changes with age from hedonistic thrill seeking with friends as a teenager to planned utilitarian intimidation, weapon use and violence in their twenties (Le Blanc, 1996, p.161).

2.10 The sub-culture of violence

Entwined within street gang life is a sub-culture of violence which Anderson (1999) refers to as “the code of the street”. Anderson (1999, p.33) describes the code as ‘a set of informal rules governing inter-personal public behaviour, particularly violence’. The code both regulates and generates street violence within poor inner city estates (Anderson, 1999, p.33). The code is policed mainly by the ‘street’ families but the rules are observed by the ‘decent’ families who adopt a ‘street-wise’ attitude in order to survive in the area (Anderson, 1999, p.33).

In the USA Anderson’s study on the lives of black males from the inner suburbs of Philadelphia in the 1980s and 1990s mirrors the ‘subculture of violence’ theory proposed earlier by Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967). Their theory suggested the high level of violence
amongst black lower class urban males was not considered antisocial or wrong (Wolfgang, 1958, p.329).

Little research was carried out in the UK on the ‘code of the street’ until Gunter’s (2008) study on mainly young black Caribbean males in an east London neighbourhood and Brookman et al.’s (2011) research with mainly white male prison inmates. Both reaffirm Anderson’s code of the street with Gunter (2008, p.355) describing it as ‘street logic’.

Sitting at the heart of the code of the street is masculinity, credibility and respect, which is hard earnt but easily lost (Anderson, 1999, p.9). Respect provides status for the individual but also acts as a defence against violence and victimization (Anderson, 1999, p.9; Pogrebin et al., 2009, p.63). Gaining respect within deprived neighbourhoods is crucial to young men without lawful means to gain a position of influence (Pitts, 2008, p.91; CCJS, 2009, p.34; Regan, 2011, p.19) To command the respect they yearn, young males adopt a certain pose, dress code and ‘street’ language (Anderson, 1999, p.73). Designer labels, jewellery, new trainers are worn together with facial and verbal expressions to send out a subtle message that they are not to be “messed with” or “dissed” (disrespected) (Anderson, 1999, p.76; Gunter, 2008, p.353). Stewart et.al. (2006, p.427) argue such behaviour does not protect the individual from victimisation but in fact attracts confrontation.

Punishing disrespect, insults and solving personal conflicts are paramount and see violence as the primary response, and which often involves weapons and results in injuries (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967; Gunter, 2008, p.355; Brookman et al., 2011, p.21). On the expectation rivals will be armed young people carry weapons to feel safe and for protection thereby creating a vicious circle of violence (Marfleet, 2008, p.84; CCJS, 2009, p.34). Initiating physical and verbal attacks gains respect demonstrating masculinity, nerve and toughness (Katz, 1988, p.103-104; Farrington, 1998, p.450; Anderson, 1999a, p.72). Nerve can also be shown by taking another’s highly valued possessions. Trophies such as
jewellery, a gun or a girlfriend can demonstrate huge disrespect towards the victim (Anderson, 1999a, p.78; Brookman, 2011, p.23; Mejeh and Parkin, 2017). For the most violent offenders true nerve is exhibited by pulling a trigger risking a violent death rather than being “dissed” (Anderson, 1999a, p.78).

Failing to respond to a challenge or threat is considered to be a sign of weakness (Katz, 1988, p.141). This can label the individual as a ‘punk’ or ‘pussy’ and leave them open to bullying and harassment (Hannerz, 1969, p.80; Brookman et al., 2011, p.25).

The subculture of violence and gangs is not restricted to the streets as many young men have discovered when incarcerated (Pyrooz et al., 2011) which we will now look at further.

2.11 Prisons and gangs

In recent years prison gangs have increasingly become more high profile. Research by American criminologists Pyrooz et al. (2011, p.13-14) identifies prison gangs as hierarchical, entrepreneurial, covert, loyal and well organised with regional affiliations. An easy or hostile term of incarceration can be determined by gang membership (Hackman, 2010, p.9). Apart from dealing in drugs, phones and contraband they are involved in extortion and violence. (Pyrooz et al., 2011, p.21; Mejeh and Parkin, 2017). Membership often curtails prisoners’ opportunity to educate and better themselves prior to their release (Pyrooz et al., 2011, p.21).

On their release gang members often find their power base with their gang has been eroded with new leaders and members in place making it difficult for them to re-establish them self (Pyrooz et al., 2011, p.11). Conversely their reputation can be strengthened after a tough prison experience (Anderson, 1999a, p.79) where often individuals increase criminal knowledge and form new associations in an environment often referred to as the ‘university of crime’ (Mejeh and Parkin, 2017a). Often offending will escalate in seriousness
after a term of imprisonment culminating in the use of firearms, (Prior, 2008, p.49; Pogrebin et al., 2009, p.21) which we will now examine further.

2.12 Gun crime

The vast majority of research into gun crime and gun culture has taken place in the USA (Hayden et al., 2008, p.164; CCJS, 2009, p.13). Firearms are far more freely available in the USA where forty-five per cent of households legally own a gun compared to just five per cent in the UK (Squires, 2000, p.184).

The landscape of gun crime and the culture that goes with it has changed greatly in UK since the arrival of the Jamaican Yardie crack cocaine dealers in the late 1980s and 1990s (Pitts, 2008, p.85; Centre for Social Justice, 2009, p.85). At around the same time disenchanted, mainly black, British born young men from the UK’s poorest communities having failed at school and unable to find employment sought the comfort of gang life (Pitts, 2008, p.64-65). The UK gangs were often rivals of the ‘Yardies’ but learnt from them as they evolved to become a home-grown version of USA style gangs (McLagan, 2005, p.25-30; Pitts, 2008, p.16; Pritchard, 2008, p.51; Centre for Social Justice, 2009, p.86; Hackman, 2010, p.97). Strong links still exist between London gangs and communities in Jamaica (Davison, 1997, p.3; Pitts, 2008, p.86).

In the late 1990s and into the new millennium gun crime increased in England’s major cities, particularly London, Manchester and Birmingham, with the perpetrators increasingly being young black British born males (HAC, 2007, p.358-363; Prior and Davis, 2010, p.9). These young black males were attracted to the wealth and glamour associated with this lifestyle (Davison, 1997, p.3-4). We now take a closer look at twenty-first century gun culture.
2.13 Gun culture

Hales et al. (2006, p.103) in their interviews with eighty convicted firearms offenders in the UK, (the majority from London, Manchester and the Midlands), identified two types of criminal ‘gun culture’. Firstly, an ‘instrumental gun culture’ where firearms are utilised solely for committing offences such as armed robbery; secondly, a ‘complex gun culture’ whereby the use of firearms is more universal and can be defensive, offensive or symbolic (Hales et al., 2006, p.103).

Those involved in ‘instrumental gun culture’ tend to be professional criminals who plan and specialize in their offending using firearms as a threat for financial or material gain (Hales et al., 2006, p.75; Prior, 2008a, p.6; Swain, 2008; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.362). They very rarely fire guns and are more forensically aware (Prior, 2008a, p.6; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.362). These armed robbers, drug traffickers and top-level illegal drug dealers often referring to such offending as ‘doin’ the business’ (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.363).

The ‘complex gun culture’ has come more to prominence in recent years with the increasing profile of criminal role models, gang cultures and the illegal drugs market which are all inter-linked confirming the correlation between gangs, drugs and gun crime (Hales et al., 2006, p.65,103; Hayden et al., 2008, p.163; Swain, 2008).

Carrying a gun or “strap” is considered acceptable and is symbolic, demonstrating masculinity and power to peers and rivals (Dowdney, 2003, p.133; Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.59,82; Harcourt, 2006, p.42; Squires et al., 2008, p.25; Pogrebin et al., 2009, p.20,69).

Guns are often considered to be seductive, sexy or cool (Harcourt, 2006, p.8). The bigger the gun the more power and status gained by the individual (Harcourt, 2006, p.94;

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7 “strap” is the slang term for a gun
Guns are commonly held, shared or rented amongst gang members and are often used for multiple crimes (Thornberry et al., 2003, p.124; Harcourt, 2006, p.51-52).

In a chaotic, impetuous, spontaneous style shots are fired to establish respect, status and revenge (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.366; Caddick and Porter, 2012, p.64). In a far more volatile world, often referred to as ‘on road’ young men compete to earn a living from the illegal economy (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.362). Illegal drug dealing is often considered a viable career by these individuals (Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.7; Hayden et al., 2008, p.171). Violence is part of the ‘street code’ and retaliation expected (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.362). Within the ‘on road’ criminal economy guns have become increasingly prevalent in recent years escalating violence (Hales et al., 2006, p.xv; CCJS, 2009, p.33).

Research has identified the reasons and motivations for these young men to possess a gun are to settle a dispute, protection and enforcement, wanting respect and power, disrespect, peer pressure, to feel safe or to commit a crime (Bullock and Tilley, 2002, p.iv; Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.8; Action for Children, 2009, p.2; CCJS, 2009, p.42; Caddick and Porter, 2012, p.62). So very complex is the issue that many of these themes cross over (Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.8). American criminologists Pogrebin et al. (2009, p.48) on interviewing sixty-seven men incarcerated for firearms offences found the vast majority of the inmates claiming their action was justified as the victim deserved to be shot following disrespect, robbery or in self-defence.

Disputes or conflicts, often quite trivial, can erupt quickly sometimes with fatal consequences as both parties seek to fire the first shot (Hales et al., 2006, p.82; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.372; CCJS, 2009, p.39). Often termed as a ‘beef’ altercations can be about territorial ‘turf’ disputes, disrespect, drug deals, status, jealousy, retaliation for a
previous attack or even something as trivial as looking at the suspect the wrong way (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.366-367,372).

Defending your ‘ends’ or ‘turf’ or postcode (territory) is paramount as it is not only the place you inhabit and display your criminal status and reputation but is central to the illegal economy such as illegal drug dealing, prostitution and handling of stolen goods (Squires et al., 2008, p.25; Centre for Social Justice, 2009, p.86; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.368; Regan, 2011, p.18). Rivals entering this territory are challenged and weapons will be carried when leaving their ‘ends’ (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.368).

Travelling outside of their territory may be to rob rival drug dealers or to attend social venues such as night clubs or parties (Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.9,110; Caddick and Porter, 2012, p.65).

Illegal drugs markets are a primary factor in relation to gun use with robberies, ‘turf’ disputes, debt enforcement all common a place and very rarely reported to the police (Katz, 1988, p.249; Hales et al., 2006, p.65; Swain, 2008). With drug dealers arming themselves for protection retaliation often occurs (Hales et al., 2006, p.65-72; Harcourt, 2006, p.83). Firearms, usually semi-automatic pistols or revolvers are smuggled into social venues where often gang rivalry or incidents of masculine reputation or disrespect occur (Bullock and Tilley, 2002, p.16; Hales et al., 2006, p.87-89; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p.369). In many instances both sides exchange fire and the perpetrator can often become a shooting victim (Bullock and Tilley, 2002, p.19-20).

2.14 Victim-Offender cross over

Research shows a high percentage of shooting victims go on to be shooting offenders and vice versa (Bullock and Tilley, 2002, p.19-20; Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.4; Hales et al., 2006, p.ix; Prior, 2008b). Many shooting incidents result in minor injury or no injury at all
and often go unreported to the police (Squires et al., 2008, p.18). Of those shootings reported half of the victims refuse to assist the police (Metropolitan Police, 2011, p.11). Within gang cultures it is frowned on to ‘grass’ or ‘snitch’ and victims also fear reprisals (Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.9; Metropolitan Police, 2011, p.4). Another factor that comes into play is a lack of confidence in the police and the Criminal Justice System (Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.9; Metropolitan Police, 2011, p.16-23). Often victims elect to seek retribution themselves perpetuating a cycle of violence (Hales and Silverstone, 2005, p.9; Pritchard, 2008, p.291).

While individuals progress in their life and offending their journey will not always be smooth and we now examine how the life-course can alter.

### 2.15 Life events and turning points

Over the life-course Sampson and Laub suggest there are transitions from stage to stage and turning points or moments of significant change, which alter the pathway of a person’s life (1993, p.8; 1995, p.144). Elder (1985, p.31-32) claims these turning points are abrupt and can lead to profound changes in a person’s life. Abbott (1997, p.102) likens them to a key opening a lock. Sampson and Laub maintain for most individuals turning points act as “triggering events” for changes which are more cumulative and gradual (1993, p.8; Laub et al., 1998, p.226).

Turning points can have a positive or negative impact on an individual’s life-course and can be initiated by experiences such as marriage, divorce, work, unemployment, military service, parenthood, criminal behaviour, friendships, gang membership and incarceration (Sampson and Laub, 1993, p.8; Elder, 1994, p.5; Goodey, 2000, p.497; Thornberry et al., 2003, p.7; Melde and Esbensen, 2011, p.513). Both the strengthening and weakening of social ties can play an important part in this process (Sampson and Laub, 1993, p.245; Laub
and Sampson, 1993, p.304). For example, criminality can decrease after marriage but increase after divorce (Laub and Sampson, 2003, p.118; Farrington et al., 2006, p.20-21). Fatherhood in conjunction with imprisonment can provide both a positive and a negative impact. The prospect of prison is a powerful deterrent but being imprisoned can afford the offender the opportunity on prison visits to re-build family ties broken as they indulged in a criminal lifestyle (Edin et al., 2001, p.26).

Likewise, gang membership can see negative and positive turning points with a decision to leave often linked to encountering or witnessing serious violent crime (Young et al., 2014, p.182).

Byrne and Trew (2008, p.247) claim that negative turning points result in negative feelings which culminate in offending.

Moving on from the life-course, its events and turning points, we now examine a selection of life stories.

2.16 Life story interviews and autobiographies

Going way back in time individuals have enjoyed telling or writing life stories. A collection of autobiographies and biographies have been reviewed giving an insight into the lives of these individuals and how the research and interviews have been conducted and presented (Shaw, 1930/1960; Parker, 1990; Butterfield, 1995; Berry-Dee, 2003).

Criminological life stories date back to the 1920s when Clifford Shaw (1930/1966) published *The Jack Roller*, the life story of a young delinquent named Stanley, to which he added his own background research and commentary. *The Jack Roller* provided an illuminating insight into his life and highlighted a number of the risk factors discussed earlier in this chapter.

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8 The term ‘Jack Rolling’ means robbing street drunks
Fox Butterfield’s (1995) book *All God’s Children* provided a case study of Willie Bosket, one of New York’s most notorious and violent criminals, and his family going back several generations. Butterfield interviewed Willie Bosket in prison. Bosket provided the author with criminal records, psychiatric reports and trial transcripts and also permission to access other files about him (Butterfield, 1995, p.xvii). Bosket, a black male, grew up in a deprived area, was a violent child and began his criminal career aged five (Butterfield, 1995, p.144). He shot and killed two men at the age of fifteen (Butterfield, 1995, p.xiv). A fascinating insight into Bosket’s life was provided which mirrored many of the topics discussed in this chapter.

The life story interviews of twelve murderers by Tony Parker (1990) provided not only a great insight to the lives of these individuals but also to Parker’s style of interviewing and presentation. Listening was Parker’s strength and he considered himself as ‘a blackboard for people to write on’ (Soothill, 1999, p.x). His interviews come across very vividly with very little constraint on the participants making them a pleasurable read.

Criminologist Christopher Berry-Dee (2003) provides one of the few collective biographies involving males with the study of the lives and homicidal careers of nine serial killers. Prior to interviewing these convicted murderers Berry-Dee researched their history from birth and spoke with their families, associates, the victim’s family, police, judges and members of the medical profession who had involvement with them. Berry-Dee’s book captures brief details of their lives and in-depth narrative of their crimes making it more true crime in content rather than an academic study.

Having reviewed the offending years of individuals we will now move on to the relevant literature which focusses on the reasons why individuals decide to stop offending.
Section Three – Desistance

2.17 Why do individuals decide to desist?

Until the late twentieth century desistance was a subject of little empirical research interest or theoretical debate (Farrall and Bowling, 1999, p.253; Farrall, 2000, p.xi). Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck pioneered researching why people stop offending when, in 1940, they began a decade longitudinal study with five hundred delinquent boys (Glueck and Glueck, 1950). Research on desistance did not increase significantly until the 1970s and 1980s. This followed a wave of longitudinal studies, where researchers were confronted with the problem of having to account for many of their cohorts’ desistance from crime (Farrall, 2000, p.xiii; Farrall, 2010, p.10). From that time research focusing on the termination of criminal careers has grown significantly. This includes influential studies such as Shover (1983), Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986), Sampson and Laub (1993), Maruna (1997, 2001), Laub and Sampson (2003) and Calverley (2009, 2013), each of which will be reviewed in this section. The UK and USA have proved to be the location of most desistance research which has primarily featured longitudinal or retrospective studies (Farrall, 2000, p.xix; Farrall and Calverley, 2006, p.4). This research will add to this literature and test the theories uncovered in this review of desistance literature.

2.18 Desistance – An event or a process?

The definition of desistance has been frequently debated by criminologists. While it is generally agreed it is the cessation of a pattern of criminal offending (Meisenhelder, 1977, p.139; Shover, 1996, p.121, Farrall and Bowling, 1999, p.253) there has been much debate as to when the moment of desistance occurs and when an offender can be truly considered to be a ‘desister’.
Studies using quantitative methodology have often portrayed desistance as an abrupt event when criminal offending ends (Maruna, 2001, p.22). This is particularly the case where official data and/or questionnaires have been used. Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986, p.72), who conducted research with former robbers, supported this and suggested offenders can simply give up crime, but this remains a minority view.

With qualitative methods increasingly used in desistance research it is now widely agreed that desistance is a process rather than an event (Maruna, 2001, p.26; Farrall et. al., 2014, p.39). The use of in-depth interviews has given researchers an insight into offenders’ lives and an understanding of events along with the catalysts leading to their decision to desist (Farrall et. al., 2014, p.15,157). Laub and Sampson (2003, p.21) define desistance as “the casual process that supports the termination of offending and maintains the continued state of non-offending”.

The path to desistance has been variously described by criminologists as a gradual faltering zig-zag journey alternating between crime and ‘interludes of honesty’ (West, 1963, p.3; Glaser, 1964, p.317; Maruna, 1997, p.79; Healy, 2010, p.175; Carlsson, 2012, p.1). Maruna and Farrall (2004, p.174-175) argue that a lull in offending is ‘primary desistance’. This is then followed by ‘secondary desistance’ where the individual adopts a change in identity.

More recent research by Farrall and Calverley (2006, p.98-130) suggests desistance is a four-phase process. This includes (1) early hopes; (2) an intermediate phase with some relapses but a renewed sense of purpose; (3) a penultimate phase when feelings of guilt emerge; (4) a final phase of ‘recovered’ identity. Giordano et al. (2002, p.1029) present a slightly different four stage process which focusses on reflection and outlook. This extends from (1) openness to change; (2) ‘hooks for change’ or turning points; (3) an appealing ‘replacement self’; (4) transformation.
2.19 Desister or Non-Desister?

The definition of when an offender can be identified as a desister varies greatly within the research undertaken. Earlier studies utilised self-defined desistance or official data such as non-arrest or non-conviction over a nominated length of time to define desistance (Graham and Bowling, 1995, p.52; Farrington et al., 2006, p.27; Soothill and Francis, 2009, p.385; Farrall et. al., 2014, p.7-9). This research method presumed that individuals were being truthful and had no further arrests or convictions. It did not confirm that an individual was not currently committing crime.

Serin and Lloyd (2009, p.347) identify the transition period from offender to non-offender as a defining time. They argue desistance is not achieved until the individual has conquered temptations and obstacles on route to a non-criminal lifestyle (Serin and Lloyd, 2009, p.359). Given temptation and the frailty of human nature it can be argued that complete conformity can only be reached when a person dies (Frazier, 1976, p.175; Farrington, 1997, p.373; Maruna, 2001, p.23; Bottoms et. al., 2004, p.383). If this is the case it can be argued that research on the length of criminal careers is obsolete and would be irrelevant to this study where the five participants are still living their lives.

Having defined desistance, we will now examine theories as to why individuals cease offending.

2.20 Theories of desistance

The age-crime curve demonstrating offending, declines after the teenage years, and that many individuals cease to offend is a constant finding in criminological research (Blumstein et al., 1982, p.72; Farrington, 1986, p.192-195). Maruna (2001, p.20) argues that offenders may not grow out of crime but may get caught less, slow down their offending rate, switch crime types or spend time in prison and so cannot offend.
Arguably the first theory of desistance was Gluecks' (1940, p.105) theory of maturational reform. They suggested a ‘burning out’ process where offending reduces naturally after the age of twenty-five as the individual gains either employment or family responsibilities (Glueck and Glueck, 1943, p.236). This “maturation” view is supported by Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983, p.565; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p.141) who concluded that desistance was a natural “ageing out” of criminal behaviour but was determined by the individual’s self-control.

Sampson and Laub (1993, p.204-243) in their analysis of Gluecks’ data advocated a theory of age-graded social control. Here individuals cease offending in adulthood because of social bonds stemming from life events such as marriage, parenthood, employment and military service. Research by Graham and Bowling (1995, p.51-59) also highlighted both “growing” out of crime and marriage as contributing factors. Elsewhere Farrington et al., (1986, p.351) highlighted employment as being very influential. These structural factors provide meaningful support and a sense of belonging which assist in an individuals’ conforming (Meisenhelder, 1977, p.325-328,331, Byrne and Trew, 2008, p.245-248).

A number of criminologists however question ‘age related’ theories. They suggest other factors are central to an individual desisting. Early desistance research, utilising quantitative data, focussed on external structural factors such as marriage, parenthood and employment. These were seen as drivers for desistance. More recent qualitative research utilising interviews with offenders has now afforded researchers the opportunity to explore and understand the real-life world and identities of the individual (Maruna, 1997, p.66; Maruna, 2001, p.7). Laub and Sampson (2003, p.146-149), who from their initial analysis of Gluecks’ data, posited structural turning points as pivotal in desistance went on to conduct interviews with some participants. They highlighted instead a personal ‘transformative action’ where the men actively decided to give up crime. Desistance was seen as being the
individual’s rational choice or decision (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986, p.72; Byrne and Trew, 2008, p.245) or indeed conscious self-rehabilitation (Meisenhelder, 1977, p.325-326, 332-333). This discovery was to be confirmed in other studies.

Maruna’s (1997; 2001) innovative research for example focussed on ‘internal’ changes in offender’s lives which captured the emotion and motivation that underpinned the desistance process. For many desisters there was a key moment or ‘bottoming out’ which caused them to question the direction of their life (Maruna, 1997, p.77, Webster et al., 2006, p.16). Their decision to sever links to their previous life, criminal associates and environments being described as “knifing-off” by Maruna and Roy (2007, p.104). That significant turning point was sometimes ‘words of wisdom’ from a trusted source, or a shock such as the murder of an associate, (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986, p.74-79; Maruna, 1997, p.77). Fear proved to be a pivotal factor; which included fear of serious assault or even death (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986, p.74; Maruna, 1997, p.78; Hughes, 1998, p.147). Additionally, the prospect of serving a long prison sentence proved key in the decision making process (Meisenhelder, 1977, p.322-324). A period of contemplation prior to decision making was also identified by Shover (1983, p.213) and Leibrich (1993, p.56-57).

In their new ‘real’ identity, desisters often portrayed themselves as ‘missionaries’ or ‘role models’ for young people with a desire to give back to society (Shover, 1983, p.210; Maruna, 1997, p.87; Maruna, 2001, p.9-12; Gadd and Farrall, 2004, p.127). Successful desistance was often linked to support from trusted sources and opportunities for engaging in projects or employment enabling them to maintain their motivation and attain their goals (Maruna, 1997, p.84; Sampson and Laub, 2005, p.43; Burnett and Maruna, 2006, p.94). Conversely some experienced a ‘road-block’ to reform and are tempted to return to crime because of a lack of money, unemployment, boredom, despondency or meeting with

From his study of twenty serious offenders Maruna (1997, p.71) developed a model of reform (see figure 2.5 below) which was very similar for all participants. Each stage of the reform process is described as a nuclear episode with themes identified and imagoes for the offender. A loop where offenders encounter obstacles to desistance and return to criminality, sometimes in a repetitive cycle, being a typical part of this process (Healy, 2010, p.173).

The last thirty years have witnessed major economic and social change. This study argues that early desistance theories involving military service or marriage are now of far less relevance. Certainly, the influx and use of drugs, particularly heroin and crack cocaine, are now woven through the fabric of crime and have significantly impacted on offenders’ lives, particularly those involved in gang and gun crime.
2.21 Desistance study profiles

A review of desistance literature has identified studies of juvenile delinquents and low-level offenders. However there has been very little focus on serious offenders. Maruna’s (1997) analysis of career criminals and Cusson and Pinsonneault’s (1986) study of robbers are most relevant to this research. With gun crime in London’s communities being a relatively recent phenomenon (since the late 1980s) and substantial prison sentences being given to perpetrators, research with desisters for this crime type remains in its infancy. As a result, themes and patterns of desistance have yet to be clearly established.

2.22 Ethnicity and desistance

The vast majority of firearms offenders are black males. As a result, ethnicity is an issue which must attract our attention. In most studies ethnic minority participants have typically featured in small numbers. Until recently there has indeed been limited research on ethnicity in relation to desistance. Calverley (2013) in his study of ethnic minority offenders explored the impact of cultural and structural influences on the desistance process. His findings show that, while Indian and Bangladeshi offenders benefitted from close knit family and community support in their desistance process, for black and dual heritage males, desistance was a much lonelier procedure (Calverley, 2013, p.187-188). The fragmentation of black men’s’ families coupled with the lack of support and opportunity within the local community and the negative influence of associates, peers and some family members made the road to desistance extremely challenging (Calverley, 2013, p.137-138). The desistance debate has been added to more recently by Glynn (2014), a black ‘urban’ criminologist. Glynn (2014) provides an assessment of the challenge of desistance through the eyes of black male offenders. The research identified the pressure of returning to ‘the streets’, racism, lack of support and blocked opportunities as barriers to desistance for
black males (Glynn, p.58-63). This is supported in the findings of The Kenny Report (2012, p.22). Glynn (2014, p.107) presents a theory of masculinity in relation to black male offender’s life journey (see figure 2.6 below). Different types of masculinity are identified throughout the life cycle, suggesting that social and structural inequalities are a key factor in the issue of desistance (Glynn, 2014, p.119).

![Diagram]

Figure 2.6 - A theoretical model of masculinities in relation to black men’s desistance – Glynn (2014, p.107)

Glynn concludes his study suggesting future research in this area should afford black males the opportunity to tell their life stories to better understand their experiences (2014, p.11,124,155).
2.23 Gangs and desistance

Closely linked to young male’s masculinity is gang membership with desistance from gangs being a relatively understudied topic (Klein and Maxson, 2006, p.154; Pyrooz et al., 2014, p.492). Research has shown individuals drift away from gang life and others leave abruptly (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002, p.66). Identity, status, companionship and protection are lost when leaving a gang although many who exit continue to have close ties with gang members (Pyrooz et al., 2014, p.508-509). Pyrooz et al. (2014, p.507-509) recommend further research on the complexity of gang ties and status which they argue is crucial to understanding the gang desistance process and when an individual can be truly considered to be a ‘former’ gang member.

Having reviewed and evaluated the significant empirical studies on criminal career paths, gun violence and desistance from crime we will now move on in the next chapter to describe the methodology utilised to conduct this research study.
CHAPTER 3
Methodology

3.1 Introduction
The research strategy adopted to gain information on the lives of young men involved in
gun crime is documented and discussed in this chapter. The function, strength and
limitation of each data set, and the data analysis methods, will be explored as well as the
rationale for adopting the selected combination of techniques. Presenting the reader with
a clear awareness of the nature of different data types obtained, as well as an appreciation
of the ‘research process’ as it evolved, remains the primary objective.

A critical open-minded stance was adopted from the start of the study. This involved the
introduction of a research diary to capture all aspects of the project such as development
of ideas, meetings and interviews, gathering and analysis of data, progress and problems
encountered (Silverman, 2000, p.193; Robson, 2002, p.258). This has aided clear reasoning
(Silverman, 2000, p.193), and proved invaluable in composing the thesis (Robson, 2002,
p.258), and allowed for inclusion of descriptive and reflective accounts of the process.

3.2 Ethical approval to research
Consideration of the ethical implications of the study and approval to research had to be
obtained prior to commencement of the study at organisational level from both the
Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and the University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee. This
secured the endorsement of both organisations that had an immediate interest in the
research.

As an employee of the Metropolitan Police Service, approval was required on two fronts.
First senior managers at Operation Trident were advised of the study from the outset.
Secondly application was made to the Strategic Research and Analysis Unit (SRAU) which
act as the Metropolitan Police Service gatekeepers for all internal and external research applications involving the organisation. An MPS SRAU Protocol for Research and Analysis was submitted along with the University of Portsmouth thesis proposal. The SRAU sanctioned the research on 29th June 2011 and granted permission to utilise police databases and data for the study.

Ethical approval was also gained from the University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee (see Appendix A) following submission of an ethics self-assessment form together with copies of the MPS SRAU protocol and drafts of the letter to participants, consent form and information sheet (see Appendices C, D and E). See also University of Portsmouth Form UPR16 at Appendix B.

### 3.3 From inside researcher to outside researcher

In relation to Police research and the access of police data Brown (1996) identifies four types of researcher: (1) inside insiders; (2) outside insiders; (3) inside outsiders; (4) outside outsiders. Under Brown’s definition the researcher for this study, as a civilian member of police staff and not a police officer, would be considered an ‘Inside outsider’. As a Metropolitan Police Service employee, the researcher held an inside status but without the same sub-cultural bonds as Police Officers was considered an ‘outsider’ (Stockdale, 2016, p.315).

As discussed in the previous section the formal process of gaining ethical approval and permission to utilise police data had been a relatively easy process as a member of Metropolitan Police Service staff (Reiner and Newburn, 2008, p.343).

During the process of completing the research and interviews the researcher left employment with the Metropolitan Police Service, in essence changing from an ‘inside outsider’ researcher to an ‘outside outsider’ researcher (Brown, 1996). The consequences
of this move soon became apparent as access to Metropolitan Police Service IT systems to research the final study participant was no longer available which necessitated making formal application by e-mail for the data. This process through the SRAU was highly procedurised and took several months (Lee, 1993, p.124). This gave the researcher a full appreciation of the challenges encountered by ‘outside outsider’ researchers to the Metropolitan Police Service organisation. Had this been required for all five research participants, who were recruited at different times, it would have been a very time-consuming process. Being able to research four men while employed as a Metropolitan Police Service senior intelligence analyst afforded the researcher the opportunity to read all the records thoroughly and cross check much of the information gathered. Fortunately, the research for the fifth participant was performed by an analyst who as a fellow academic had a good understanding of the research requirements.

The impact of changing from an ‘inside outsider’ researcher to an ‘outside outsider’ researcher was also apparent in respect of the National Police Library, which holds a wealth of criminological literature. The researcher had to negotiate extended membership of the National Police Library where most of the Professional Doctorate research had been undertaken. Having left the Metropolitan Police Service, the researcher now had no official status and was no longer authorised to visit the National Police library (Reiner and Newburn, 2008, p.344). After some negotiating formal access was granted to allow the researcher to continue loaning books.

In respect of conducting interviews with the research participants the pendulum had swung the other way as the researcher was now an ‘outside outsider’ and this will be reflected on later in this chapter.
3.4 Research design

The desire to study this topic was fuelled in January 2011 when a convicted gunman was researched and interviewed about his life for a project overseen by the Metropolitan Police Service Anti-Violence Board. It was an eye-opening experience that made the researcher realise it would be a great opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding and analysis as to how and why some individuals progress to gun crime.

Piloting the research design provided a valuable learning curve in understanding in a research context, showing the type of information that could be gleaned, the likely challenges and the importance of building a rapport with the participant. It enabled the researcher to build on and improve the research design and the lessons learnt are reflected upon during this chapter.

This research is an interpretive biographical case study design employing a mixed methods approach designed to capture the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative styles (Creswell, 2002, p.22) thereby negating the narrow-focussed approach of using just one research paradigm (Mason, 2006, p.13).

Interpretive biographical or life history research is described by Denzin (1989, p.13) as “the studied use and collection of personal-life documents, stories and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individuals’ lives”. Denzin (1989, p.47,70) describes these moments as ‘a revelation in a life’ or ‘an experience which leaves a mark on a person’s life’. These turning points can be any significant event in a person’s life and not necessarily linked to crime (Goodey, 2002, p.481). These epiphany moments and experiences (Denzin, 1989, p.22) will be uncovered and interpreted during the analysis as the researcher seeks to comprehend how and why these young men became involved in criminality and gun violence and why they now wish to try and desist.
Life histories stories provide a personal approach and uncover issues missed with quantitative research. Combined with quantitative data they produce an in-depth real-life picture of a person’s life and identify turning points (Laub and Sampson, 2003, p.9-10; Laub and Sampson, 2004, p.91).

In respect of criminology life stories date back to the 1920s when Clifford Shaw, a founding member of the Chicago School, conducted research with delinquent youths (Goodey, 2000, p.475; Presser, 2009, p.182). Boys were asked to write their own life story to which official data was added to complete the study in a mixed methods approach (Goodey, 2000, p.475). Shaw considered he worked ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ his participants (Goodey, 2000, p.475) which this research seeks to do.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.17) described mixed methods as the “third research movement” offering a rational and realistic option to the traditional qualitative and quantitative paradigms. It “bridges the schism” between the qualitative and quantitative paradigms (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.15) to provide a balanced, pluralistic and complementary study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.17). Mixed methods habitually provide richer explanations to research questions allowing the researcher to deliver an all-embracing final paper (Jick, 1979, p.609; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.17).

This research identifies a mixed methods approach with the inclusion of quantitative and qualitative phases (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.14). It has been uniquely constructed on quantitative data from police and other agencies combined with qualitative data gained through personal life story interviews with young men involved in gun crime. Due to the in-depth and personal nature of this study, focus groups and surveys were from the outset rejected as a research instrument as they would be neither practical nor provide the depth of knowledge required. Life story interviews provided a wide-ranging insight into
the lives of these young men aiding understanding as to why they became embroiled in firearms offending in England’s capital city.

Life story interviews are mini autobiographies told by the individual in the way they choose incorporating events, experiences, influences and feelings of their life (Becker, 1966, p.vi; Denzin, 1989, p.48; Kvale, 1996, p.1,70; Atkinson, 1998, p.8). They are the ideal mechanism for in-depth research revealing much about the storytellers’ inner life and providing interaction and a creative relationship between interviewee and interviewer (Atkinson, 1998, p.59; Laub and Sampson, 2003, p.9). A life story interview will never be conducted the same way by two different people and the interpretation considered subjective, which will be discussed further under data analysis (Atkinson, 1998, p.59).

Quantitative data was collected from archival police and prison record sources and combined with the in-depth offender interviews. This enabled data triangulation, essential to the construct validity of the typologies employed (Yin, 2009, p.41). The initial quantitative segment of the research provided a basis and background for the subsequent qualitative phase of interviews.

### 3.5 Data collection tools and storage

The mixed methods approach adopted saw the collection of data in two separate phases. Data from the first phase of research on police and prison databases was collated and stored on Excel spreadsheets. The second stage involved interviews in which the researcher, in the role of interviewer, was essentially the research instrument (Kvale, 1996, p.125; Gillham, 2005, p.7). The data collection instruments and methods will be examined in more detail later in this chapter as progression of the research unfolds.

Ensuring all data, field notes, audio files and interview transcripts were appropriately stored and protected would be key to maintaining the confidentiality of the participants.
(Noaks and Wincup, 2004, p.43; Gillham, 2005, p.10-11). All electronic files were stored on a password protected computer, while the research diary, hand written field notes, the digital recorder and print-outs from police data-bases were stored in a locked cabinet in an office with key-pad access. The paper print-outs from police data-bases were destroyed by shredding once data had been entered on to the Excel spreadsheet.

3.6 Sampling approach

Professional Doctorate research is typically conducted by one researcher who gathers and analyses the data and writes up the findings. The number of research participants and the time spent ‘in the field’ therefore had to be realistic while satisfying the rigorous academic requirements.

There was insufficient information and no central data-bases within either the HMPS and MPS available to provide an accurate population of males who have been involved in firearms offending and who have pledged to try and desist from a life of crime.

To recruit participants the researcher was able to benefit from being an ‘inside’ researcher. Contacts made over the years through working relationships with HMPS and Charity Trust staff were utilised to recruit the participants. The task would certainly have been far more challenging for an ‘outside’ researcher particularly in respect of participants in prison. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was therefore used to purposively select a sample of participants (Robson, 2002, p.263-265; Bryman, 2008, p.458-459; Denscombe, 2010, p.34).

Purposive sampling enabled the use of the researcher’s expert knowledge as a criminal intelligence analyst to ‘hand-pick’ participants with an appropriate criminal background and who were likely to produce the most valuable information (Robson, 2002, p.193; Bryman, 2008, p.458; Denscombe, 2010, p.34-35).
This sampling technique provided an exploratory sample which was ideal to provide a deeper understanding and uncover theoretically grounded arguments from this unexplored topic (Neuman, 2000, p.196; Denscombe, 2010, p.41). While this specifically selected sample had limitations in respect of generalisability (Bryman, 2008, p.391) it was the richness, appropriateness and adequacy that proved to be the primary considerations (Fossey et al., 2002, p.726; Denscombe, 2010, p.35).

3.7 Recruiting the participants

Due to the in-depth nature of this research a sample of just five participants were selected. Morse (1994, p.220-235) suggests that this is a favourable number of participants when trying to understand the essence of the experience. It could however be argued that a sample of just one is sufficient when considering the classic work of Clifford Shaw in his case study of Stanley, The Jack-Roller (Shaw, 1930/1966; Maruna and Matravers, 2007, p.427-442).

The inclusion criteria for this study was that the participants were young men who had been involved in gun crime offending in London and were now committed to trying to turn their life round and desist from a life of crime.

The five men researched were all involved in firearms offences in London in their late teens or early twenties. Four of the men are black and the other white. All grew up and still reside in England’s capital city.

Locating and recruiting males who fitted the criteria and were prepared to talk about their life proved a great challenge, the researcher’s role working for the Metropolitan Police Service generated some stigma among several potential candidates. It was here that contacts within the HMPS and at charity and football community trusts built up over the years by the researcher came to the fore. From their work with the offenders over a lengthy
period the staff from HMPS and the Trusts had become trusted by the men. The staff were able to utilise their relationship with the offenders to explain the value of this research as part of their desistance process and to confirm their long standing and trusted working relationship with the researcher. This proved pivotal in recruiting the men for this study. Two of the men were recruited from prisons and had proved to experienced prison staff over a substantial amount of time their intention to desist from a criminal lifestyle. Both had been involved in one-to-one meetings, attended and participated in prison workshops on guns and gang life and had written and reflected on their life experiences. Two more of the participants were recruited through Charity Trusts. They had been working as volunteers for the Trusts for a number of months following their release from prison and had demonstrated a willingness to work regularly and had not been involved in re-offending. The final participant had been a desister for over five years when recruited for the study. He ran his own Charity Trust and had not re-offended in that time. He was recruited through LinkedIn, the social networking website for professionals, when he invited the researcher to link up after reading about this research topic.

3.8 Seeking authority to meet the participants

Having identified a suitable candidate, permission was sought from the appropriate authority to meet with them. For two participants, who were serving prisoners, formal application was made to the Prison Governor to visit and interview the men. Once permission had been granted and with the assistance of Glen Banks, a former HMPS employee who had worked with both men, arrangements were then made with the respective prisons to visit them. A Metropolitan Police Service risk assessment form was completed (see Appendix F).
While meeting a senior case worker at a Charity Trust on a work-related matter a further participant was identified. The young man fitted the study criteria and the case worker suggested his participation as part of his rehabilitation programme. A meeting was held with the Trust Youth Services Manager who confirmed access to the young man and arranged the use of a room to meet him.

A further participant was identified through a Professional Football Club Community Trust when the researcher had a conversation with the Social Inclusion Officer. A meeting was arranged with the man and the Crime Reduction Officer at the Trust offices to gain the necessary consent. Negotiations were made to use the Trust offices to interview the participant.

In relation to the fifth participant, who had made contact via the social network LinkedIn, there was no need to negotiate access through gate-keepers and arrangements to meet were made directly via e-mail and phone.

3.9 Preparing to meet the participants

Once a possible candidate had been identified, preliminary checks were carried out on police data bases, to confirm that they met the study criteria. In preparation for the first meeting a letter of invitation to participate in the research, a consent form and an information sheet were designed (see Appendices C, D and E). The letter provided a brief introduction, the aims and objectives of the research and how it would be carried out. The consent form outlined the participant’s rights as a volunteer to be provided protection as specified in the British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics for researchers (BSC, 2011). These ethical issues for the participant encompassed consent, risk, harm, confidentiality and privacy (Punch, 1994, p.82-97). The information sheet outlined everything to be covered with the men at the first meeting and would be a useful guide as the researcher
talked them through it. E-mail contact details for the researcher, supervisor and the Professional Doctorate Course Leader were included should the men have any questions.

### 3.10 Considerations before meeting

It was important to find a venue for the meetings that both parties would be comfortable with. As a lone female interviewing men who had been involved in firearms offending the researcher was conscious of finding a safe meeting environment which would not be completely isolated. Additionally, mindful of the participants life-style and the researchers job as a Metropolitan Police senior intelligence analyst attention was paid not to put either party in a compromising position in which we could be seen by police officers or the participant’s criminal associates.

This was not a problem with the two men interviewed in prison as a meeting room away from other prisoners was allocated and a prison officer was present at all times (Jupp et al., 2000, p.224).

When interviewing the two men recruited through the charity trusts the researcher was able to negotiate the use of a small meeting room at the trust where other people were close by performing their jobs.

Meetings with the fifth participant were different as the researcher had left the Metropolitan Police Service and this young man had been a reformed character for several years. Still mindful of his past and the researcher’s safety the meeting was held in a cinema café. This venue was ideal as it was quiet but in the public domain.

The way you present yourself at a first meeting with someone generates a significant impression which can be influential on the outcome of the research (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.367; Gillham, 2005, p.77). With this in mind the researcher carefully considered how to dress for the initial meetings.
For prison visits the researcher was a professional representing the Metropolitan Police Service so elected to dress smartly in a work attire of jacket and dark trousers with minimal jewellery. At the charity trusts the staff and their clients dressed less formally a more casual dress code was adopted. In respect of meeting the fifth participant at the cinema casual clothes were worn.

3.11 The first meeting

An initial meeting was set up with each man to obtain their informed consent and to cover all ethical issues prior to commencement of any research.

At the first meeting the researcher was keen to get to know a little about the participant and build up a good rapport (King and Wincup, 2008, p.30). Initiating this in the first meeting would lead to richer more informative interviews (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.367). Building up trust and mutual respect between both parties takes time and is instrumental in successful research (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.367; Atkinson, 1998, p.35; Goodey, 2000, p.478). The researcher wanted the men to be open and honest in the future interviews and considered it imperative to be open and honest with them about their employment and the research.

Following an introduction, the aims and nature of the research were described and why they were being asked to participate (Noaks and Wincup, 2004, p.83; Denscombe, 2010, p.184; Maxfield and Babbie, 2010, p.273-274). An explanation was given that the researcher was conducting the study primarily as a University of Portsmouth Doctoral student. When meeting the first four participants the researcher was employed as a Metropolitan Police civilian intelligence analyst and informed them of this. It was emphasised that the researcher was not a police officer and interest in them as a participant was not of an investigative police nature but from an academic and crime
prevention stance. In essence the interest was in them as a person and the story of their life. Being able to understand their life from their perspective, to place oneself in their shoes was imperative (Becker, 1966, p.vii; Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.367; Atkinson, 1998, p.13).

Their consent was required for both stages of the study. Firstly, to conduct research on police and open source databases and then to interview them. An assurance of maintaining the individual’s anonymity and confidentiality was given prior to obtaining their written consent to participate (Neuman, 2000, p.99; Jupp et al., 2000, p.229; Noaks and Wincup, 2004, p.48). It was explained that their identity and other recognisable data would be sanitised to protect them in this thesis and related presentations and that they would be given a pseudonym (Neuman, 2000, p.99). An assurance was given that all data and interviews would be stored securely for the sole use of the researcher (Atkinson, 1998, p.28; Gillham, 2005, p.13). Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and raise any issues they had about the research. To formalise the relationship, they were provided with a copy of the letter, the information sheet used to brief them with plus their signed written consent.

Once the formalities were completed, further time was spent speaking informally to the participants to get to know them a little better. Notes were taken but only around salient points to aid the first stage of the research. At this stage the strategy was to break the ice and build up a rapport with the participant that would positively impact upon the information they would impart in future interviews about their life (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.367). Interviewing the men in the second meeting allowed them time to prepare and refresh their memory of their life story (Atkinson, 1998, p.29).
3.12 The first research phase

The initial research was conducted using quantitative research methods gathering data from a variety of predominately archival sources such as police and prison databases. Although often described as “sterile and unimaginative” quantitative studies produce descriptive factual evidence (De Vaus, 2001, p.5) which was what was required as means of starting to build up a picture of the individual’s life. It allowed accurate date confirmation of events in their lives such as offences, arrests and prison sentences.

Imagination and meticulous planning was required designing the first stage of research to ensure all relevant data was captured (Davies, 2007, p.26). An Excel spread-sheet was constructed for each participant with each row representing a month of their life synchronised against the actual year and month. Data was collected and manually entered onto the spread-sheet in note form and cross checked for accuracy.

With authority secured from the MPS SRAU four police intelligence databases, the Police National Computer (PNC), the Microfiche system, the Crime Reporting Information System (CRIS) and the Criminal Intelligence System (Crimint Plus), were utilised to gather data on each individual’s criminal history and background.

First utilising the offenders unique PNC identity number, a copy of their PNC record was obtained providing details of their convictions, prison sentences, cautions, reprimands, non-convictions and pending prosecutions. Other useful information such as offences and arrest details, home addresses and occupations were also gathered.

Personal records were only introduced onto the PNC in the mid 1990s and in two cases it was necessary to apply for the individual’s Microfiche. This was the method used to store information prior to the introduction of PNC personal records and recorded the same information.
The second database interrogated was CRIS and a search on the individual’s name provided details of all offences reported to the Metropolitan Police Service where the men were either accused of the offence, a named suspect, a victim, an informant or witness.

With a picture of the offender’s criminal history now emerging, a search on their name was performed on the Crimint Plus database. Introduced in 1994 this computer system stores information on criminals and suspected criminals and allowed corroboration of data already extracted from PNC and CRIS and to glean further information on the individual, their activity and background.

Finally, to obtain accurate data on the participant’s terms of imprisonment, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) was contacted. NOMS provided the exact dates and length of time the men had spent in prison or youth offender institutions.

The data collection and collation now complete, different research strategies were then employed to map each individual’s criminal career, family background and life history (Punch, 2006).

Longitudinal case studies constructed in a chart format were built to allow analysis of the different offender’s criminal career progression.

A first draft version of a comprehensive life time-line was compiled for each participant from birth to current day using PowerPoint. This encompassed all notable events, arrests and terms of imprisonment throughout their life obtained from the initial research.

The products of this initial quantitative segment of research set the foundation for the subsequent second interview phase. The life time-line would be utilised as reference document and act as an aid for both the researcher and the interviewee (Shaw, 1966, p.22, Healy, 2010, p.51).
3.13 The second research phase

The data accrued from the initial research, while revealing, in fact lacked depth. It did provide a strong foundation however for the second qualitative phase of data collection. By conducting in-depth interviews with these young men, the aim was to bridge these gaps and provide real meaningful analysis. This more interpretive naturalistic approach allowed exploration of the lives, experiences and world of the research participants and a focus on the meaning of naturally occurring rich data gathered from interviews, conversations and field notes (Silverman, 2000, p.8; Mason, 2006, p.22; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p.4). A particular strength of qualitative research lies in the knowledge it provides of the dynamics of social processes and social context, and its ability to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (Mason, 2006, p.16). Traditionally qualitative research is flexible, fluid and data-driven (Mason, 2006, p.21) involving induction, exploration, discovery, constructing themes, theories and hypothesis and analysis of data collected primarily by the researcher (Silverman, 2000, p.77-79; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.20). It allows for the exploration of the social world of the research participants, their lives, their experiences and understanding (Kvale, 1996, p.70; Fossey et al., 2002, p.717; Mason, 2006, p.22). Mason (2006, p.22) succinctly captures the qualitative paradigm when she comments:

“Qualitative research tends to expect, indeed to celebrate, richness and nuance in data and understanding.... It aims to understand and communicate its subjects’ experiences, interpretations and meanings, and consequently qualitative data and argument can be highly compelling, with a distinctive ‘real life’ immediacy and resonance”.

The rich data is based on participant’s defined categories of meaning allowing for thematic analysis (Neuman, 2000, p.420; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.20).
3.14 What type of interview?

Kvale (1996, p.3) likens an interviewer to a miner whereby they unearth valuable nuggets of knowledge from the interviewee’s experiences. These nuggets of knowledge and meaning are then purified when transcribing from oral to written form (Kvale, 1996, p.3). Having elected to conduct interviews the researcher was faced with a menu of three interview types: structured with specific fixed order questions; semi-structured with flexibility around the wording and sequence of questions; and unstructured whereby informal discussion is held on a topic (Robson, 2002, p.270-271; Denscombe, 2010, p.174-175).

As the interviews would be explorative and unveiling themes, the structured interview technique was rejected as there was not enough information from the quantitative research to construct specific questions and responses would be too restricted (Denscombe, 2010, p.174). Some direction to the interviews was however required, rather than an interviewee driven approach, an unstructured approach was discarded in favour of the semi-structured style.

Explorative in-depth semi-structured interviews, although more time consuming, offered a balanced flexible structure to gain quality data and elicit main issues and views as perceived by the participants (Hibberd and Bennett, 1990, p.93; Oppenheim, 1992, p.67; Kvale, 1996, p.70; Gillham, 2005, p.70). These interviews would uncover new concepts, identify themes and focus the research study (Oppenheim, 1992, p.68; Neuman, 2000, p.420; Gillham, 2005, p.72). It would allow the researcher to control the length and order of proceedings, provide the opportunity to probe, enabling expansion of replies, and follow up with additional questions (Robson, 2002, p.287; Noaks and Wincup, 2004, p.86; King and Wincup, 2008, p.32).
3.15 Interview preparation

While piloting this research design and interviewing a prisoner background research was utilised to compose questions for a semi-structured interview. His life was broken down into sections and he was asked to talk about various topics within that segment of his life. This worked extremely well, relaxing the interviewee and the narrative flowed naturally. The researcher was able to control the length and order of proceedings and probe or ask specific questions that had arisen out of the rich narrative (Robson, 2002, p.278). By not restricting the questions new topics and issues were raised that otherwise may have been completely missed (Neuman, 2000).

Relevant data was captured during the interview by co-ordinating the dialogue in respect of both the academic and social perspective (Mason, 2002, p.67). As Mason (2002, p.67) points out “It is all too easy to orchestrate a pleasant social encounter whose content has little or no bearing on the intellectual puzzle which the research is designed to address”. So, following the pilot the researcher developed an interview guide by way of a ‘check list’ of topics (see Appendix G) to cover in each interview (Patton, 1990, p.343; Pogrebin et al., 2009, p.12; Carlsson, 2012, p.6). Each topic heading was placed in a grid on one sheet of paper and relevant bullet points listed beneath the main heading. This provided a guide for the areas to be covered at a glance. It also meant the topics were not structured in a linear order. Consequently, as the interview unfolded and shifted between different topics the researcher was able to keep track, record areas covered and prompt on any issues not covered (Kvale, 1996, p.147; Gillham, 2005, p.76). By not having a linear order it allowed the interview to flow more easily and generate more natural good quality data than if an inflexible linear approach had been adopted (Soothill, 1999, p.93; Carlsson, 2012, p.7).
3.16 The interviews

The five men were interviewed by the researcher over a period of three and a half years. However, the first, during the pilot research, was a full year before the rest. Prior to the interviews an initial meeting took place between the researcher and the individual to explain the research and gain their consent to participate. Depending on the time available the men were then interviewed on one or two occasions with the total length of interviews with each participant ranging from ninety minutes to four hours, the average being around two hours. The longest interview was over two meetings for one interviewee who told a fascinating story of his life but was quite repetitive. With so much rich data captured, interrupting the conversation may have lost valuable data. Overall for the five participants interviews a large amount of data was collected.

At the start of each participant’s first interview the points made in the initial meeting were summarised regarding the research to ensure they were fully comfortable with it. Their importance in the research was emphasised and also how the researcher wanted to understand their life and experiences from their point of view. The researcher wanted them to become the teacher to help understanding (Spradley, 1979, p.34; Atkinson, 1998, p.71).

With the initial research complete a draft copy of the man’s life time-line and family tree was available which would be used as an aid for the interview together with the ‘check list’ of topics to discuss.

On practical grounds a request to digitally record the interviews was made as taking notes would be arduous and would lose much of the detail (Oppenheim, 1992, p.71). Recording allowed concentration on the dynamics of the interview and eye contact with the interviewee (Kvale, 1996, p.160; Parker, 1999, p.237; Noaks and Wincup, 2004, p.86). It was explained the sound file was solely for research use and would be stored securely.
All five participants agreed to the use of a small digital recorder for the interviews but in one instance the prison would not authorise this. Before commencing the interview, the participant was told approximately how long the interview would last and asked to select their own pseudonym to maintain their anonymity in the final thesis (Parker, 1999, p.239; Gillham, 2005, p.13). They were advised they could request the recorder be turned off if they wished to talk about sensitive issues and if there was anything they did not wish to talk about to say so (Parker, 1999, p.239). They were informed that if they admitted to a crime not previously dealt with the researcher would have to seek legal advice (Jupp et al., 2000, p.229). At the start of each interview the digital recorder was tested to ensure it was operating correctly (Atkinson, 1998, p.30; Gillham, 2005, p.78).

The responsibility is on the interviewer to provide an atmosphere where the interviewee feels comfortable to talk. As a result, a relaxed tone to proceedings was created sitting at an angle to the participant and always ensuring a drink was available for them (Kvale, 1996, p.125; Liebling, 2001, p.475). To conduct an effective interview, a fine balance between professional impersonality and a friendly but not confiding manner had to be struck (Kvale, 1996, p.125; Atkinson, 1998, p.28; Gillham, 2005, p.11).

The interviews commenced by asking the men to talk about their life starting with their earliest memories. The men were allowed to proceed at their own pace and finish what they had to say, mindful that listening is a key interviewing skill (Kvale, 1996, p.148; Atkinson, 1998, p.32; Robson, 2002; Gillham, 2005, p.29). Being attentive assisted in building trust and making the men aware of their importance to the research (Atkinson, 1998, p.33-34; Carlsson, 2012, p.7). Rapid choices had to be made regarding follow up questions and clarification asked on anything not understood (Kvale, 1996, p.149; Parker, 1999, p.239). People are often better with the order of events rather than dates and having
the individuals draft life time-line to hand proved invaluable in confirming chronological order (Shaw, 1966, p.22; Cohler, 1988, p.552-575; Kvale, 1996, p.124; Gillham, 2005, p.35; Wikstrom et.al., 2012, p.76). As the men were guided through their life story topics on the ‘check list’ were identified and questions asked around areas not covered (Atkinson, 1998, p.40; Goodey, 2000, p.483; Carlsson, 2012, p.6). The first phase research of the study had already provided some knowledge of their life history. Everything they said did not have to be accepted at face value and their response could be validated with critical questioning and comparison against official data (Kvale, 1996, p.149; Pogrebin et al., 2009, p.12).

At the end of the interview the participant was asked if there was anything they had missed out or wished to add (Atkinson, 1998, p.53; Parker, 1999, p.238; Gillham, 2005, p.79). Without these men none of this research would have been possible and they were thanked for their time and everything they had taught the researcher (Atkinson, 1998, p.36; Parker, 1999, p.239; Gillham, 2005, p.79; Denscombe, 2010, p.186).

3.17 Challenges encountered

Interviewing these young men brought about several different challenges due to the profile of the researcher and the lifestyle of the participants.

From the beginning consideration was given to what impact the researchers profile of white, middle-aged, middle-class, female employed by the Metropolitan Police Service would have on the participants and the research (Sanders, 2005, p.23).

Denzin (1989a, p.3-4) claims the gender of the interviewer and interviewee makes a difference as masculine and feminine identities differentiate within the cultural boundaries of a paternalistic social system under which the interview occurs. Dingwall (1980, p.881) suggests women are more empathic interviewers than men while Punch (1994, p.82-97) warns that females may have to implement strategies to deal with prejudice and sexual
innuendo in masculine environments. There were never any problems with the men interviewed, possibly due to the researchers more mature age. Also, due to the researcher’s work background, stories of their lives involving drugs and gun violence were not going to cause shock. It may have been an advantage being a female researcher particularly when talking about their background, childhood and reflecting on their life. Confiding in a female may have been easier particularly in relation to topics outside of the masculine image they were used to portraying.

Various sociological studies such as *Dark Strangers* (Patterson, 1963) and *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994) performed by white researchers portrayed black people in a negative light causing much unrest in academic circles and hindering progress in this research area (Sanders, 2005, p.24). In a similar fashion to the men interviewed, the researcher grew up in London, one of the world’s most multicultural cities (Chynoweth, 2013). Interacting with people from different ethnic backgrounds has therefore been second nature (Sanders, 2005, p.24-25). Four of the participants were black and neither they nor the researcher considered our differing ethnicity a barrier. Their upbringing in deprived inner city boroughs contrasted with the researcher’s life on a more rural outer London borough but did not prove an obstacle as the researcher had through work a good knowledge of inner London areas.

The main concern was what impact the researcher’s job as a Metropolitan Police senior intelligence analyst would have while interviewing the men. Would they identify and perceive the researcher as just a police officer? Would they trust me? Right from the start it was stressed a civilian intelligence analyst is not a police officer and that the researcher’s role was primarily for the University of Portsmouth. Most importantly it was stated the research interest was in them as a person. Over the course of the interviews the men were very open and honest. Just over halfway through the interviews the researcher left
employment with the Metropolitan Police Service and consider this had a positive effect on the meetings with participants thereafter. Interviews were easier to arrange, the men appeared more relaxed and the researcher felt more at ease with the situation. When the men were asked about the researchers profile the responses were positive as illustrated below:

Marcus commented:

“I think it’s cool that you want to hear about my life and the challenges I have faced. Wish there were more people like you, respect Sue” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012)

James said:

“I can see how passionate you are about your research, I can see you are genuine. It makes no difference to me that you have worked for the police, that’s no threat, I’d happily talk to you anyway” (James, personal communication, Cinema Café, July 16, 2014)

The biggest challenge undoubtedly with interviews came with the two participants recruited through the Trusts who on several occasions failed to turn up for meetings. On trying to make contact they failed to respond to phone calls or texts and would often go missing for weeks at a time. Cohen’s (1976, p.82) suggestion that “interviewing is like a fishing expedition requiring great patience” was certainly sound advice. It took a while to appreciate their lifestyles and the impact being released from prison has on a person. The ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of studying for a doctorate were certainly experienced during the interview period as an excerpt from the researcher’s diary confirms:

25th November 2012
Carlton failed to turn up again last Thursday, tried ringing and texting him but no response yet. It’s the third time he has let me down now. Seemed so keen at our last meeting. Is he having doubts now? Spent the weekend wondering if this research is feasible. Proving unreliable like the previous participant. Is my job proving a barrier? Are these young men just unreliable? If he pulls out what are the chances of finding three more willing participants..... the lows of doctoral study!

Conducting these interviews was a truly humbling and, at times, a very emotive experience.

In just a few hours so much was learnt about their lives. Through all these interviews it was
noticeable how much it meant to these young men to tell their own story and be listened to (Atkinson, 1998, p.3). They embraced the opportunity as confirmed by Harry’s comments at the end of his interview:

“Thank you, Sue, for letting me participate in your research and do this interview. No one has ever shown that much interest in me or my life before” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011)

3.18 Transcribing the interviews

The process of transcribing interviews is commonly deemed as a time consuming, demanding and tiresome task (Kvale, 1996 p.169; Noaks and Wincup, 2004, p.129; Bryman, 2008, p.496; Denscombe, 2010, p.275). While a professional typist would have completed the job far quicker transcribing the interviews was viewed as a vital preliminary stage of the analysis. Transcribing within a couple of days of each interview proved particularly useful as it was fresh in the mind so aiding interpretation (Gillham, 2005, p.123).

Each interview was typed up verbatim as paraphrasing or using the language of the researcher could alter the original meaning (Shaw, 1966, p.22; Gillham, 2005, p.129). The men’s dialogue was often compelling, and their exact words needed to be captured (Gillham, 2005, p.129). Attention was made to include the correct punctuation to ensure the correct meaning of the interviewee’s narrative (Truss, 2003).

Early transcribing enabled reflection on the interview, how it had gone and what could be improved on in the next interview (Parker, 1999, p.240). It also brought the researcher closer to the data and its meaning (Atkinson, 1998, p.57; Denscombe, 2010, p.275) refreshing memory on the points made by the interviewee. It was during transcribing that notes were made on re-occurring themes and significant turning points or events (Atkinson, 1998, p.57). These topics were central to the data analysis that followed (Kvale, 1996, p.169; Noaks and Wincup, 2004, p.122). After transcribing each interview, the transcript
was checked against the interview again to ensure all detail was correct (King and Wincup, 2008, p.35).

The interviews were then edited ensuring retention of the original ‘voice’ and character of the interviewee as the researcher’s questions, areas of repetition and irrelevant small talk were removed (Atkinson, 1998, p.56; Gillham, 2005, p.127). Sections were shifted into chronological order using the life time-line as a guide (Atkinson, 1998, p.43; Gillham, 2005, p.127-128). Additionally, the data was sanitised to protect the interviewee who was given a pseudonym. Locations, prisons, gang names and other identifiable information were also given fictitious identities. At the end of this very time-consuming process what remained was a flowing narrative of the individual’s life story in his own words (Atkinson, 1998, p.3).

3.19 Data analysis

The analysis of data can be conducted manually or by computer using software packages such as NUD*IST and Nvivo (Denscombe, 2010, p.278). Careful consideration was given to both options and after experimenting with NUD*IST it was elected to analyse the data manually. While computer packages allow for precision and speed in locating coded data, the main concern was that too much distance between the data and the researcher would be created, jeopardising the interpretive process. While manual analysis is labour intensive it allowed a ‘closeness’ to the richness of the data enabling effective interpretation and synthesis of the facts. Manual analysis was also more conducive to working in tandem with life time-lines during the analysis phase.

A great deal of interview narrative is superfluous to the empirical enquiry. Reading through the life stories, themes and significant points were identified that would contribute and notes made in the transcript margins (Gillham, 2005, p.130; Denscombe, 2010, p.283). Working through the transcripts the life time-lines were updated, significant events and
turning points in the individual’s life identified and displayed on both documents. The interview transcripts (see Appendices H-L) and life time-lines (see figures 4.2-6.5) are included to aid the reader and provide transparency to the data analysis process (Denscombe, 2010, p.297). With the analysis complete various quotes in the storyteller’s words were selected from the interviews in support of the findings (Gillham, 2005, p.128; Denscombe, 2010, p.296).

3.20 – Research credibility
Judging the credibility of qualitative research is not straightforward and is conventionally based on validity, reliability, objectivity and generalizability (Denscombe, 2010, p.298). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.27-28) claim it is not possible to prove that qualitative data is accurate and appropriate. This research has attempted to address this with triangulation of the qualitative interview data with the initial quantitative data. While the initial research and life story interview will never be conducted the same way by two different researchers (Atkinson, 1998, p.59) the implementation of a documented and robust quantitative research procedure followed using a ‘check list’ to guide the interviews provided reliability and consistency across the research.

Interpretation and analysis of life stories is individualised and highly subjective (Atkinson, 1998, p.59; Gillham, 2005, p.129). In interpretation objectivity had to be ensured in identifying connections, meanings and patterns from the text and personal life experiences or even theoretical bias ignored (Denzin, 1989, p.27-28; Atkinson, 1998, p.64). The aspect of generalizability is an interesting point as this is usually judged by statistical probability on larger quantitative samples (Bryman, 2008, p.156; Denscombe, 2010, p.300). While the five men in this study are unique individuals in their own right it would be
intriguing to see what percentage of the findings from this research would be replicated across a similar size and profile cohort.

3.21 Summary

This chapter has outlined the research strategy and design as this study unfolded reflecting on the experiences of data collection, recruiting and interviewing the participants, the challenges encountered and transcribing and analysing vast quantities of fascinating data. In the following chapters an analysis and findings are presented, and a summary and discussion of key findings and issues raised for key partners to consider as they attempt to reduce of gun violence.
CHAPTER 4
The Early Years

4.1 Introduction

The next three chapters present the findings from quantitative life history research and in-depth life story interviews with five young men involved in firearms offending in London. The overall aim is to explore the risk factors and turning points on the life path of these individuals.

Empirical research has identified three stages of life course offending. These are pre-offending or early years ('onset'), offending years ('duration') and desistance ('end'). A chapter will be devoted to each of these life course stages, reflecting the format of the previous chapter.

This chapter focuses on the lives of these five men during their early life prior to their offending. Analysis is conducted of risk factors, significant events and turning points in their childhood and the findings related to the empirical literature reviewed by the researcher.

The findings are illuminated with statements and evidence drawn from the interviews. Time-lines for each of the participants' early years are also included at the end of the chapter to provide a visual aid of their life progression. The chapter is concluded with a summary of the research findings.

Firstly, before exploring the analysis findings, a little background information will be provided for each of the five participants.

4.2 Introducing the participants

Five young men, four of black ethnicity and one white, were subjects of research and were interviewed for this data. Interviews were conducted over a period of three and a half
years. Two of the men were interviewed while in prison, two at the offices of charity trusts and one at a cinema café in east London. A brief introduction will now be given for each of the men.

4.2.1 - Harry

Harry agreed to take part in this research study at a meeting on 6th January 2011 at HMP Alpha where he was nearing completion of a long prison sentence for a shooting incident in south London. He was interviewed on 25th January 2011 at HMP Alpha (see Appendix H).

Harry had previously contributed to the researcher’s master’s study and asked to introduce his life story. He said: -

“I don’t rep no postcode or bandana, but I’ve been in gang life all my life. I’m serving a long sentence because of my affiliation to gangs and for possession of a firearm with intent to endanger life. I’ve been through a lot, lost a lot of friends, lost a lot of things, lost most of my life in prison due to gangs. Now I’m thinking about turning my life round. I’ve met a good few people along the road that’s helped me, but I’ve also helped myself on this journey. This is about me, where I come from, where I’m going and what I wanna do” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Harry was born in south London and in the first four years of his life lived on four different inner London council estates. His father left when he was very young, and he grew up with his mother, step-father, two brothers and two sisters.

4.2.2 – Marcus

The meetings with Marcus took place at the offices of a Charity Trust where he was working as a volunteer following his release from prison. He had been the victim of a shooting and was also arrested for firearms offences. Following the initial introductory meeting on 4th November 2011, Marcus went missing for several months and he did not respond to phone calls or texts. He eventually got in touch with the researcher on 18th January 2012 and after
failing to turn up for one meeting was interviewed on 3rd February 2012 at the Charity Trust (see Appendix I).

Marcus was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and spent his early childhood years there before moving briefly to France and then to England at the age of four. He spoke the national language of French well and still understands French today. Marcus lived on a large old council estate in south London with his father, mother, two brothers and sister.

4.2.3 – Billy

Billy was interviewed in HMP Beta on 13th June 2013 (see Appendix J) as he was coming to the end of a long prison sentence for shooting a man outside a public house.

Billy, who is a white male, was born in north London and grew up on an inner London council estate. He lived with his parents and was the youngest of four children, two boys and two girls.

4.2.4 - Carlton

The initial introduction meeting with Carlton took place on 10th September 2012 at the offices of a professional football club Community Trust. He was working there following his release from prison a couple of months beforehand. Arrangements were made to interview Carlton who failed to turn up for three meetings and did not respond to phone calls or texts. It transpired Carlton was struggling to reintegrate into society following his release from prison and eventually he was interviewed on 4th and 11th March 2013 (see Appendix K) at the Football Community Trust office, six months after the first meeting.

Carlton was born and raised in north London where he lived in a council house with his parents, two brothers and two sisters. His parents had moved to England from the Caribbean for a better life and worked hard to provide for their family.
4.2.5 - James

James, who had been a reformed character for five years, was interviewed at a Cinema café in London on 16th July 2014 (see Appendix L). He had been the victim of a nightclub shooting and was involved in armed robberies of illegal drug dealers.

James was born in Jamaica and lived with his parents and elder sister in a rented house. He moved to England when he was eight years old to live with his father, step-mother and step-brother on an estate in north London.

Having introduced the five study participants, we will now move on to explore the research findings.

4.3 Early life analysis, risk factors and themes

Listening to the participants’ stories about their childhood years provided a fascinating insight into their early life, the challenges they faced, the risk factors and significant events that contributed to their delinquency and early offending. This was the section of their life where limited official data was available to the researcher but is vital to gain an understanding of their progression to criminality. We will now look at themes that grew out of the analysis beginning with their family background.

4.4 Family background

Life for Marcus and James commenced outside of England while Harry, Billy and Carlton were all born in London. All five men have been raised at council accommodation in inner London boroughs with high crime levels. This confirms the findings of Shaw and McKay (1969), Farrington (1998, p.448) and Browning and Loeber (1999, p.2) who identified living in a deprived inner city high crime neighbourhood is a strong risk factor for youth violence.
Marcus and Carlton were raised by both their natural parents as was Billy until his father’s death. James and Harry’s early life proved to be highly impacted by their step-parents respectively which will be explored further under parenting.

Having established the men’s childhood family background we will move on to examine the themes and risk factors that emerged from the analysis starting at the beginning of their life.

### 4.5 Happy beginnings

All five men describe their early childhood as happy and that they enjoyed family life.

Reflecting on his early years Harry commented that:

“*I was happy when I was really young. The only family around me was my mum, little sister, cousins and auntie. We did not have a lot, but I was happy inside*” *(Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).*

As a young child Carlton loved family life and commented that:

“*I loved my home, the family environment, that sense of belonging. We’d have the Saturday bag, a big packet of Opal Fruits, four packets of biscuits to last the week. We sat around, all the brothers and sisters and had biscuits, sweets or chocolate. It made me feel really warm, the family atmosphere*” *(Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).*

Billy had a happy childhood at home and loved school. He recalled that:

“*Up until the age of 10, I was being programmed to be a good person and didn’t know any different. Don’t get me wrong I could be a little shit around the estate, but it was kid’s stuff. I was certainly brought up to know right from wrong*” *(Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).*

Although all five describe a happy early childhood three of the men mentioned poverty or not having much which will now be reviewed.
4.6 The poverty line

Ghandi (n.d) argued that poverty is the deadliest form of violence while Webster et al. (2006, p.12) and Farrington and Welsh (2007, p.78) in their research identified growing up in family with low income as a precursor for youth violence.

Harry, Carlton and James refer to their family struggling financially during their childhood. Harry’s father left when he was very young, and his mother struggled financially to provide for her children until his step-father moved in.

Carlton’s parents moved to England from the Caribbean and worked hard to provide for their five young children. Reflecting on these times Carlton fondly remembered that: -

“My mum, god bless her, has been a domestic cleaner most of her life. She had two jobs. At 4am she’d go to work, come back, get us ready for school. When I came back from school she went and worked in the hospital. I remember seeing her at night time working in the dark. If not, she was over the bath washing clothes” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

Carlton also talked about his clothes and money as a child and recalled that: -

“Growing up I got hand downs from my brother. I hated it, thinking this is old as in worn, old fashion. I couldn’t get the wizz-kids and got cheaper stuff..... For me to get a 10p sweet mix-up was massive. I looked at other guys, I felt worse off, miserable...... I couldn’t understand why some guys had nicer stuff” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

Another indication that the family struggled financially was a lack of heating in the house in the morning and Carlton would rush to school to get warm.

James’s early life was in poor surroundings in Jamaica. He had no toys and spent his time playing with dirt and stones or his sister’s dolls and consequently became jealous of other boys and their possessions. His father’s gambling also resulted in a money shortage.

When his father moved to England the family poverty increased and his mother had to take on extra jobs to make ends meet. James recalled that: -
“We witnessed real poverty and suffering. We had no food, just fritters made with flour, fish, peppers, onions, fried like pancakes” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

James moved to England to live with his father when he was eight years old and his father’s gambling on horses caused the family financial problems. His step-mother refused to cook dinner for James. He recalled that:

“My step-brother never suffered, he’d get takeaway, Chinese, KFC. I learnt to cook at a young age to survive, corned beef and rice, tuna rice or pasta. Punished for something my dad had done” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the poverty suffered by Carlton and James affected them with feelings of resentment and frustration building up. These emotions could certainly be considered as a precursor to violent behaviour as suggested by Farrington and Welsh (2007, p.78).

Although happy and in some cases poor in their early years the lives of these five young men began to change and we now move on to look at some of the themes and risk factors which altered their childhood beginning with trauma.

4.7 Traumatic experiences

Trauma, particularly the loss of a parent, was highlighted by Graham and Bowling (1995, p.xi) and Farrington et al. (2006, p.5) as having a major impact on a young person’s life, and often leading to delinquency. Four of the participants suffered a daunting experience early in their life and for two of them this involved parental loss.

Billy’s father, a former army soldier, was his hero and role model. At the age of ten Billy’s world was shattered when his father told him he was dying. Billy recalled that:

“My hero, my dad, sat me down one day and was telling me he was dying. I was supposed to deal with this in some brave way like a soldier, but the thing is I couldn’t. I was ten years old and found it difficult to deal with. I ran out of the room. He died a week later” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).
For Harry, whose father left at a very young age, it was the arrival of his violent drug dealing step-father that was a traumatic experience for him at the age of four. Harry recalled:

“The first thing I remember is gates going up at the windows and doors… and my cousins were not allowed to visit anymore” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Marcus also suffered a traumatic event at the age of four when his family left Congo for a better life in England. He recalled that:

“I remember crying my eyes out. I didn’t want to leave my hamsters. I remember just crying, first time on an aeroplane. I didn’t know where we was going” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

James spent most of his time at home with his elder sister when he suffered the trauma of being sexually abused by her at the age of five. It was something that lived with him into adulthood and which he kept secret for years. James reflected:

“Once I came in to find the boy from next door with his trousers down and they were having sex. My dad told me not to let people in the house, so I got the broom, hit him and he left. I felt I was being punished for not letting the boy come to the house that’s why she tried that with me. For years I blocked this out of my mind” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

These traumatic moments changed the direction of the men’s’ lives. These were then followed by further events and turning points on their route to delinquency. Being juveniles many of these occurrences were linked to their parents and will now be examined and themes identified commencing with violence within the home.

4.8 Family violence

McCord (1979, p.1481) and Sampson and Laub (1993, p.65-66) identified family violence as a risk factor leading to criminal behaviour and violent behaviour in adulthood. All five men witnessed or were victims of some form of violence during their childhood which would support this theory.
4.8.1 – Inter-parental violence.

Three of the participants, Harry, Marcus and James, witnessed their parents arguing and their father or step-father beating their mother.

Harry remembers his step-father violently abusing his mother and recalled that:

“*I used to be outside listening. Inside I’m getting mad cos I can’t do anything about it cos I’ve seen what he does to people. I had to listen to my mum crying. Then she used to take it out on me cos she’s trapped in a situation she don’t wanna be in. It’s like going round in circles. This was before I went to school*” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Violence gradually crept into Marcus’s life. His parents would often argue, and his father assaulted his mother. Marcus vividly recalled:

“He used to put his hands on her most of the time. He would slap her, and she would always be crying. One time she looked at my face while she was on the floor, she was crying. I looked at him thinking that’s my mum” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

For James his father’s gambling away hard earnt money caused violent arguments between his parents. James recalled that:

“*Witnessing that first physical fight between them was the first disconnect of whose side do you take. At the end of the day it’s my mum cos she’s a woman. I’m gonna risk my life and run out in the dark to go and see where she’s gone*” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

For all three men this initiated a feeling of anger which led them to begin to resent their father figure.

Some of the participants became the victims of violence which we will now examine.

4.8.2 – Parent to child violence

Four of the men suffered beatings from their parents when they were naughty, sometimes quite violently with belts, hoover pipes and wooden spoons.
The most violent childhood was suffered by Harry who was regularly beaten by his step-father who had a long criminal record which included violence and drug dealing. He would physically punish Harry if he did not listen or obey him. Harry recalled:

“He’d hit me, tell me he was doing it for my own good, toughening me up, making me stronger. I don’t know what it’s like in the outside world and I’d appreciate it later in life. I’ve got tears in my eyes, wondering why he is doing this and what he’s telling me ain’t helping me but it’s hurting me. It hurt me at the time..... My pain threshold is more than other people” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Marcus also remembers being harshly disciplined as a child and commented that:

“If we were naughty we got beated with the hoover pipe or a wooden spoon. Put your hand out and leave it there while he hit our knuckles. We got beat, we got it all when we were little. Yeah in a way I’m angry with him for the way we grew up, the abuse and beatings but it’s kinda made me who I am today” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

James also recalls his mother physically punishing him whilst Carlton’s father would thrash his hands with a belt if he was naughty.

In two of the household’s violent behaviour was the norm and considered acceptable which we will now explore.

### 4.8.3 – Encouraging violence

Both Harry and Billy were actively encouraged to partake in violent behaviour by their ‘father figures’.

Harry’s step-father forced him to learn to box and encouraged him to participate in violence. Harry remembered that:

“I didn’t want to go I wanted to play football. I did boxing for years, from when I was proper young, aged seven. I was winning fights but didn’t enjoy it cos I didn’t want to be there” (Harry, personal communication HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

When Harry was ten his step-father got him and his step-brother to beat up men who owed him money. Harry recalled:
“It kinda felt good beating them up….. we’re starting to get more into this pattern of behaviour” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

With the violence and the gates at the windows and doors of his house it would appear Harry was being trained for a life of crime and imprisonment from an early age.

Although he did not suffer violence Billy was encouraged to participate in violence by his criminal elder brother and praised for doing so.

Harry described this pattern of violence as “just going round in circles” and for him and the other participants it partly contributed to feelings of anger which we will now move on to look at.

4.9 Angry young boys

The appearance of anger, aggression, bad behaviour and fighting in childhood was suggested as a precursor to delinquency by Loeber (1982, p.1433) and Wasserman et al. (2003, p.2-3). All five of the men suffered great anger in childhood for different reasons.

For both Harry and Marcus their pent-up feelings of anger were released in aggressive and violent behaviour at primary school.

Harry’s anger arose due to the violence his step-father inflicted on him and his family. Harry remembered his early school life and recalled that: -

“I had lots of fights cos I’ve got pain inside from home. I was always getting suspended for violent acts. I would explode over the silliest of things but wanted to lash out, pressure at home innit” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Marcus’s anger also emerged at school when class mates teased him, and he was always in trouble. He commented that: -

“I used to get teased at primary school because my English weren’t all that. I had to learn English. I also got teased about the way we looked, our trainers and clothes, they didn’t fit in. You could tell we was from somewhere else. That’s where most of my anger came from. I couldn’t take it when someone teased me or about my mum or family, it wasn’t funny to me when I was
young. I used to snap at them. I’m not having no one cuss me and all that” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

James’ and Carlton’s anger was directed at their home life and parents with a lack of possessions, due to poverty, and by the age of seven they became jealous of what other children had.

Carlton’s selfishness and anger continued to build over the next few years and he remembered that: -

“When I got to eleven I said mum, dad, you’re not fixing my feelings I need to fix them myself, acquire assets to make me feel better and that’s what I did. This was the short-term fix to my discontentment in life” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

In Carlton’s case his parents did not understand his anger and selfishness around the material possessions he desired as they had not grown up around British culture.

James’s anger continued when he moved to England to live with his father and his stepmother. Again, his father’s gambling caused trouble at home fuelling his anger.

Billy’s anger surfaced after his father’s death as his idol and role model had left him. He recalled: -

“The anger I felt at the time was intense. My dad had left me, and I adored him, he was my role model….. It wasn’t long after my dad’s funeral that I smoked my first cigarette at the bottom of the estate with friend’s I’d grown up with, about six of us. I was rebelling, sort of sticking my fingers up to my dad for leaving me” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Although their bottled-up anger was released in different environments it proved to be a significant factor in their progression to delinquency.

A common theme that emanates from their interviews in relation to their anger and frustration is a lack of support from schools and local authorities.

When Harry and Marcus became involved in fighting as their anger erupted the teachers never asked why or tried to understand the reason they were behaving in that way.
Harry believed that had action been taken when he was eight his offending could have been prevented. He commented: -

“If I had someone to talk to instead of getting told off and being scared. Someone to tell what’s happening with me, to ask how I’m feeling, what I’m going through, why I did what I done. No one didn’t wanna hear, it was “you’re suspended” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Marcus and James both suffered with language and cultural barriers when they moved to England and there was a lack of support to assist them in their transition. At school Marcus enjoyed more practical learning but due to language barriers struggled to express this to teachers. He recalled that: -

“I tried to explain to teachers when I was little..... I was more a practical learner..... Back then teachers didn’t know that, they didn’t understand. If one kid’s being disruptive then send him out. What they didn’t understand is we all have different ways of learning” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

James talked about the difficulties in moving from Jamaica to England at the age of eight. He commented that: -

“I’m going to school pretending to be OK. Coming to this country, getting accustomed to the way of life, no one helped me with the language barrier, how to behave. I’ve come here, kids are not listening to the teacher, what am I gonna do? Follow them, I’m not gonna be good, I’m gonna act out my madness” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

When Billy’s father died there was no support for him as a ten-year-old to help him through such a traumatic time in his young life and the anger that he felt. Billy reflected on that time and stated: -

“I often look back now to that child and know that if someone had just asked me how I felt things would have been so different. There wasn’t the support around then that there is today for traumas like that for a ten-year-old. There was no talking it through at the time, so I had to deal with it myself” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Having looked at support given by schools and social services we will now move closer to home and examine the support provided to the participants by their parents.
4.10 – Parental support and role models

Browning and Loeber (1999, p.2), Gottfredson and Hirschi (2000, p.90), and Wasserman et al. (2003, p.5) identified poor child rearing skills, neglect and low parental involvement as risk factors leading to delinquency. This is evident within this study on several fronts. All had working parents who tried to provide for their offspring. Marcus and James were often left at home alone to cook and fend for themselves. Marcus recalled that:

“T’ve kind of been the man, I’ve had to do something from young. I remember cooking for me and my little brother when we were alone at home. I was about seven, learnt how to cook pasta and egg, that was one meal we had a lot” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Harry talked about neglect and recalled:

“We always had material things like food and clothes but when you’re growing up those things aren’t important. It’s all about parental time, love and care but that wasn’t there” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Following his first arrest Harry was put into care which led to a feeling of rejection, loneliness and resulted in further delinquency confirming the findings of (Sampson and Laub, 1993, p.243) and Taylor (2006, p.40).

The neglect shown to James by his step-mother left him feeling alone and unwanted, ultimately setting him on the trail to delinquency. James stated:

“The neglect and discomfort made me open my heart to the streets. I grew mentally stronger, felt anger, cold inside and incomplete. My heart had cracked. I was no longer the loving smiling child from Jamaica. I was ready to be guided by the local youths” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Reach (2007, p.6) identified the importance of positive role models in boys’ lives. For all five men the lack of a connection with a positive role model certainly impacted their early life.

Harry and Billy grew up influenced by their criminal step-father and brother respectively.
Billy remembers the impact his brother began to have on him and stated:

“He was now the ‘father’ figure in my life, my new role model. I was confused….. I was being programmed into someone I didn’t like at the time but as time went on felt it was normal to be….. I was starting to understand the language the older kids were talking, and people knew I was my brother’s younger brother. I was being loved by different people now, but it felt OK. Gradually I started to crave the attention of the older lads on the estate but to do that I had to follow suit and for me it was an education” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

James was left without a role model when his father left for England when he was just six. He recollected:

“I was deeply in need of a strong father figure. It was traumatising. I became like other kids that didn’t know their dad. You made up lies to say your dad’s in the army or a policeman, so you didn’t get picked on at school” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Although James joined his dad in England two years later he was never the positive role model he needed during his formative years.

For Marcus and Carlton, while their father’s may have been good role models, there was a lack of connection between father and son.

Having examined parental influence on these men we will now look at the influence of peers.

4.11 Peers and criminality

All five participants were influenced by delinquent peers at school or older boys on their estate.

Harry’s introduction to delinquency came at nine years old with older boys on the estate when he was suspended from school. Harry recalled that:

“I’d go out pretending I was going to school and start hanging on the estate across the road with older boys until school finished. I started doing little bits of crime, just being in the cars they were stealing, like TDA’s, joyriding. I’d have a little bit of drink, a spliff but no major crime, just kinda flirting with
Harry was regularly committing shoplifting and graffiti offences by the age of ten while the other four men began offending between the ages of eleven and thirteen. All had now taken the first steps on the path to criminality.

4.12 Summary of the early years

This chapter began by introducing the five research participants followed by presentation and discussion of risk factors, significant turning points and themes identified during analysis of their pre-offending years.

All five men describe a happy early childhood, with three highlighting family poverty. Traumatic events certainly impacted the childhood of four of the participants and changed the course of their young lives.

The most significant risk factors identified from the analysis were family violence, anger and lack of a positive role model which were witnessed by all five participants.

Three of the men observed inter-parental violence, four suffered physical violence from their parents and two were actively encouraged to participate in violence.

Running in tandem with violence at home were feelings of anger amongst the boys which manifested in aggressive or delinquent behaviour.

Two of the men grew up influenced by negative role models while for the other three there was a lack of a father-son connection.

Analysis also identified the participant’s perceived lack of support for their problems from the school and local authorities.

Having examined the childhood years of the participant’s we will move on to examine the offending period of these men’s lives in the next chapter.
Life Time-Lines

Finally, to conclude this chapter the time-lines for the five participants childhood are included to provide a visual overview of this part of their life. Below is the key for the time-lines.

KEY FOR LIFE TIME-LINES

- Negative turning point or event
- Positive turning point or event
- Term of imprisonment

Arrests    Change of home
Victim of crime    Violence
Drugs involvement

Figure 4.1 – Key for Life Time-Line charts
Figure 4.2 – Harry – The Early Years
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Figure 4.3 – Marcus – The early Years
Figure 4.4 – Billy – The Early Years

- Born in London
- Generally well behaved
- Played out on the estate
- Extremist criminal
- Older brothers got involved with older lads on estate
- Starred smoking & drinking
- Elder brother respected due to carved reputation
- New father figure
- Old role model
- Hero and role model
- Edward told him
- When he was a soldier
- Know right from wrong
- Good person
- Mum & dad to be doubted up by
- Father died
- First held
- Fell into anger
- Respect, loyalty, love, gave
- His role model had left
- His dad had moved a long way
- Brother
- He blamed another
- Billy – The Early Years
Figure 4.6 – James – The Early Years

James - The Early Years
CHAPTER 5
The Offending Years

5.1 Introduction
In the earlier chapter the childhood and pre-offending years of the five participants of this study was evaluated. We now move on to the offending years of these young men and present the research findings for themes identified in the analysis of this period of their life. The findings are related to the empirical readings reviewed in chapter 2 and are illuminated with statements taken from the interviews with the men.
We enter their real world to gain an understanding of their criminality and lifestyle. In their own words we hear about their offending, gang life, drug taking and dealing, possession and use of firearms plus life in prison.
Their interviews coupled with official data have enabled the completion of life time-lines to portray their progression in offending, terms of imprisonment and significant turning points in their life. These are included, after a summary of the findings, at the end of this chapter to provide a visual aid of their offending years.

5.2 The offending years analysis, influences and themes
Listening to the participants talk about their life in their offending years provided a significant insight into how their offending progressed and the challenges and events that played a part in directing their life pathway. Also, because they had a criminal record official data was available to add to the interviews to build a more detailed picture of their life.
Commencing with their first offending we will now examine the themes, influences and turning points that emerged from the analysis.
5.3 The first step

All five of the men started committing criminal offences between the age of ten and thirteen. This is much younger than the Home Office Youth Style Survey of 2000, which gives an average age of thirteen and a half. These crimes included such offences as shoplifting, spraying graffiti, breaking into cars and burglary.

Aged twelve Billy started shoplifting and breaking into cars which he never got caught for. He recalled that:

“Remember the old Parka coats? They had perfect sleeves for going to the sweet shop, going to the fridge and pushing lollies up the sleeve. That was our first dare, to come out with 2 or 3 ice lollies. That was the first thieving we ever done. After that it was a little bit of shoplifting and then out of cars” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

James remembers his first crime well. He stated:

Just after my twelfth birthday I committed my first crime. I collected the school meal register and stole meal tickets. I sold these for £1 making £20 a month. I felt a sense of satisfaction (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Many of the men’s early offences also went undetected. When asked about their early offending both Harry and Billy did not consider they were criminals. Reflecting on his early teenage years Billy was to state that:

“I can safely say we didn’t believe ourselves to be ‘criminals’. It was like it was normal to do what we were doing because everyone around us was at it or talking about it. The more crime we committed without being caught compounded our belief that we were good at what we did” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Eventually the participants did get apprehended and we will now look at their first arrest.

5.4 The first arrest

Harry and Marcus were first arrested at the age of thirteen and Billy, Carlton and James at sixteen years of age. National Statistics (2017, p.4) provides an average first arrest age of
15.2 years and although this study’s average is marginally lower at 14.8 years it should be remembered this relates to a sample of just five participants.

Marcus was first arrested at the age of thirteen for shoplifting. He was shopping with his friends who had more money than him and recalled that:

“\[I\] wanted to buy a Disney jumper with all the characters on the front. I had enough as the jumpers were about £35. I’m watching my friends getting trainers, jeans and jackets. I don’t know my head just took me. Instead of paying for the jumper I tried to steal it, so I could still have money. I got arrested walking out by the security guard” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Billy had led a charmed life stealing from cars and committing burglaries at building sites, factories and shops. His undetected crime activities eventually came to an end at the age of sixteen. He remembered that:

“We got caught for twenty of them. It scared us to death, we were sixteen..... My first arrest for burglary was a marked point in our lives and really brought it home. We saw the reality of the consequences of our actions for the first time” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Likewise, there was a feeling of shock for Carlton when he was arrested for a robbery on his sixteenth birthday. He recollected:

“I was scared, in shock, what’s going on. I told them everything, made a statement, didn’t know any different. ‘If you tell us what happened it’s gonna be easier for you’ I believed maybe this guy can help me” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

Being arrested for the first-time generated different reactions among participant families. Harry’s mother refused to attend the police station, Marcus’s father beat him, Billy’s brother praised him, and Carlton’s mother was upset and cried. James’s arrest at the age of sixteen for a stabbing caused family discontentment and embarrassment. He recalled:

When I was arrested my parents were fed up but there’s only so much talking you can do. Police were coming and making sure I was in, my curfew. It was an embarrassment for the neighbours” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).
With all five men now on the criminal career pathway we will move on to look how this impacted their family life.

5.5 Family relationships

As they entered their teenage years all five men encountered problems with family relationships.

Marcus and Carlton’s relationship with their father broke down when their offending started. There was no real father-son relationship from that point in their life.

For Marcus his poor relationship with his father continues today and he commented that:

“It’s still like that today. We’re big people now. I don’t say nothing, he don’t say nothing. Who cares kind of thing” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Carlton regularly used to bring goods purchased with the proceeds of crime home and when questioned by his parents his excuse wasn’t plausible. Carlton reflected:

“Had my parents said don’t want that stuff in the house maybe I wouldn’t have continued down that path. I learnt the skill of not communicating. Once the dust had settled knew I was gonna be alright. As far as I was concerned I was a big man. You can’t tell me nothing. I didn’t care what anyone thought. My needs and wants were getting met” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

Carlton’s failed father-son relationship continued for many years as his father never visited him once while he was in prison. He stated:

“Mum said he don’t wanna see me in situations where he’s not able to do anything about it. I don’t know if he felt ashamed or should have done more to prevent it” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

Similarly, Harry’s relationship with his mother broke down after his first arrest while James’s step-mother’s neglect and lack of support made his life difficult for many years. Following his fathers’ death Billy never received the parental support to which he had been accustomed.
For three of the men family relationships at home became untenable resulting in them leaving home. This proved a significant factor in the increase of their offending as they struggled to survive.

Harry was put into ‘care’ at fourteen and described feelings of rejection, loneliness and that nobody cared which are identified by Sampson and Laub (1993, p.243-257). Harry recalled:-

“I phoned my mum to come and get me. She wouldn’t. I started to feel resentment towards her but also him (step-dad) as I knew it was him saying I’m bringing police to the house and that’s not good for him. I said never gonna talk to them again. I don’t wanna be part of their life no more….. I had a feeling of loneliness, was anxious and had to learn to be strong. I started to take harder drugs. I was getting more depressed cos I ain’t got nowhere to live. I’d go to my Aunts, she said ‘Your mum said we’re not allowed to let you stay’. I was really on my own” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Marcus left home at the age of sixteen. He recalls that day as he had been arrested for stealing a car and his father was furious. Marcus remembered that: -

“The way he beat me that day it weren’t a normal smack, it was proper clenched fists, like boxing. I retaliated, put my hands on my dad, grabbed him, don’t put your hands on me like that again. My mum come out crying ‘You two stop’ I said, ‘Mum I don’t want to be here no more, I’m going’ My mum was begging me to stay. He weren’t that bothered” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

James also left home at sixteen and recalls that: -

“Home was like a battlefield with continuous disputes. I stayed out late, became a full-time employee of the streets. I’d been running away from home from about fourteen, I’d stay at friends….. At sixteen I was homeless and slept at a train station for a night or two. I was fully into gang life, it was ride or die…..I found a friend to stay with at a hostel. Then moved into a flat we afforded from crime proceeds” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Continuing the family theme, we will examine the subject of fatherhood in relation to the five participants.
5.6 Fatherhood

All five men are fathers with three witnessing fatherhood for the first time while teenagers and two in their early twenties.

James became a father for the first time after his last recorded offence. The other four men continued to offend after the birth of their first child which challenges Sampson and Laub’s (1993, p.204-243) findings from their analysis of Gluecks’ data collected in 1940s which suggests individuals cease offending following parenthood.

Harry and Carlton became fathers at the age of fifteen and eighteen respectively. Both were in prison at the time.

Harry recollected that:

“It meant nothing to me. At the time I wasn’t speaking to the girl. I met her in a children’s home. She came to see me, but I never had no feelings for nobody, my family, no one, no feelings of joy or happiness. I wasn’t interested” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

On becoming a father Carlton recalled:

“When my son was born I never viewed having a child as anything. The responsibility, nurturing, passing of life skills, emotional stability and natural security never entered my mind. I wasn’t jubilant, I was in prison. The girl wasn’t my flavour or someone I wanted to be with for the rest of my life. I felt trapped” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Having examined the family influences on these men we will now consider the influence of peers and education on their life.

5.7 School life and achievements

Graham and Bowling (1995, p.49) and Farrington and Welsh (2007, p.40) highlighted truancy, expulsion from school and low school attainment as a significant influence on delinquency, violent offending and gang life.
Of the five men in this study only Harry and James were either expelled or truanted which challenges these findings, although it should be noted this study only has five participants.

James talked of his truanting and recalled that:

“I was bunking off school, hanging round with the older boys off the estate. I'd sign in, bunk off and sneak back at the end of the day. I never got expelled, I was too smart for that” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Marcus and Carlton both enjoyed school, did not truant and passed five and seven GCSE’s respectively. These results would question the findings of Barn’s (2001, p.35) research which suggests black boys under achieve at school thus contributing to delinquency.

James, although he did truant at times, stayed at school until he was sixteen and explained that:

“I couldn’t wait to leave school and be a real gangster. I had a taste for what the streets had to offer and wanted my share. I acquired more skill on the streets to make a success of life than I'd acquired in the classroom. I got a few GCSE’s, not good grades, I didn’t revise. I felt I was being robbed by the education system when I could be on the streets earning” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Disillusioned with school and lacking a stable family young people often turn to gangs and we will now consider their alternative family.

5.8 Gang membership and masculinity

Gangs now played a significant part in four of these men’s lives. Only Marcus stated that he was not a gang member. Marcus was however influenced by his peers at secondary school who were involved in criminality and not long after was arrested for his first crime.

Harry, Billy, Carlton and James all joined gangs between the age of eleven and thirteen. They described the gang variously as their family, providing love, loyalty, respect, support, mentoring and a sense of belonging which Thornberry et al. (2003, p.65) have highlighted in their own research.
Harry joined a gang at the age of eleven when the older members took a shine to him. This proved to be both a negative and positive turning point in his life. Gang life resulted adversely in Harry’s criminal activity increasing. Yet from a positive perspective Harry recalls that:

“Being in a gang meant everything to me cos that’s all I had innit….. They let me stay at their house so seemed like my family. I’d have done anything for them, they’d have done anything for me. Gang life provided mentoring, money, emotional support, somewhere to live, rules to live by, companionship, safety in numbers” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Billy watched and learnt from the older boys and passed this knowledge on to his friends.

At the age of twelve he formed his own gang and commented:

“This was the start of my gang and it offered me things I didn’t have at home; love, loyalty, respect. At times you felt invisible, you could get away with anything. Gang culture was beginning to play a big part in my life at twelve years of age” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

James was part of a gang who went to school and committed crime together. He commented:

“They were like a family, gave me a feeling of belonging” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Within the gang environment role models for Harry, Billy, Carlton and James emerged in the form of the gang elders, albeit negative role models, as is described by Fuller (2001, p.22).

Carlton became involved with an older gang and progressed to more serious crime. He remembered that:

“They were older than me….. saw me as the young leader. The elders were my role models. I was a dog on heat waiting to be told what to do, when and how. I’d something to prove, wanted to impress, do the best I could, be accepted and liked. I wanted them to sing my praises, say my man’s active. I wanted what they had but wanted more” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

James talks about his elder role model and recalled that:
“He was like an elder brother, I looked up to him. He schooled me on work and on staying safe on the roads. I reached out, he reached back. Drug dealing was too much hard work and now I was robbing drug dealers. We drank champagne at night clubs. I was paid for making sure there was no disturbances at the clubs” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Gang life witnessed the four participating in both gang fights and other acts of criminality. They variously describe this as providing respect, bravado, a release of pressure, a ‘rush’ or feel good factor and a chance to impress. This confirms the masculinity and ‘street code’ theories identified by Katz (1988, p.53) and Anderson (1999, p.9) in their research.

To gain respect Harry would be the first to offer to fight in gang fights and stated that:

“I’m angry inside and when we had fights with gangs I’d be the first to offer to fight...... I didn’t care who it was, it could be the biggest guy I’d fight him. It was a release kind of feeling. It was all about bravado, being on top in a peer pressure environment that mattered most. You couldn’t let anything phase you” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Harry talked about the importance of gaining respect and impressing other gang members and gangs. He recalled that:

You had to have £300 jeans, £500 jacket, lots of jewellery, pockets of money and be smoking crack in large amounts. It was either that or nothing. If it wasn’t that you were nothing. At raves it was about which crew were the most rowdiest, baddest. We began to want more and more” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

James regularly committed robberies at the age of fifteen and described the feeling it gave him:

“I was a street robber targeting the wealthy. I got a rush from robbing and assaulting people” (James, personal communication, Cinema cafe, July 16, 2014).

Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) highlight territorial gang fights as being paramount and this is confirmed in this research.

James gained a reputation for fighting, particularly when at school and explained:

“We regularly had fights with other schools. Fights proved ‘realness’ and ‘gangsta’. Gangsta = GANG, gang members, and STA, the reputation you build on the streets. I earned respect that I still possess today. At school
fights you’d have to fight, there was no running off, even if you got beat up. That’s how my respect came. Most…. from my school days. I had so many fights I was known as ‘the guy’” (James, personal communication, Cinema cafe, July 16, 2014).

Billy talked about having fights with other gangs at pubs and recalled that: -

“We was telling other gangs we were there marking new territory, ‘pissing up trees’ we called it, challenging them on their manor. We had morals, you didn’t hurt your own, didn’t steal off your own…..they were unwritten rules that we based our morals and beliefs on” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Billy also recalled his eighteenth birthday celebrations with his gang that brought back painful memories to him from another gang encounter. He commented: -

“We bounced around the pub, pissing up trees (marking our territory), not knowing a gang from another area had come to celebrate my birthday, just in a different way….. We were outnumbered six to one and got such a battering that we carry scars to this day from that night. The psychological damage was massive, our reputation in tatters” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Research by Thornberry et al. (2003, p.122-125) and Decker et al. (2008, p.153) concluded that offending increases with gang membership and it is to offending that we now turn.

5.9 Progression of offending

All five men started their offending with property offences including shoplifting, graffiti (criminal damage), theft from cars and burglary. This in fact confirmed the findings of Farrington et al. (2006, p.11).

Carlton explained about his early offending and commented that: -

“We burgled houses at weekends cos everyone would go out. I wasn’t a good burglar. I was trying to earn bucks off my mate. You had to be devious, knock on the door, speak if they were in. We’d go to richer areas, take the train and comeback with suitcases full of money, cheque books, jewellery, hi-fi’s. We’d get through any window. I took stuff down the pawn shop to a fence. We became entrenched in the lifestyle. They allowed us credit cos they knew we’d be back with bits” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).
With the exception of Billy, they all then progressed on to violent crimes such as assault, robbery, possession of knives and drugs offences in their mid-teens. This also replicated the findings of Farrington et al. (2006, p.33) and Prior (2008, p.114). Billy’s primary crime inadvertently at that age proved to be burglary.

All five men had been arrested for knife offences between the age of fourteen and twenty. Billy carried a knife for protection while Carlton stated a knife was part of his gang uniform, supporting the findings of CCJS (2009, p.34). Billy and Carlton also admitted to using knives in gang feuds. Carlton recalls how he once used a knife and commented: -

“I’ve seen this boy ‘Give me your stuff or I’ll stab you’ I took his stuff, he kicked out and talked back, bravado came in ‘You can’t talk to me like that, show me respect’ I stabbed him in his leg innit” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

The initial robberies for Harry, Marcus, Carlton and James were street robberies. James admitted he got a ‘rush’ from robbing and assaulting people. Katz (1988, p.53) refers to this as a ‘sneaky thrill’. James remembered his progression to committing robberies at the age of fourteen and recollected that: -

“We had a ‘cotch’9, an empty garage under a tower block. We’d plan robberies, sleep with girls and snatch their phones. We got braver and moved on to street robberies, snatching handbags off women from the city” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

For Marcus a significant turning point in his life at the age of fourteen led to his decision to become a street robber. He became the victim of a robbery by a local gang at school. He remembered that: -

“That’s the day when I thought I’m not getting robbed again, I’m gonna be the robber, the one that’s taking people’s stuff. I used to wear a gold chain with a cross on it, it was my mum’s….. I had tears coming down my eyes, trying to tell them please it’s my mums, don’t take it and they shoved my head, like shut up. That was the tip of the iceberg. That turned me into an animal….. Yeah that’s the one that kicked me off” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

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9 Jamaican slang for somewhere to relax
Harry and Carlton progressed to committing more serious robberies in their late teens. They robbed banks, building societies and jewellers shops.

Harry and his gang moved on from snatching money from people at cashpoints to robbing banks when the security door was opened. Harry reflected on that time and recalled:

“Then we thought this was too much hard work, so we looked for Building Societies with no screen, jumped over and ransacked the drawers” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Carlton in the need for more money moved on to robbing jewellers shops and explained:

“I graduated, and I don’t use that word in a glorified way, done a couple of jewellers. It was easy, went in and all this jewellery came out. I put on all this tom (jewellery) felt like the man of town, I owned it, I felt real power. It made me saw street robberies was senseless, what am I doing them for? My burglary and street robbery was short lived. That’s how my crime evolved. It was like an initiation” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Carlton and James went on to become involved in robbing drug dealers.

Carlton saw this as the best robbery option as drug dealers do not inform the police when robbed so the chance of arrest is minimal. He explained:

“I stopped robbing the queen’s people so to speak. If you rob the queen, you go to prison but if you robbed drug dealers my thinking was you don’t. I hit the pavement robbing dealers but with that came the risk of getting shot. We made substantial amounts..... crack, heroin, cash, Rolex watches, diamonds, firearms, it was unreal. They’d say I’m not a criminal, a thieving little git, I’m a business man” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Billy’s criminal progression followed a different pathway with burglary being his main criminal activity in his teens. The violent offences in his twenties were as a result of his drink and drug addiction. Billy recalled that:

“I had respect. The thing is it was from the wrong people. People that were only out for themselves. My drinking started to increase, so did the violence. The progression through the knife stage had happened, bigger and bigger knives. We always knew guns would be a bigger part of our lives at some point” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).
Following a massive family feud Billy committed a robbery at an off licence and recalled that:

“Because of something he said and cos of my belief I went on after that to commit an armed robbery on an off licence to prove myself, well that’s how it seemed….. I ended up getting a two-year sentence” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Harry, Marcus, Carlton and James all stated they committed crime to survive. For Billy it was however to support his drug and drink addiction.

Marcus talked about his life when he was seventeen and had left home. He recalled that:

“I’ve kinda learnt to survive on the roads by dealing cannabis and doing a few robberies. Trying to survive on my own, I needed new trainers, I needed to eat. On cannabis I made about £60 profit every couple of days. Started to buy stuff, feeling like I was independent for myself, doing my own thing” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Marcus also went on to talk about his drug dealing times when stating that:

“I’ve had to sell drugs, it’s not something I was happy with. At the time I had no choice. I didn’t know a way out of the situation I was in. What my friends presented to me at the time, crack selling, it was the best plan I’ve ever heard when I was that age, no money and everything. I never used crack. I don’t think I ever would” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

All five men lived for the moment spending the proceeds of their crime on material goods, drugs, champagne, girls and family members. This served to increase their status as highlighted by Sanders (2005, p.48-52).

Harry reflected on when he was robbing banks, building societies and post offices and stated:

We bought crack and was smoking loads. That part of my life was fast, money came and went as quick as it came in. Cocaine, champagne, designer clothes were the order of the day. You had to have £300 jeans, £500 jacket, lots of jewellery, pockets of money and be smoking crack in large amounts. It was either that or nothing. If it wasn’t that you were nothing. At raves it was about which crew were the most rowdiest, baddest. We began to want more and more” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).
Money made on crack dealing Marcus spent on cannabis, clothes, trainers, food and cars.

He commented that:

“Everyone knew my name in my area. He’s got a new car, new trainers, new jacket? That’s how I was, I was seen like that. The little rich kid in the area, always got money. The status I had made me feel good but what they didn’t know is my family background or my family situation. They’ve just seen the outside picture. He’s looking nice, fresh clothes every day, but no one knew how or why I did it” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

At seventeen Carlton passed his driving test and brought a car from the proceeds of robberies at jewellers. He fondly remembered:

“Bought a mini, customised wooden dashboard for £1,500 and was the man about town. They called me Earn a Ton because I earnt so much money” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

James likened himself to Robin Hood10 who stole from the rich and gave to the poor.

He recalled:

“I bought jewellery, clothes, £100 jeans, £200 jackets, £150 trainers. Money went on family, pretend family cos when you’ve got money there’s a lot of them, girls, bikes, cars and giving people money. If someone phoned for £1,000 and I’d just robbed a dealer of £6,000 what’s £1,000? It was about helping people, being like Robin Hood. I had a house in St Lucia, but it’s gone now…… My solicitor was a diamond, got me off everything, it was like a drug. It looked like I couldn’t get caught doing anything. So why would I respect money?” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

For Carlton it was all about feeling good about himself and people liking him. With the proceeds of robbing jewellers shops he gave his children financial support and explained:

“I never realised I wasn’t giving them emotional support. When I gave them money they’d feel good about me and I’d feel good about myself. Not much thought was put into it because what mattered primarily was me feeling good about myself” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

10 A heroic outlaw in English folklore
Research by Farrington (1998, p.424) and Prior (2008, p.114-117) has revealed the versatility of violent offenders in switching between violent and nonviolent crimes. The offending of Harry, Marcus, Carlton and James in this research demonstrates and serves to confirm versatility in offending.

Entwined within the progression of offending are drugs. We will now examine the impact of drug use on the lives of these men.

5.10 The influence of drugs

All five men were involved in the use and supply of illegal drugs throughout their offending career. For all of them the introduction to drugs was through smoking cannabis in their early teens.

Marcus first smoked cannabis at school for the first time when he was fifteen. He recalled that:

“I remember trying weed for the first time and thinking nnnn what is this, my eyes were rolling, my heart beating fast, I’m thinking I’ll never do that again” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

James tried smoking cannabis for the first and last time with older boys. James commented that:

“My step-brother and his friends were smoking weed. It wasn’t for me. It burnt my chest. I was coughing but it was good to try. I don’t drink or take drugs. I’ve always had the thinking anything could happen to me at any time and I need to be alert and sober. I don’t want substances to cloud my mind” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Harry and Carlton progressed to smoking crack while Billy used speed (amphetamine), ecstasy, cocaine and heroin.

All the men began drug dealing, with the exception of Harry, in their mid-teens. Harry started earlier, selling crack when he was just twelve years old. He recollected that:

“I started to sell £20 wraps of crack for the Yardies on our estate….. I’d float around near my step-dad’s shop as there were lots of customers there. I’d
get paid £80, it was a joke cos we was getting about £500 a night” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Marcus, Billy and Carlton commenced their dealing in cannabis and James with heroin.

Billy and his gang began dealing drugs with other gangs outside of the estate. He confirmed that:

“Drugs were a massive push in our progression. Not just the effects of taking them but selling them as well” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

By the time he was fifteen Carlton was selling cannabis for a man from a local café. He recalled:

“The money I earnt from drugs was minimal, £30, but it was that buzz of having a sense of belonging. I wanted people to like me as opposed to how much money I’m gonna make” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

James started college aged seventeen where he began drug dealing. He recalled:

“I lasted two months in college doing music. From dealing heroin I bought a car from the profit which we used to go robbing people” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Marcus, Billy and James progressed to deal crack or cocaine.

Following his release from prison Marcus’s drug dealing increased to a new level as he moved on to supplying crack. Marcus recalled that:

“I smoked a lot of cannabis. I thought I’m not making proper money, let me try something else, so that’s what I did. I earnt more from crack, but more trouble came with it. With crack I was at my prime. I’m not gonna glorify it cos looking back I don’t like what I was doing. I was better off, I was getting somewhere with selling crack. I’d have £300 in my pocket before 12 ‘o’ clock, by the afternoon £500. I dealt in my local area. Why get a job when you get more for dealing crack? That’s the mentality I had for years” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Billy was the only participant who had not been arrested for a drugs offence even though he was heavily involved in drugs use and their supply.

Research by Hales et al. (2006, p.65) confirmed a strong link between the illegal drugs market and firearms and we now explore the research findings around gun crime.
5.11 Gun crime and organised gangs

All the men, with the exception of Marcus, were introduced to firearms in their early adolescence.

With his elder brother involved in armed robbery Billy first held a shotgun at ten years old.

He remembered that day following one of his brother’s criminal exploits and stated: -

“There’s a photo somewhere of when I was ten, sitting on the living room floor at seven in the morning in just my pants. I’d just been woken up by drunk adults. There was a look of confusion on my face as I had a sawn-off shotgun in my lap and was surrounded by bank notes from one of my brother’s robberies. I remember that morning well because it was freezing, and they gave me a £10 note for my troubles!” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Harry, Billy and James all looked after guns for friends when they were twelve or thirteen years of age.

Billy recalled the occasion when his sister caught him with a gun and stated that: -

“I got a terrible hiding from my sister one day when she saw me and my friends out of her window with a handgun. It was my mate’s bigger brothers….. We were thirteen and promised not to go near guns again. We knew their power and the fascination was so strong” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Carlton and James both owned and fired a gun at the age of fifteen.

Carlton acquired his first gun while conducting a drugs deal. He remembered: -

“I bought it up to my room and loaded it. Everyone was geeing me up. Out of my window I shot it, dropped it on the grass. My friend ran it to his mums and put it under her bed” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 4, 2013).

James first fired a gun that he attained during a robbery and reflected: -

“We robbed it off a guy outside a club. We took turns firing it out of the car. We didn’t understand the seriousness of this, how easy it is to squeeze this thing off” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Billy and James both commented on the power and fascination of the gun which supports Hales and Silverstone’s (2005, p.58-59) masculinity theory.
James recalled the time he first held a gun at the age of twelve and stated that:

“We pointed the gun at each other, just kids playing. The gun was heavy. I felt I could do whatever I wanted” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

For Harry, Billy, Carlton and James the gang affiliation progressed through their late teens and into their twenties. Also, as their criminality became more serious firearms became a chosen weapon. Harry, Billy and James all refer to their gang owning and sharing a gun(s) as described by Thornberry et al. (2003, p.124).

Billy recalls how his gang came about owning a gun following a cocaine deal when their supplier fired a shot at another gang who attempted to intervene. Billy commented that:

“We was impressed. We finished our deal in high moods and asked when he could get us a gun; he was surprised we didn’t already have a tool. This gun was classed as a gang gun, not an individual’s and was put away with conditions to its use based on our morals and beliefs. It made me really think about what we was getting into. I never touched that gun, but others did on occasions, usually when doing a deal for protection. It eventually got sold to another gang due to paranoia, but we still had our contact if we needed another” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Billy grew out of gang life in his early twenties as he settled down to family life and his firearms possession after that was just for his own protection.

The gangs that Harry, Carlton and James belonged to progressed on to become far more sophisticated with involvement in commercial robberies, drug dealing, and drug robberies as outlined by Densley (2014, p.526) in his research.

Harry refers to the progression of his gang life style in his early twenties and commented that:

“I grew out of the gang lifestyle and started to think more business orientated even though the business I was now in was drugs” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

James talked about his advancement to an organised gang who controlled the local drugs market and many London nightclubs. James reflected that:
“They exposed me to machine guns. I was the youngest on the firm. That’s when I saw the different world of gang lifestyle. What we’d been doing, robbing, stabbing, shooting was child’s play compared with these guys. It was like the movies, we was part of the underworld. I’ve never seen anyone except white gangsters live the life we were living, even today. I became a ruthless member. We partied anywhere crossing post codes and enemy lines. It was like living a dream….. I’d contacts for guns and drugs, made a big name for myself, became untouchable. I was at a place in my life where I was top”’ (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Gun ownership for them had now became multi-purpose and reflected (1) symbolism; (2) as a threat when committing robberies (3) as a protection when drug dealing. This evidence supports Hales et al. (2006, p.103) ‘complex gun culture’ theory. Both James and Harry’s gang-controlled drugs markets. Harry referred to his drug dealing as a business while James stated it was “living a dream as part of the underworld”.

Harry mentioned jealousy generated among other drug dealers and the threats his gang received. As he explained: -

“You gotta protect yourself. At first it wasn’t even about the guns, but after attempts on our life we never had any choice. We decided to buy firearms to keep safe” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Harry and his gang in fact purchased a Mac-10 machine pistol which they later went on to use.

Ultimately Harry and Billy both committed shootings while Marcus, Carlton and James proved to be shooting victims.

Billy reflected on the night that would change his life for many years to come when he shot a man. He stated:-

“One night just before I was twenty-seven, everything came to a head. I used a gun on an innocent man. I was drunk and on cocaine and ended up shooting a man outside a pub after a silly argument. This day was the consequence of my whole life….. At the time of the shooting I felt very cold at that point and completely blocked what I’d done out of my mind. It took me four years to stop denying I had shot and very seriously injured someone
and that it was purposeful” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Marcus recalled the moment when he was shot and stated:

“Got in the club, had a nice time, some champagne. Got outside, someone bumped into me. All I said was “Bruv what are you doing? What’s your problem?” His friends turned round “What you saying Bruv?” I’m looking at the gun thinking woe what do you mean what am I saying. Please I’m not saying anything. He shot me” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Marcus was shot three times in the stomach and spent several weeks in hospital including time in intensive care.

Carlton’s involvement in the illegal drugs market culminated in him being shot and he recalled:

“It was linked to drugs. When I got shot I was slipping. I felt invincible, drove around strapped up, crack spliff in my mouth, you can’t tell me nothing cos I have everything” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

In James’s case he shot himself during a gun fight with a rival gang when his gang had gone to seek revenge over a previous incident. James remembered that:

“As I came out a rival gang boy was there. I knew I was dead but wasn’t willing to die. I charged into him, as I got across the road I cocked the gun and accidentally shot myself in the hand. I screamed, they thought they’d shot my leg. It burnt me, I grabbed the back of my leg. I started firing back. My friends came out firing and they ran off..... I could have been dead that day” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

The location of four of the shooting incidents that the participants were involved in proved to be social venues. Marcus and James were both shot at nightclubs. Harry and Billy committed shootings at a nightclub and public house respectively for which they were ultimately imprisoned. It is to the prison experience that we now turn.
5.12 Prison life

All five men have served terms of imprisonment. Harry, Marcus, Carlton and James all served their first sentence as teenagers.

On receiving his first prison sentence just before he was sixteen Harry commented that:

““I’ve been prepared for prison, kinda living with him (step-dad), with gates up” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Harry described his early prison experience as:

“It was like hell on earth, but you had to learn to thrive off it and go with its energy. If you imagine how a surfer feels when he is riding the biggest, scariest wave of his life. Everything is against him, it’s just him and his board against the world. He just rides out the wave until it finishes. That’s how prison was, you have to go with the energy or get crushed, because people will crush you” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Carlton remembered entering a prison cell for the first time aged seventeen. He recalled:

“It was cold going into the cell, an empty shell, no toiletries, no TV. I thought how guys live here? And remember hearing guys talking like it was happy days, I couldn’t work it out. What about me? I’m down in the dumps, devastated. I thought can’t wait till I get out, gonna smash jewellers again” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Apart from James all have served more than one prison sentence. Harry has spent almost half of his life in prison.

Harry, Billy, Carlton and James all talk of experiencing violence while in prison.

Harry made a name for himself by fighting in prison which earnt him respect from fellow prisoners. Harry remembered:

“In prison you had to make a name for yourself. As soon as you walked in you’ve got people being aggressive. Aggression all over again, but I didn’t mind cos it was like people had told me. The older boys told me if someone says anything you don’t wait, attack them then everyone will get the message. Anyone said anything to me I attacked them straight away and after a while I realised everyone in prison won’t trouble you no more. People started respecting you, offering you their weed to be your friend; give you shower gel to be with you” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).
Harry also recalled when he was assaulted in prison by prison gang members. He commented that:

“I got attacked cos I wanted to be me innit, I didn’t want to be part of the group, didn’t wanna be seen with these people. Got smashed over the head with an iron bar, my hand was mashed up and got cuts to the back of my head. Officers came on the wing, cards arrived, telling how much people was looking out for me and hope I’m alright. That was the first time I saw love from lots of people” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Additionally, Harry talked about his experience of being one of only two black prisoners. He recalled that:

“It was racist there. I didn’t care, started to have fights….. that was the first time I’d proper been attacked by officers. It was a shock cos I wasn’t ready for it. Most things I’d kinda prepared for. You walk down the stairs and as the door opens the screw officer pulls you in. They attack you straight away. That’s the first time I said to myself I don’t wanna be in prison. I went to the cell with tears in my eyes, but it was tears of anger. I was proper mad. They took my clothes off me. I was in this strip cell by myself, no one came, I was kicking the door and was proper emotional. It wasn’t the fact they beat me up it was everything, my whole life, where it had gone” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Carlton’s drug dealing in prison led to violence and he explained:

“I got stabbed. We was in the kitchen serving food, drug dealing over the hot plate. This new guy decided to do his transactions on my territory. We had a dispute, he got stabbed too” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Harry, Carlton and James all stated that prison was about survival.

Harry and James were involved in forming London based gangs while imprisoned. This confirms the findings of American criminologists Pyrooz et al. (2011, p.13-14).

Harry talked about having fights in prison and forming a gang when he was eighteen. He recollected that:

“I joined up with guys who I used to fight cos we’re all from London. Other people are the enemy innit. Everyone needs to be protected innit. We started to have things our way in prison” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).
Aged nineteen James served his first prison sentence and formed his own gang. He remembered that:

“I caused chaos, they sent me on every single wing..... I spent six weeks locked up for twenty-three hours a day..... I formed a gang of Londoners. I found I had a leader’s glow, the ability to captivate an audience, hold their attention, the gift of influence..... It was all about survival”. (James, personal, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Billy and Carlton were also involved in prison drug dealing.

Facing a long prison sentence Billy felt he needed something stronger than alcohol and cannabis. He started to smuggle drugs into prison and was soon back on his life cycle of getting drugs and dealing drugs. He was on heroin at the time and remembered that:

“It numbed my mind, stopped me thinking about what I’d done..... I could bounce around, I didn’t give a toss cos I was on this drug that stopped me caring” (HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

When Carlton’s first prison appeal failed he was angry and responded by dealing drugs in prison. He recalled:

“I had run ins with prison officers, they rushed my cell at 6am, the mufti squad, designated drugs team, and took my drugs” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Pyrooz et al. (2011, p.21) also highlighted the challenges faced by individuals when released back into society. We will now consider this.

5.13 Life after prison

Before going on to commit further crime all five men have made at least one attempt to desist from offending after their release from prison. Harry, Marcus, Billy and Carlton all tried working. However, it never lasted long, and all were enticed back into the ‘rich pickings’ of the illegal drugs market.

Harry recalled when he came out of prison at the age of twenty-two. He commented that:

“I decided I ain’t gonna do no robberies. I was chilling..... I was trying to stay away from people. I worked at my Uncles café, but it didn’t feel right. People
from my past were coming in, tempting me, they had fast cars, jewellery, clothes, excessive amounts of money. One thing led to another and I fell right back to what I’d already come out of. It was now about money, power and respect. I started to get involved in selling drugs” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Marcus pointed out there was no incentive to work in a low paid job and explained: -

“I’ve always tried to work but once I get into work and start to get their attitude and abuse automatically my mind frame switches. I think I make more money than you, I don’t need to hear your shit. That’s the mentality I’ve had for years. I don’t need this job. I could switch my phone on and make £500. Once I got involved in drug and knew what I was doing it messed up my head” (Marcus, personal interview, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Billy recalls when he was released from prison aged twenty-five and attempted to go straight. He stated that: -

“Got myself a good job as a computer fitter and tried to settle down but I was already programmed to mess up. Stress started to build up again very quickly after my release. My drinking increased and my relationship with my girlfriend was breaking down. Again, it was the same old shit but a different place and time in my life. Booze E’s, cocaine, cannabis, violence, the cycle was running, I’d already made my cycle, so it was off again” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Carlton talked about his attempted to desist at the age of thirty-seven. He recalled: -

“The most vulnerable time was living on my own, just divorced, work wasn’t working out, they were never gonna give me the money I deserved. I tried to set up my own company called ‘Breaking the Cycle’ but it weren’t going nowhere. I went to a wedding and met a guy I hadn’t seen for 12 years. He knew I was active in criminal activity. I said I don’t do that no more. Going home I thought I ain’t got nothing to lose. I need this pick me up, it was my choice” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

James saw committing crime as ‘work’ and claimed he wanted his share of what the streets had to offer.

These failed attempts to desist would appear to amply confirm Maruna (2001, p.26) and Farrall et al. (2014, p.39) theory that desistance is a process.
5.14 Summary of the offending years

This chapter has provided an instinctive overview of the criminal offending of five young men. It provided analysis of their offending and the significant events and turning points, which occurred throughout this period of their lives.

The main themes to emerge from the analysis of the offending period of these men’s lives were gangs, violence and drugs.

For four of the men gang membership paid a big part in their life and provided the role model they yearned for, albeit a negative one. The early violence experienced in their childhood progressed within the gang environment with gang fights, violent acts and robberies to prove masculinity and gain respect. All five men were arrested for knife offences in their teens as their offending escalated. Four admitted they committed crime to survive and spent the proceeds on material goods, drugs, girls and their family.

Drugs influenced the lives of these five men hugely with all involved in drug use in their early teens and then supply as their offending progressed. The rich pickings gained from drug dealing was also pivotal in the men returning to crime.

All five participants have served terms of imprisonment, four whilst still teenagers, and four witnessed violence in prison.

Other interesting findings from the analysis showed that four of the men continued to offend after the birth of their first child and that only two were expelled or truanted from school.

Having explored the offending years of these young men’s lives we will now move on in the next chapter to consider the desistance period of their lives.
This chapter is completed with the inclusion of time-lines for all five men for the offending period of their life to provide a visual overview of this period of their life. See below for the key for the time lines.

**KEY FOR LIFE TIME-LINES**

- ○ Negative turning point or event
- ○ Positive turning point or event
- ← Term of imprisonment

**Arrests**  **Change of home**
**Victim of crime**  **Violence**
**Drugs involvement**

Figure 4.1 – Key for Life Time-Line charts
Figure 5.1 – Harry – The Offending Years (1)
Figure 5.2 – Harry – The Offending Years (2)
Figure 5.3 – Marcus – The Offending Years (1)
Figure 5.4 – Marcus – The Offending Years (2)
Figure 5.6 – Billy – The Offending Years (2)
Figure 5.9 – Carlton – The Offending Years (3)
CHAPTER 6
Time to Desist

6.1 Introduction

In chapter 5 the criminal offending careers of the five research participants were examined.
We now move on to explore the desisting years of these young men. We present the
analysis and research findings for this period of their life with reference made to relevant
empirical readings.

All five men made failed attempts to desist from offending before going on to commit
further crimes. This suggests desistance is in fact better seen as a process rather than an
event. In this chapter we look at the actor’s journey to reaching desistance. We consider
the challenges they faced along the way and which often ended in failure. We review the
positive experiences that helped them achieve their goal, their thoughts for the future and
additionally advice for any other young men who might follow in their footsteps.
A summary is then provided of the main research findings.

The life time-lines for this section commence from the first attempt at desistance through
to the date of interview for this research. They have been compiled utilising both interviews
and official data. They portray the men’s progression to desistance and significant turning
points and events within this period. These are included at the end of the chapter to assist
the reader in following their desistance journey.

6.2 Desistance stage analysis, themes and experiences

Listening to the five men’s accounts of their attempts to desist from crime provided an
intriguing insight both into the reasons for ceasing to offend and the challenges faced and
factors that contributed to them achieving their goal. The interviews, supported by official
data, provided a detailed picture to be constructed for this period of their life. Commencing with the issue of desistance we will now consider the themes, influences and turning points that arise from the analysis.

6.3 Desistance patterns

Maruna (2001, p.26) and Farrall et al. (2014, p.39) suggest desistance is a process rather than an event. This study confirms these findings. All five subjects returned to offending after their first attempt to desist. Their desistance process stretching over many years in fact.

Four of the subjects, Harry, Marcus, Billy and James, made early attempts to desist while in their late teens or early twenties. Carlton’s first desistance attempt only arose at the age of twenty-eight.

West (1963, p.3) and Healy (2010, p.175) describe desistance as a gradual faltering process alternating between crime and honesty. These findings are confirmed by all five men with Marcus, Darren and Carlton making three or more attempts to cease their life of crime.

Maruna and Farrall (2004, p.174-175) suggest there is a secondary desistance. This is where the individual adopts a change in identity. This is confirmed by all five men in this study and will be considered in more detail later.

All five men continue to live their lives, so it cannot be confirmed if their most recent attempt to desist is their final one or that they will not perhaps be tempted back in to criminality. Examining their age at the first attempt to desist to their age at the time of interview demonstrates the length of the desistance process for these men. It ranges from seven years for Marcus to sixteen years for Billy. It should also be noted that long prison sentences have meant Harry and Billy have not reoffended in recent years.
Having reviewed the desistance patterns for the five men we now examine the reasons for their return to criminal ways.

### 6.4 Return to offending

The illegal drugs market proved to be the overriding factor for all the men returning to crime to either deal drugs or rob drug dealers. Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986, p.79), Maruna (1997, p.69-72) and Calverley (2013, p.187-188) identified a lack of money, unemployment and meetings with criminal associates as reasons to returning to offending. Harry, Carlton and Billy were tempted back to offending by criminal associates.

Harry recalled his first attempt to desist at the age of twenty-two when he was released from prison. He commented:

> “I decided I ain’t gonna do no robberies. I was chilling and started to get involved with my daughter and her mother. That was kinda the first time we started to build up a relationship. I was trying to stay away from people. I worked at my uncle’s café, but it didn’t feel right. People from my past were coming in, tempting me, they had fast cars, jewellery, clothes, excessive amounts of money. One thing led to another, I fell right back into what I’d already come out of. It was now about money, power and respect. I started to get involved in selling drugs” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Carlton’s attempt to desist came to an end with a chance meeting with an old criminal associate. He remembered:

> “I went to a wedding, met a guy I hadn’t seen for twelve years. He knew I was active in criminal activity. I said, ‘I don’t do that no more’. Going home I ain’t got nothing to lose. I felt that sense of belonging again, I need this pick me up, it was my choice” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Released from prison aged twenty-five Billy tried to go straight but it was not long until he was lured back into the world of drugs. He explained:

> “Had to get a job or my girlfriend was going to leave me and take my daughter with her. I did manage this but had a rocky start cos I couldn’t help
thieving. I did stop and got myself a good job as a computer fitter and tried to settle down but was already programmed to mess up. The stress started to build up again very quickly after my release. My drinking increased and my relationship with my girlfriend was breaking down. I happened to have a chance meeting with an old friend, I’d had my first E, he’d given me my first ecstasy. Again, it was the same old shit but a different place and time in my life. Booze, E’s, cocaine, cannabis, violence, the cycle was running. I’d already made my cycle, so it was off again” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Used to the rich pickings of a drug dealing lifestyle all five struggled to survive on state benefits or the wages of poorly paid jobs which they only occupied for short periods. Marcus worked in a hotel and as a plumber for short periods before drifting back into drug dealing. He remarked that: -

“I’ve always tried to work but once I get to work and get their attitude and abuse automatically my mind frame switches. I think I make more money than you, I don’t need to hear your shit. That’s the mentality I’ve had for years. I don’t need to be in this job, I could switch on my phone and make £500. Once I got involved in drugs and knew what I was doing, it messed up my head” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

On release from prison James struggled to survive on state benefit and the money he had saved. James explained: -

“I borrowed £400 to get drugs to sell to get me on my feet. Two weeks later I was robbing drug dealers. I came home to nothing. Dad gave me £20, my clothes was gone. People know I’m home, I’ve got no money. Nothing had changed. It was like I’ll have to fall in line, my friends were ready for me to take up position. You see your family struggling after 3 years what you gonna do? I was on £91 per fortnight benefit with no job, qualifications or income. I was tempted to hit the roads and did, I started doing robberies on my own as I didn’t trust anyone” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Having examined why individuals return to criminality we will now explore what influenced their decision to desist.
6.5 Desistance influences

Early research on desistance advocated structural factors such as marriage, parenthood and employment as key to offenders ceasing criminal activity (Glueck and Glueck, 1943, p.236; Sampson and Laub, 1993, p.204-243).

Marriage has become less fashionable in more recent times with only two participants, Billy and Carlton, getting married. However, all five men have been influenced by wives or girlfriends when attempting to desist.

Billy’s first attempt to desist came at the age of eighteen when he got married. His first child was born when he was nineteen and he was not arrested for any offences for a number of years. At the age of twenty he drifted back into drug dealing which quickly lead to problems as Billy explained: -

“I had respect. The thing was it was from the wrong sort of people. People that were only out for themselves. My drinking started to increase, so did the violence…… I couldn’t deal with everyday things because of the lifestyle I was leading. My marriage broke up. I couldn’t hold down a proper job” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Carlton, who made several attempts to desist in his thirties, attempted to ‘go straight’ when he got married just before this thirtieth birthday. He purchased a beauty salon for his wife but also to help himself turn his back on crime. However, this new life was a challenge as he explained: -

“I’d just married, the shop was for her. It started to weigh me in. I’d taken on a new way of thinking, I didn’t know how to manage it, how to do family life, money wasn’t fast and furious as I’d known it. If I wanna make money I ain’t waiting for someone to come for a facial. Watching money trickle in weren’t the way I made money. I lost my mojo of committing crime, but I was trying to go straight” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Carlton struggled, and he slowly slipped back into the world of drugs.
Additionally, parenthood has had some influence with Marcus, Billy and James desisting at the time of fatherhood. However, for Marcus and Billy this was short lived as they returned to criminality.

When his girlfriend became pregnant Marcus attempted to desist. He remembered that:

“I wanted to have everything ready, cot, pram, everything and I weren’t working. All my drugs money I was trying to save up and I would buy her clothes. Everything ready so her mum wouldn’t stress about things. Then I started thinking I can’t have my daughter seeing me doing this. Fair enough daddy brings home money but it’s dirty money innit” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Marcus was twenty-three when his daughter was born and not long after he drifted back once again into drug dealing.

For Billy there was a period of desistance around the time his second child was born. Billy recalled that:

“It was actually a period where I was trying to go straight. Just had a new baby, four-year-old daughter, nice house, I’d managed to get myself a good job, so things were rolling quite well. I was still doing a little bit of dealing” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Shortly after Billy was drawn back into the world of drug dealing and went on to commit firearms offences.

James was working for a gang’s project at the time of the birth of first child. He recalled:

“With a baby on the way I wanted to give it security, love, support, affection, a dad to be proud of, everything my parents failed to give me” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

For James the birth of his son gave him motivation to successfully desist. James reflected that:

“For the first time ever, I loved. He gave me motivation to pull away from the crowd. Had he not been born I would have ended up back in prison and doing the hit. That’s one reason why I left the street. I didn’t wanna be driving around with my kid and some guy tries to shoot me or I have to kill someone and go to prison. I didn’t wanna be part of their life. I’d been given a second chance, a reason to live and achieve” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).
While relationships and parenthood have been social influences on attempts to desist in this study they have not had the impact suggested by the Glueck’s (1943) and Sampson and Laub (1993).

Employment has certainly not had the same impact. Harry and Marcus were only in employment for a short period before returning to the richer pickings of drug dealing. Billy never stayed in the same job for a lengthy period. Likewise, Carlton’s employment was short lived. James never worked until his current period of desistance.

Maruna’s (1997, p.77) more recent research identifies key meetings or moments as pivotal in the desistance process. This is confirmed in this study. For Harry and Billy meetings and words of wisdom from prison staff proved significant in their decision to desist.

For Harry it was a chance meeting with a fellow prisoner that first set him thinking about where his life was going. He recalled that:

“I met this Rasta man. He was telling me about who I am. I never really questioned who I was or where do you wanna to go. I’d go to his cell and wanted to keep on speaking to him. He said ‘Have you got a life plan? Do you think you’ve got a calling?’ He never told me the answers to the questions, he said ‘The questions are inside you. When you start asking yourself these questions people will start coming into your life’ (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Harry had ongoing drugs problems and it was a later meeting with a female CARAT worker that was pivotal in his decision to desist. Harry stated that:

“She says she knows there are things wrong with me innit. Everything started to come out, I couldn’t hold back and kept talking to her. Then I used to feel better. Before I’d feel pains in my belly and doctors would say there’s nothing wrong with you. After talking to her the pains started to go. She told me everything you’ve been through is for a reason and you’re special. She was the first person that ever told me that. It kinda hit me and I’m thinking why is she saying this to me innit. Thinking does she like me or something. I couldn’t work it out. She said ‘You’re gonna do a lot for yourself in the future’. No one ever told me that before, so it was a big deal. She weren’t interested in my past, just how am I doing today. She said I should do courses” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

11 CARAT stands for Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare
Harry reflected on the supportive people he met whilst in prison and commented: -

“Meeting all them people gave me hope I’d never had before in my life. Started to feel I kinda had a bit of support no matter how little it may seem cos I can’t see these people every day. I started to believe that I’m here for something” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

For Billy it was a chance meeting with a member of prison staff that proved to be the catalyst for his decision to desist. Billy looked back and recalled: -

“I had a massive change four years into my sentence. It was a simple conversation with a member of staff, where I actually accepted responsibility (for the shooting) in a moment, it was like a flash where I realised it was nothing to do with the victim. That started a catalyst for a change for me. I started challenging my own beliefs, realising the damage that it was causing me. Once I had that in place I could change, I could move forward” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

A meeting with a police officer proved to be instrumental in James’s desistance process. He remembered: -

“He supported me through the transition and although I was thinking of leaving the road he invited me to the Police Station, flipped back this chart and I was there. Everyone’s gone to jail, I’m the last one left. 100 youths under my command. The power was mine, the whole empire left to me..... He dealt with me like a son saying, ‘You’ve got to stop man cos if you carry on it’s not gonna be nice’. He got me a job in the youth offending service” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

The shock of a close friend’s murders also had a huge impact on the lives of Harry and James.

Harry described his best friends murder as the defining moment in his decision to quit his criminal lifestyle. Harry commented: -

“The defining moment when I said, ‘I’ve had enough’ was definitely his death. I’ve had friends in my life, but we were proper close. The amount of time we was together he’s done more for me than most people ever done and even spending time with each other, laughing, having drugs, going out, just being there, not judging me, he was that person. When I have friendships with other people I’ve never had proper friendship. It was that one time I’ve had it and when he passed it was like there’s nothing out there for me no more” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).
For James the murder of a close friend initially ignited feelings of revenge before a decision to walk away from crime. James recollected:

“I wanted revenge. I could be a cold individual and could switch off for the right reasons. I was ready to kill whoever. Those that killed him were the people that brought me onto the streets. I’m caught in a position where I’m gonna have to do stuff to people that have been there for me. Now I’m gonna come and kill you. No one was up for killing anyone. I’m on probation, got more to lose than anyone and everyone’s scared. I thought this whole game’s fake, I’m the only one ready to kill. I said if you’re not ready after the funeral to kill I’m done... I learnt everyone talks the talk when it actually comes down to it. I’ve never killed but for a friend I felt obligated. No one wanted to, that’s when I said, ‘I’m done, I’m walking away from this, it’s time” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

There were two significant moments in Carlton’s long desistance process. The first came at the age of twenty-eight when he lost the impetus to commit crime. Carlton remembered that:

“I got to a place where I didn’t like what was going on, I was losing momentum. I was checking with my sub conscience, something was awakening in me. I didn’t feel the drive..... There was no objective, I didn’t know what else to do. I’d reached my American dream I didn’t know what I’d got beyond that. I weren’t happy, no matter how much money I acquired. My head told me if I had these assets I’d be happy. I’d have fifty grand and weren’t happy. I realised money don’t make you happy. That feeling was worse than anything god could know.” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

The second and defining moment for Carlton came with the fear of receiving a lengthy prison sentence. He stated:

“I was devastated. I’d let myself and everybody down. I sat back, kicked myself in the teeth and thought what am I doing here. I had the fear of getting IPP 12, interest of public protection, hanging over me. God have I screwed up my life forever. I ain’t coming out. Once sentenced I felt I’d been given a reprieve and it inspired me to crack on. I chose not to hang around with people. If I keep myself straight there’s something I can engage in here. There came a point where I thought I need to change, I can’t wait till I get out” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

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12 Imprisonment for Public Protection – sentence for serious offenders whose crime did not merit a life sentence.
For Billy his defining moment came four years into his last prison sentence when he finally accepted responsibility for his actions which proved a catalyst desistance.

Desisters adopting a new identity and wanting to give back to society was identified by Maruna (1997, p.87) and Gadd and Farrall (2004, p.127) in their research. All five men in this study have shown a desire to work with young people on the cusp of gang life and criminality. They feel they are the best people to carry out this kind of work as they can talk from experience and young people can connect with them. In their new-found identity they see themselves a positive role model.

Billy believes he can help young people getting involved in crime. He stated: -

“I can tell them of my life experience, how my criminal behaviour escalated, my use of drugs, weapons, the carrying of guns, how everything escalated. If I pass that on, explain the reality of prison and the criminal lifestyle maybe I can help. Hopefully they’ll learn from my experience and will listen to me because of where I come from cos I’ve been there. I know exactly where they’re coming from, what their thoughts are, what their thoughts are and how life can be. I can tell by kid’s actions, who could get involved in criminality….. I can pick them out because they act how I used to when I was their age. The things they ask…. It’s the fascination of it, they don’t see the reality of crime and the consequences..... They only look at the glamour of violence, that’s the big mistake I made. Kids think by glamourising violence they’ll get respect. They think if they’re violent and the big man on the estate they’ll get respect. The thing is it’s a false respect and they don’t understand that. It’s glamourous to them especially with rappers telling them how glamourous it is, the money, jewellery, but the reality is completely different. That’s what they don’t know about, the fear, the looking over your shoulder, having to carry a weapon to protect yourself” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Harry when asked how he saw his future commented: -

“Right now, I’m at the crossroads. I’m starting to think when I come out of prison it’s either end up in jail or dead or I can try and go this way into kinda love instead of going with the negative and hope that takes me the right way. That’s where I’m going cos I know how easy it is for me to come back to prison, I’ve been there all my life. I know how easy it is to die cos I’ve seen all these people around me die….. I’m trying to move forward, that’s what I’m trying to do now. All my life people have wanted to be like me, in a negative way, but I feel now with everything that’s happened I can be an inspiration” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).
On his decision to desist and his hopes for the future Marcus explained: -

“A lot of things made me wanna turn my life round. My personal experience on the roads, living on the roads, growing up on the roads, selling drugs, being shot. I’m the best person to tell these kids. That’s what I see. My biggest challenge is money. I wanna be straight, have a career cos these kids out there look up to me….. I don’t wanna do what everyone does, made money, had the cars, I done all that. I wanna do something better. I wanna be one day talking on the stand or in colleges telling them I’ve done it, it’s not the way forward….. cos I was one of those kids. As soon as I saw them coppers I thought what’s him coming here for? He doesn’t know nothing. Tell him to sell drugs on the road and then come back. That’s how I was growing up. I know them kids don’t wanna see that. They wanna see someone that’s actually lived it, been through it….. Everyone thinks these kids wanna sell drugs, none of us wanna do it. I didn’t but I didn’t know what else to do. Knocked on how many doors for a job, no one would give me no job so how am I gonna eat today if I don’t do what I have to do?” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

James talked about his job mentoring young men on the cusp of gang life and stated:-

“I find it easy to hear their stories, struggles and can connect with them..... Throughout my childhood I searched for someone to teach me, lead me down the right path, inspire me. Nobody told me there were people who wanted to help, from my experience parents, teachers and police need to work closer together..... I started school in England aged eight. People come to the country and need a system to help them adjust. My primary school there was no systems that worked. At secondary school there was no intervention. I was in a gang from the start.....The most dangerous part of a young person's life, crucial, is when they leave, year eleven. If they haven’t done good at school what are they meant to do?..... You can’t get benefits, if your parents ain’t giving you no money where you gonna go? On the ‘Roads’ but pretend you’re going to college. People become dangerous then cos you’re jumping into a game where there’s already dangerous people..... or they start selling drugs, you ain’t got no money, do this for me, bring drugs back, you’ve left school now, you’re a big man” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Sampson and Laub (2005, p.43) and Burnett and Maruna (2006, p.94) identified successful desistance was linked to support and opportunity offered by trusted people.

For Harry and Billy, the support of prison staff set them on their desistance journey. Both men engaged with Glen Banks, a prison project co-ordinator, and attended a gang’s forum where they discussed gangs, guns and knives.

Harry reflected that: -
“It started me thinking – I had a negative effect on my manor. I could have a positive effect, turn it round, I can start to have a life” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011)

Billy commented on what meeting Glen meant to him and stated: -

“I met Glen..... and found that it was the next stage in my development. He encouraged me to do the last change in my life. That was to prepare for the future. That is helping kids from getting into gang and gun culture.... The project, it was a therapy for me. It’s the first time I’ve seen my life in one hit, like a piece of paper..... It was the first time I’ve seen that, where I came from, what I became. It’s made my future more stable, I know exactly what I’m good at, what I want to do, where I want to go. I’ve done a few bits of writing for the police, explained the culture I came from, which they’re interested in. Hopefully I’ll get sponsored in the future to do mentoring of kids that get into trouble” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

The offer of work at Charity Trusts provided Marcus and Carlton with the opportunity they required.

Marcus commented on his voluntary work at a Charity Trust and stated: -

“Most of us are ex-offenders, that’s why I love it here, cos they don’t judge you, cos you can still fix the wrong you have done. They’re giving you a chance, no one else ain’t given me that chance ever” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Carlton remembered the support and opportunity offered to him by the Charity Trust. He recalled: -

“I made contact with the trust and started doing work again. They said come and do a bedding in period, got ideas where you could be of use to the Trust. We can get you some pay, done some workshops, presentations, made contacts” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

James was assisted in his desistance by working for a gang’s project and also having support from a police officer. He recalled: -

“The project inspired me. In trying to go legitimate I saw friends killed or go back to jail. The street was watching me, times were hard. I was tempted to go back to my old ways for quick cash. I’m working for £1,000, £2,000 a month when I could easily pick up the phone. You think what’s the point. Detaching from associates was hard. I no longer had brotherly connection with gangs. Instead I rolled with a few that kept it real” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).
Education and reflection have played an important role in the desistance process of these five men. While in prison Harry and Billy attended and participated in a gang’s forum and also spent time writing and reflecting on their lives.

Harry spent time reading letters his best friend had sent him before he was murdered. He reflected: -

“He was telling me music was the way out of our lifestyle. At first, I didn’t see what he was trying to tell me but then realised he was saying to write, this was a way for me to talk, write poems, music, be creative” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Harry worked his way through writing, art, maths, computer and National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) educational courses in prison and remembered that: -

“I’m still asking myself why are all these people dying? Couldn’t understand why. People used to say I wouldn’t make it to twenty-one. I’m starting to go into education, to rap, to write about things like my community. It’s coming natural to me. Why are things the way they are?” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Carlton wrote crime reduction programmes while incarcerated which he also presented on day release at gang projects. He reflected on these programmes and stated: -

“I was interacting and communicating with people doing positive stuff in the community. That inspired me because people hear my story, they wanted to listen. I interacted with normal people who perceived me in a positive way, it inspired me” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Although low achievers at school Harry and James educated themselves during their prison sentence.

Since his release James has gone on to study for a degree in Law. Marcus also completed an NVQ while working at the Charity Trust. The success of these young men educating themselves challenges the findings of Farrington (1988, p.440) and Loeber et al. (2012, p.1146) who suggest low intelligence is a predictor of violent offending. It also confirms
how much young black males can actually achieve educationally in a learning environment where they receive the support which was missing from their time at school.

Other periods of reflection while in prison also saw them think about other people.

Harry and Marcus both blame themselves for their younger brothers following in their footsteps to criminality.

When Harry was twenty-four his younger brother was arrested, and he reflected that:

“*My little brother started to get arrested. I spoke to him on a visit and had tears in my eyes telling him I don’t want to happen to him what’s happening to me. That’s the first time I’ve spoken to him like that and I felt proper emotional. I know the reason I followed that road was cos of my step-dad. I was starting to think he was gonna follow me*” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Six years later Harry received the news that his brother had been sent to prison. Harry recalled:

“*That affected me cos I see my little brother; I don’t see this criminal he’s become. It tore me up inside that he was gonna go to prison and I was scared for him, like gangs in prison, people attacking him...... I know it wasn’t his kinda life style cos the step-dad left...... If you’re not prepared it’s kinda harder to survive*” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Billy and Carlton both talked about thinking of the victims of their crime and the impact on their victims, their families and the community.

Looking back over his criminal career Billy reflected:

“One thing that sticks with me is the hurt you cause people through your actions. I’m talking about victims, their families, my family, the drugs, the crime, you know everyone. The victim of the crime, their family, the society you are from, that’s the main thing that leaps out. Looking back, I’m able to understand that now. When I think about the victim of my shooting I still get very choked cos it’s my fault. That’s the hard part to accept, that I’ve ruined a lot of people’s lives. That’s something I think about all the time. But it helps me progress cos I can see what I done is wrong. I won’t do that again. I don’t want any more victims in my life” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Carlton remembered when he reached contemplation stage and commented:
“There came a time in my life, a contemplation stage, where I started to think about the effect on others. I started to primarily think about me. Do I wanna do it? No. How does it make me feel? Shit. What’s the outcome? Jail..... I don’t know which way I’m gonna go. I’m questioning it now. That transitional period went on for a long-time cos I didn’t believe anyone was thinking like me. It was about getting identification of my thinking with others. In my world you don’t talk about not wanting to do this stuff. To say I didn’t wanna do it, I struggled” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Carlton progressed to think more about his victims and actions and stated: -

There came a point where I understood victim empathy, ripple effects..... I realised the ripple effect on the community was deep. I thought about my victims, the ripple effect on that victim, their family, the community, society at large. I’ve got to understand it and only then was I able to take myself out of self” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

For Harry, Billy, Carlton and James their transition to desistance started in prison and we will now look at challenges they faced when released.

6.6 Post prison challenges

Marcus, Carlton and James all highlighted the difficulties they encountered when released from prison. They stated the amount of money prisoners are handed on their release was insufficient and the accommodation was poor.

James explained the challenge faced when leaving prison and stated: -

“A gang member comes out of prison, they need money. These things people overlook. How’s he gonna pay his electric, buy food? He’s gonna rob someone” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

James stated that the local council would not assist him with housing as he was on probation and under twenty-five years of age. Marcus talked about a lack of money, that he did not want to sell drugs to survive but knew no way out of the situation.

Carlton highlighted the loneliness he felt when released from prison. Carlton struggled initially and explained: -
“When I came out of prison I was deflated cos I’d had a room, electric, free meals. They put me in a hostel, I got bitten by bed bugs and thought phew I need somewhere to live. My basic needs weren’t being met. I felt disassociated, cut off, tried to keep my momentum going. I was walking round with my clothes in bin liners. It was pride. I didn’t want to go back to my mums with my tail between my legs; didn’t want to go back to my area and see younger guys, thought I wanna stay away, don’t want no pollution. Eventually….. got a flat where DSS was paying my rent” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).

Carlton had difficulties in adjusting to life in the community and recalled the support of the Football Community Trust gave him. Carlton stated: -

“They took me on, started giving me some reward, there it was born. There was a sticky period at first cos I was at a place where I didn’t really know….. they have been exceptional. I’d have a meeting, not turn up but they kept knocking on the door….. Their persistence paid off cos they laid it on the line, read the riot act, let me know my worth. I told them what was going on for me, they kinda understood. They was an advocate of me, some would have gone leave him. For me that was a sense of belonging. Here I am today, just under one year from my release” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013),

All three were also critical of the support provided by the probation service stating they were little or no help and provided an inadequate service for prison releasees.

Marcus raised the issue that the Probation Service had given him little support. He commented that: -

“I’ve never had no help from Probation. I came out of jail once, went to my probation officer and stressed ‘I’m homeless.’ She said, ‘probation don’t help with housing’. I’m thinking you’re my probation officer, if I don’t get myself housed I’m gonna be on the road offending again. I’m gonna be in jail soon so how can you say that” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Carlton have his thoughts on the contribution of the Probation Service and said: -

“Probation could have helped but there’s no intervention, just a standard interview. I call it the 15-minute compulsory. ‘Hello, how are you, have you been arrested? Anything for concern?’ Probation protect the public from you. I’d argue but I’m the public. They need to know you’re complying. If that’s documented happy days. They’ve got it documented, if you get nicked you’ll go back to prison. If I say I’m homeless they’d give me a list of shelters, no real support” (Carlton, personal communication, Football Community Trust, March 11, 2013).
James gave his thoughts on his experience with the Probation Service. He stated that:

“There’s an inadequate service from probation. It’s easier to send people back than support them. Inside prison inadequate, no rehabilitation, just ‘this is your release date, get your stuff together, you’re going home tomorrow, make sure you get to probation’ Where’s the support? Probation are like security guards, do nothing for you, want you to... cause no trouble. They’re like babysitters. Don’t offer you jobs, accommodation, therapy, they’re useless. You go in ‘Yes I’ve been looking for work, yes I’ve been good’. As long as there is no police intelligence you’re OK” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Calverley (2013, p.137-138) and Glynn (2014, p.58-63) in their research with black males have also identified the lack of support and opportunity as significant barriers to achieving desistance. The challenges identified in this research support this claim.

During their most recent phase in the desistance process all the young men in this study were supported in their effort to desist and job opportunities were opened-up for them.

Harry’s final comment in his interview echo’s the findings of Calverley (2013) and Glynn (2014) when he stated:

“To authorities I’d say don’t judge everyone. Give people a chance. Some people are walking around with masks on. It’s not really them, it’s bravado. The most aggressive and loudest ones they’re the ones who really wanna be helped cos that was me. It wouldn’t come across that I wanted to speak to anyone, but I did I was crying inside, I never showed it outside. I was in bits all the time. You need to find a way to reach out to these people, realise they are human, everyone deserves a chance” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

6.7 Summary of the desisting years

This chapter has examined the desisting period of the five men’s lives and the challenges they encountered, providing analysis of themes, significant events and turning points.

This study confirms that desistance is a process with three of the men making three or more attempts to desist over a period of years.

The illegal drugs market is the most influential factor in the men returning to criminality with individuals struggling to survive on state benefit or poorly paid jobs particularly
following prison release. Three of the men also mentioned the poor assistance given to them by the Probation Service. Three of the men were lured back to criminality by past associates.

Analysis of desistance influences highlighted key moments and meetings plus support and opportunity as being crucial to decision to desist.

For three of the men key meetings with people who listened to them and offered support proved pivotal. For two of the men the murder of a close friend aided their decision.

All five of the participants have been provided with a support and a job opportunity to aid their desistance. A new identity and a wish to give back to society in a mentoring role is also common to all five participants.

Earlier research had suggested marriage and fatherhood were instrumental in offenders desisting. For four of these men whilst this might have influence their decision at the time it did not last for long and they returned to offending.

Previous research has identified that low intelligence is a risk factor for later violence offending. This research challenges those findings as three of the men have studied and achieved qualifications while in prison and two have gone on to study since leaving prison, one for a degree in law.

In the last three chapters we have considered the life stories of five young men involved in gun crime from their childhood through their criminal career to their most recent attempt to desist. Turning points, significant events and themes in their lives have been examined and analysis provided from both interviews and official data and time-lines of their lives.

The final chapter will consider the implementation of the research project, significant findings and key issues identified that police and partner agencies might focus on in order to assist in the reduction of gun violence.
Time-Lines

At the end of this chapter the life time-lines for the five men for the period of their desistance process are included. This provides a visual aid for this period of their life highlighting the significant events, meetings and challenges faced.

KEY FOR LIFE TIME-LINES

- Red circle: Negative turning point or event
- Green circle: Positive turning point or event
- Blue arrow: Term of imprisonment

- Arrests
- Change of home
- Victim of crime
- Violence
- Drugs involvement

Figure 4.1 – Key for Life Time-Line charts
Figure 6.1 – Harry – Time to Desist

[Diagram showing a timeline of events related to Harry's life, including his drug culture, family matters, and legal actions.]

- First, Harry began working with his thesis researcher.
- He attended a drug culture event.
- He completed computer courses and began working at an museum.
- He spent time at prison and studied for his VQA.
- He met his best friend and worked at HMP CARAT.
- He started taking classes and attended a drug course.
- He completed his prison term.
- He returned to his studies and sent letters to friends.
- He failed his prison tests and was arrested.
- He was sentenced to 14 years and joined the prison system.
- He worked at the cafe and built a close friend circle.

The timeline concludes with a return to drug culture and a relationship with his girlfriend.
Figure 6.3 – Billy – Time to Desist

- Catalysts for change
  - Responsibility
    - Proposals accepted
  - Man 
- The IT was
  - Everything he had shot a

- Took 4 years to stop
  - Feel cold
  - Mind what he
  - Blocked out of

- Little dealing
  - Child born, done a
  - Nice house, good job

- Tried to go straight
  - Had done

- Little dealing
  - As computer

- Got jobs as
  - Older brother

- Massive family feud
  - Gun
  - Daughters born, gun
  - Daughter

- Drug
  - Money, own

- Girls
  - Minor clothes

- Deal line

- End term of imprisonment
  - Project community
    - Prison youth &
    - Involvement in
  - Stages of dealing
    - Started dealing
    - Front drags & 
    - Violence
  - With local gang
    - Released & back
    - Into dealing
    - Front drags & 
    - Violence
  - To prove himself
  - Deal to deal
    - With rival gang
    - Committed crime
    - Assaulted man in pub
  - Got married
  - Child born
  - Time term
  - Deal line

Billy - Time to Desist
Figure 6.5 – James – Time to Desist

Time to Desist - James
CHAPTER 7
Summary and Discussion

7.1 - Introduction

The final chapter draws together the research experience, and both the findings and discussion points that have arisen from the study. It begins with a review of the aims and approach adopted in the study. This is followed by a brief synopsis of the most significant research findings. The chapter ends with a discussion on the major issues that have grown out of the research.

7.2 - Research aim and process

This research set out to better understand how and why young men become involved in firearms offending and also the reasons why they had chosen to cease their criminal identity.

Prior to commencement of the study ethical approval was gained from both MPS and the University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee.

Through purposive sampling at HMP Alpha, HMP Beta, a Charity Trust, a Football Community Trust and LinkedIn social networking service five young men involved in firearms offending in London were identified and recruited to participate in the study. Formal access to meet with the men was negotiated with the prisons and charity trusts.

This study is based on an interpretive biographical case study design employing a mixed methods research approach.

Following an initial meeting with each individual, to gain their consent to participate, quantitative research was thereafter undertaken on each man on police intelligence, prison
and open source databases. Life time-lines (see figures 4.2-6.5) were constructed for each individual and these were used as an aid-memoire for the research second stage.

Arrangements were made to meet with the men again to conduct explorative in-depth semi-structured life story interviews. The five men were interviewed over a period of three and a half years from 2011 to 2014. Two of the men were interviewed in prison, two at charity trust offices and the other at a cinema café. Four of the interviews were digitally recorded. One prison would not authorise the use of a digital recorder so detailed notes were made by the researcher.

Utilising their life time-line as a guide the men were asked to describe their life story starting with their earliest memories. A check list of topics (see Appendix G) was used to make sure all life experiences were covered.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher to capture the exact words of the participant. This enabled the researcher to become familiar with the data prior to the research analysis.

Analysis was conducted manually for the five participant’s interviews offering an immediate and effective interpretation of the data. Themes, significant turning points and events were identified during the analysis. The life time-lines were also updated to reflect this.

Having reviewed the research aim and process a synopsis of the study key findings will now be presented.

7.3 - Key findings

This study segments the lives of the participants into the three stages of life-course offending to assist in comparison of findings from empirical literature and from the research analysis. These are pre-offending (‘onset’), offending years (‘duration’) and
desistance (‘end’). We will now examine the key findings that fall into these three categories.

7.3.1 – Pre-offending

Violence, anger and trauma played a significant part in the childhood years of these men. McCord (1979, p.1481), Widom (1989, p.251) and Sampson and Laub (1993, p.65-66) all identified family violence as a significant risk factor for the onset of offending and violent behaviour. This research supports the existing argument that violence breeds violence. Four of the men suffered harsh discipline and physical beatings from their parents.

This is clearly evidence by Harry who recalled: -

“He’d [step-dad] hit me, tell me he was doing it for my own good, toughening me up, making me stronger. I don’t know what it’s like in the outside world and I’d appreciate it later in life. I’ve got tears in my eyes, wondering why is he doing this and what he’s telling me ain’t helping me but it’s hurting me..... My pain threshold is more than other people” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 25, 2011).

Three men also witnessed regular violence between their parents. Two were in fact encouraged to participate in violence by family members and praised for doing so.

Trauma has been highlighted by Farrington et el. (2006) as having a major impact on a young person’s life. Four of the participants suffered a daunting experience early in their life which clearly changed the course of their life path. This is best illustrated by Billy whose world was shattered at ten years old. Billy recalled that: -

“My hero, my dad, sat me down one day and he was telling me he was dying. I was supposed to deal with this in some brave way like a soldier, but the thing is I couldn’t. I was ten years old and found it difficult to deal with. I ran out of the room. He died a week later” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

During their childhood all the men suffered periods of anger. This confirmed the findings of Wasserman et al. (2003, p.2-3) who suggested anger can be is a predictor of future
offending. Marcus provides a good example of anger from his time at school. Marcus commented:

“I used to get teased at primary school a lot because my English weren’t all that. I also got teased about the way we looked, our trainers and clothes, they didn’t fit in. You could tell we was from somewhere else. I couldn’t take it when someone teased me or about my mum or my family, it wasn’t funny to me when I was young. I used to snap at them. I’m not having no one cuss me” (Marcus, personal communication, Charity Trust, February 3, 2012).

Poor parenting skills, neglect and low parental involvement were risk factors identified by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) and Browning and Loeber (1999, p.2). This research confirms this with all five men experiencing poor parental involvement and particularly the absence of close father-son relationships.

Having reviewed the risk factor key findings in the men’s childhood we now move on the look at those identified for their offending years.

7.3.2 – The offending years

Farrington (1988) and Loeber et al. (2012) suggest low intelligence is a predictor of violent offending. The findings of this research certainly challenge that argument. Two of the men interviewed in fact achieved very good GCSE results. Two of the men who failed at school later went on to educate themselves in prison. One then progressed in fact to study for a law degree at university.

Four of the men were gang members by the age of thirteen and the other was negatively influenced by peers at school. Gang membership witnessed an increase in their offending. However, it also provided support, loyalty and a sense of belonging. This confirmed the findings of Thornberry et al. (2003). Anderson’s (1999) masculinity theory of fighting, gaining respect and status is also confirmed in this research. This is evidenced by James who explained: -
“We regularly had fights with other schools. Fights proved ‘realness’ and ‘gangsta’. Gangsta = GANG, gang members, and STA, the reputation you build on the streets. I earned respect that I still possess today….. I had so many fights I was known as ‘the guy’” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

Gang membership also resulted in four of the men finding role models, albeit negative ones, in the form of gang leaders supporting the findings of Hayden et al. (2008, p.169). All five men were early offenders beginning their criminality between the ages of ten and thirteen. Two of the men stated they did not consider their criminal actions were wrong. This was illustrated by Billy who stated:

“I can safely say we didn’t believe ourselves to be ‘criminals’. It was like it was normal to do what we were doing because everyone around us was at it” (Billy, personal communication, HMP Beta, June 13, 2013).

Four of the men admitted they committed crime to survive and all five lived for the moment. They spent their crime proceeds on material possessions and drugs. All five men were also involved in drug dealing.

On route to their progression to gun crime all the men were arrested for both knife offences and robbery. Three of the men went on to join organised gangs, possess firearms and rob drug dealers. All this demonstrates a clear progression in the seriousness and violence of their offending. This lifestyle is demonstrated by James who reflected that:

“They [the gang] exposed me to machine guns. I was the youngest on the firm and that’s when I saw the different world of gang lifestyle. What we’d been doing, robbing, stabbing and shooting was child’s play compared with these guys. It was like the movies, we was part of the underworld. I’ve never seen anyone except white gangsters live the life we were living, even to today….. We were prepared for trouble, robbed everyone….. we controlled most clubs from East to West End. I became a ruthless member and we partied anywhere crossing post codes and enemy lines. It was like living a dream” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).

In this environment firearms were considered symbolic, to use as a threat and for protection. This confirms the findings of Hales et al. (2006, p.103).
During their criminal years four of the men switched between violent and non-violent crime which confirms Farrington’s (1998, p.424) findings that violent offenders are versatile in their criminality.

All five men became fathers for the first time in their late teens or early twenties. Four of the men continued to offend after the birth of their first child which challenges the Glueck’s (1940) and Sampson and Laub’s (1993, p.204) suggestion that individuals cease offending with parenthood. However, all five of the men went on to be clearly influenced by relationships and the birth of further children during periods of desistance. We will now consider the key findings around desistance.

7.3.3 – Desistance
This study supports the theory of Maruna (2001, p.26) and Farrall et al. (2014, p.39) that desistance is a process and not an event. All five men made a first attempt to desist before returning to offend. Indeed, three of the men made three or more attempts to desist. Up to the date of interview the desistance process for the participants, ranged from seven to sixteen years which demonstrates that it can be a very long drawn out procedure.

The sum of money gained from dealing in the illegal drugs market proved the dominant factor in the men returning to a life of crime.

Maruna (1997) identifies a key moment as instrumental in an individual questioning the direction of their life. This is confirmed in this study. All the men either met key individuals or suffered a shock such as the death of a close friend or prospect of a long prison sentence. This is highlighted by James who was in prison when a close friend was murdered. He remembered:

“A friend was murdered, shot in the head. After that I questioned if I wanted that lifestyle as it could have been me. I reflected on my life. My conclusion was I’d made a poor choice of friends..... I believed I had the ability to go right where I’d gone wrong” (James, personal communication, Cinema Cafe, July 16, 2014).
On release from prison all the men struggled to survive on state benefits or with poorly paid jobs. Three of the men highlighted the lack of support provided on release from prison and were critical of inadequate probation services.

In their current desistance phase all five men have shown a change in identity expressing a wish to work with young people and give something back to society. In this regard the evidence here confirms the findings of Maruna (1997) and Gadd and Farrall (2004).

Having reviewed the key findings, we now discuss the major issues uncovered by this research.

7.4 – Discussion

A theme that emerges throughout the life course of these young men in this research is either the absence or lack of support. Starting back in their childhood poor parental support was clearly evident and particularly inadequate father-son relationships. As their young lives progressed on to delinquency and offending the participants found substitute role models in gang leaders or criminal members of the family. While there are high profile role models within the sports and media industry there is a need for more accessible positive role models within the local community.

The research has also highlighted the lack of support for these young men’s problems within schools, the police and local authorities. People did not want to listen or understand the problems they encountered. Nor did they offer help or counselling. This was an issue raised by all of the participants. Harry provided a good example of this from his schooldays when he stated that:

“Maybe my pathway to crime could have been prevented when I first got suspended when I was eight, if I had someone to talk to instead of getting told off and being scared. Someone to tell what’s happening with me, to ask how I’m feeling, what I’m going through, why I did what I done. No one
didn’t wanna hear, it was you’re suspended, do it again and you’ll be expelled. A lot was going on at home then, but no one knew, I didn’t tell no one. I was dealing with it myself internally” (Harry, personal communication, HMP Alpha, January 6, 2011).

With these participants the problem of inadequate support continued in fact post prison. On their release they struggled to survive financially on state benefits and often had nowhere to live. Three of the men talked about a lack of support and negative experiences with the probation service. The researcher would question if probation staff cuts and workload have had an impact on the service provided to its customers.

The lack of job opportunities, often due to their criminal record, inevitably resulted in the men being lured back into the highly lucrative illegal drugs market. This led to further arrests and the likelihood of further imprisonment. So, for young men in this situation how do we stop ‘Prison’s revolving door of despair’? (Guardian, 2017).

All five participants for this study have been provided support for their current desistance process through prison initiatives, charity trusts or the police service. All have progressed into mentoring roles within the community. They have the ‘life’ qualifications to perform this role and young people connect with and listen to them. Under their new identity these men can be positive role models for young men on the cusp of criminality.

The findings of this research challenge Farrington’s (1998) assertion that low intelligence is a predictor of violent offending. Two of the men achieved at school and two who failed at school have, with encouragement and support, have gone on to successfully educate themselves.

In summary this research has identified what constitutes a system failure which has collectively contributed to these young men becoming actively engaged in gun crime. Several of them were to talk about a perception of their lives going around in circles. A primary lesson from this research would therefore be that If the current failed system continues then the revolving prison door can never be expected to stop.
A further lesson arising from this research would be that these five men have demonstrated that given the right support and opportunities they can succeed both educationally and in employment. The Government currently invests heavily in prisons but were they to re-directed some of this spending into schools, social services, probation and policing they could begin to deal more effectively with many of the problems at root cause before these young people are criminalised. More apprenticeships and opportunities are needed for young people.

Support from the Government to set up additional Charity Trusts similar to the two Trusts who participated in this study could be the key to addressing the problem of increasing violent crime and young people leaving gang membership. These should be spread across the UK and not just located in the bigger cities. There needs to be a Trust or other support accessible to all young people in the UK.

Utilising the ‘life experiences’ of individuals who have been involved at the top of the gang hierarchy could provide powerful role models to whom young people will trust and listen to. This role is vital and cannot be underestimated.

Adopting this approach could provide a ‘win-win’ solution across the board. Ex-offenders wishing to buy into desistance would receive training, a legitimate career and an income reducing the likelihood of them returning to their old life style. These individuals could provide a trusted contact between the statutory agencies such as the police, probation and local authorities and the young people involved in gangs and violent crime. In addition, these Trust workers would be the ideal people to offer support and services and deliver presentations and workshops at schools, pupil referral units and youth clubs. Teachers cannot be expected to tackle these problems and having someone young people can equate to, speak in confidence to and trust cannot be stressed enough.
This approach could assist hugely in supporting the strategic objectives of the Prevent and Prepare strands of the Government’s Serious and Organised Crime Strategy.

If the current surge in street violence is to be reduced there is a need to understand these young men by talking and listening to them before it is too late.
Ms Susan Prior  
Professional Doctorate Student  
Institute of Criminal Justice Studies  
University of Portsmouth

REC reference number: 11/12: 29  
Please quote this number on all correspondence.

1st April 2014  

Dear Susan,

Full Title of Study: Brothers in Arms: A comparative analysis of turning points on the life path of young males convicted of firearms offences.

Documents reviewed:  
Consent Form  
Information Sheet  
Interview Schedule  
Letter  
Participant Information Sheet  
Proposal

The data collection for your thesis had already been completed and, therefore, a standard ethical opinion could not be given by the Faculty Ethics Committee. However, having assessed your submitted documents it appears that the conduct of the research has been ethically compliant.

Kind regards,

FHSS FREC Chair
Dr Jane Winstone

Members participating in the review:

- David Carpenter
- Jane Winstone
FORM UPR16
Research Ethics Review Checklist
Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Postgraduate Research Student Handbook for more information)

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<td>ICJS</td>
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If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University’s Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).

UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:
(if you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee reps or see the online version of the full checklist at: http://www.ukr.io/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/)

a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame? YES ☒ NO ☐
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged? YES ☒ NO ☐
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship? YES ☒ NO ☐
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration? YES ☒ NO ☐
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements? YES ☒ NO ☐

Candidate Statement:
I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)

Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC): 11/12: 29

If you have not submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered ‘No’ to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:

Signed (PGRs): [Signature] Date: 27-09-17
Dear

This letter is an invitation to participate in research I am conducting as a student at the University of Portsmouth with support from Her Majesty’s Prison Service (HMPS) and Trident - the Metropolitan Police Service team responsible for investigating gun crime in London’s communities.

I am currently studying part-time for a Professional Doctorate whilst working as a civilian Senior Analyst for Trident. HMPS have assisted me by identifying you as a possible participant for my research, hence why this letter is addressed to you personally.

I have spent over a decade as an analyst within the Trident Team and I have witnessed numerous young men progress from minor crime to involvement in gun related violence. During this time, I have seen many young lives ruined by life changing injuries and long prison sentences and I have wondered how and why their lives have progressed this particular way.

The title of my research study is ‘Brothers in Arms: A comparative analysis of turning points on the life path of young males involved in gun crime’.

My intention, with your help, is to create a time-line of your life; firstly, from research on police and open source databases and then by incorporating details from one to one discussions.

This type of research has not been carried out before in the England, but I believe it help highlight the problems faced by young men in inner London and how they are drawn into possessing guns and ultimately gun related violence.

Your participation in this research will remain voluntary throughout. I will however need your permission to conduct research in which to form the time-line of your life and one to one discussions to gather information on your life and experiences. There will be no risks to you as a result of this study and your name and other identifiable details will never be used in any reports or my final thesis.

Thank you for your time and I hope you will participate in this exciting and worthwhile research.

Sue Prior MA
CONSENT FORM

I have read the information presented in the letter about the study titled ‘Brothers in Arms: A comparative analysis of turning points on the life path of young males involved in gun crime’ being conducted by Sue Prior as a student of the University of Portsmouth together with the support of the HM Prison Service and Trident from the Metropolitan Police Service.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about this study and my participation and received satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I understand that participation in this research is voluntary and that my name and any other identifiable details will be made anonymous in any reports or the final thesis.

Please circle Yes or No

I am aged over 18 and eligible to participate in this study       Yes     No

I agree to research being carried out on the police and open source databases and a time-line of my life being put together      Yes     No

I agree to be interviewed for this research       Yes     No

Participant’s name ___________________________________________ (please print)

Participant’s signature _______________________________________

HM Prison Service witness’s name __________________________ (please print)

HM Prison Service witness’s signature __________________________

Researcher’s name ___________________________________________ (please print)

Researcher’s signature _______________________________________

Date ______________________________
Research Information Sheet

The title of my research study is ‘Brothers in Arms: A comparative analysis of turning points on the life path of young males involved in gun crime’.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research study. Before you decide if you would like to accept I will explain more about my research, why I am doing it and what it would involve for you. Please ask if there is anything you are not clear about and feel free to talk to other people about my research if you wish.

- Explain my role as researcher and also my job role
- Present participant with letter, give him time to read it and ask him if he would like me to go through it with them.
- Purpose of this study – To better understand how and why young men become involved in firearms offending and the reasons why they have chosen to cease their criminality
  - To identify similarities and differences in the criminal career progression and social background of my participants
  - To identify risk factors and turning points in your life that may have resulted in your enticement onto the pathway leading to gun crime.
  - To assess where interventions could have been put into place to assist in your rehabilitation and diversion from crime.
  - To establish reasons for you wishing to cease your life of crime
- Why and how you have been invited
- Participation is voluntary and number of other participants
- Show him the consent form and talk through it.
- Talk him through the research
  - Initial research on police and intelligence databases
    - Written permission in line with Data Protection Act
  - Construction of life time-line draft
  - Interviews talking about his life
    - Interviews - where/when
    - Taped if you agree
  - Type up your interview
  - Update life time-line
  - Check you are happy with time-line
  - Conduct my analysis to answer the questions I have posed in my thesis proposal
  - Write my thesis which will include a section on your life story
- Explain confidentiality and check you are happy with this
• Storage of data/field notes/transcripts/interview tapes – computer password protected – personal folders or in locked drawers/office
• Printouts destroyed by shredding
• Previously un-actioned crimes you admit to
• If you participate, it is possible some of the data collected and interview transcripts may be looked at by authorised persons from the University of Portsmouth. Data may also be looked at by authorised people to check my study is being carried out correctly. These people will have a duty of confidentiality to you as a research participant.
• Confidentiality during and after research study.
  • Explain anonymity
    o Life time-lines/interview transcripts – anonymised
      ▪ Protect you, your family, associates, venues
      ▪ Your name and other identifiable details will not be used in my draft and final thesis, life time-lines or any publication unless I have your signed consent
    o Choice of pseudonym
  • If there is a problem or there is anything you are unhappy about in respect of my research, please contact me or my supervisor Diana Bretherick at the University of Portsmouth and we will do our best to answer your questions.
    o Sue Prior – susan.prior@myport.ac.uk
    o Diana Bretherick – email diana.bretherick@port.ac.uk
  • If you are still not happy and wish to complain formally please contact my Course Leader Francis Pakes – email francis.pakes@port.ac.uk
  • Results of this study
    o Published in my thesis
    o Happy to give you a copy of your life time-line
  • Research sponsor – University of Portsmouth
  • Research funding – I am funding this research which is being carried out during my spare time
  • Research review
    o Research at the University of Portsmouth is overseen by a group of people, called the Ethics Committee, to protect your interests. My research study has been reviewed and give a positive response by the University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee.
  • Any Questions?
  • Thank You
    o For meeting with me and listening to what I have to say. If you decide to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form and you can keep the invitation letter, a copy of the consent form and this information sheet.
  • End
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1</th>
<th>Box 2</th>
<th>Box 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risk Assessment</td>
<td>Task/Activity Assessed</td>
<td>MPS Control Measure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>Review Date</td>
<td>Pre-Control</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Date of Last Assessment</td>
<td>Persons at Risk</td>
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Is the risk relating for this task post control acceptable and can all controls be immediately implemented? (Yes or No)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. <strong>Family</strong></th>
<th>2. <strong>Where Grew Up</strong></th>
<th>3. <strong>Family Situation</strong></th>
<th>4. <strong>Family Life</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Parents</td>
<td>• Where born</td>
<td>• Origins</td>
<td>• Did you get on</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Brother/Sisters</td>
<td>• Area grew up</td>
<td>• Parents/Step Parents</td>
<td>• Arguments/fights</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Other Family</td>
<td>• Type accommodation</td>
<td>• Extended family</td>
<td>• Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Partner</td>
<td>• Number of rooms</td>
<td>• Siblings</td>
<td>• Parental supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children</td>
<td>• Who lived there</td>
<td>• Education</td>
<td>• Interest/ask/know what you were doing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Any time away from home/In care?</td>
<td>• Employment</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interests</td>
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<tr>
<th>5. <strong>Friends</strong></th>
<th>6. <strong>Childhood</strong></th>
<th>7. <strong>School</strong></th>
<th>8. <strong>Gangs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• From where</td>
<td>• Happy/Sad</td>
<td>• What schools/when</td>
<td>• Gang member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lots or a few</td>
<td>• What did you</td>
<td>• Likes/dislikes</td>
<td>• Which gang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Best friends</td>
<td>• like doing</td>
<td>• Truant</td>
<td>• Age joined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Change over time</td>
<td>• Who spent time with</td>
<td>• Suspended/expelled</td>
<td>• Why joined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How spent time</td>
<td>• Changing interests</td>
<td>• Get in trouble</td>
<td>• What it meant to you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How much time</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parents reaction</td>
<td>• Status in gang</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>9. <strong>Drinking &amp; Smoking</strong></th>
<th>10. <strong>Drugs</strong></th>
<th>11. <strong>Teenage Years</strong></th>
<th>12. <strong>First Illegal Acts/Crimes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Age started</td>
<td>• Used</td>
<td>• Happy/Sad</td>
<td>• What were they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who with</td>
<td>• Which drugs</td>
<td>• What did you</td>
<td>• What age</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Where</td>
<td>• Age started</td>
<td>• like doing</td>
<td>• Who with</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How much/often</td>
<td>• How/who with</td>
<td>• Who spent time with</td>
<td>• Why</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• How did it make you feel?</td>
<td>• Changing interests</td>
<td>• Your decision</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dealing</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Did anyone know</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Which drugs</td>
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<td>• What age</td>
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<td>• Where</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 1st contact</td>
<td>• Age</td>
<td>• What offences</td>
<td>• Why commit crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Age</td>
<td>• What for</td>
<td>• How did it start</td>
<td>• Are reasons different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why/When/Where</td>
<td>• Parents reaction</td>
<td>• Progression</td>
<td>• How did it make you feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What happened</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Did gang escalate it</td>
<td>• What did you use proceeds for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents reaction</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Changes over time</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Further police contact</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Progression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Often/reason</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• How treated</td>
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<tr>
<th>17. <strong>Firearms</strong></th>
<th>18. <strong>Since school</strong></th>
<th>19. <strong>Music &amp; Media</strong></th>
<th>20. <strong>Probation</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Age you first held/fired a gun</td>
<td>• Further education</td>
<td>• Any effect on your criminal activity</td>
<td>• Ever had contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How did it make you feel?</td>
<td>• Any qualifications</td>
<td>• How</td>
<td>• Did it prove useful</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Owned/used</td>
<td>• Jobs</td>
<td></td>
<td>• How</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How did you get gun?</td>
<td>• If left, why</td>
<td></td>
<td>• If not, why not</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Unemployed?</td>
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<td>• Benefits?</td>
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<td>• Other earnings</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ever been in prison</td>
<td>• Where could interventions have been put in place in your life</td>
<td>• What/who made you decide to turn your back on crime</td>
<td>• What are your hopes for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How many times</td>
<td>• Did anyone try to help you</td>
<td>• Why</td>
<td>• What do you hope to be doing 5 years?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How long for</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Challenges faced</td>
<td>• Your message for youngsters today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prison experience</td>
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Interview with Harry at HMP Alpha on January 25th, 2011.

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t rep no postcode or bandana, but I’ve been in gang life all my life. I’m serving a long sentence because of my affiliation to gangs for possession of a firearm with intent to endanger life. I’ve been through a lot, lost a lot of friends, lost a lot of things, lost most of my life in prison due to gangs. Now I’m thinking about turning my life round. I’ve met a good few people along the road that’s helped me, but I’ve also helped myself on this journey. This is about me, where I come from, where I’m going and what I wanna do.</td>
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I was born in south London and was happy when I was really young. The only family around me was my mum, little sister, cousins and auntie. We did not have a lot, but I was happy inside.

When I was four my step-dad came on the scene and my cousins were not allowed to visit anymore. The first thing I remember is gates going up at the windows and doors, by the time I reached five it seemed normal. By that time, I ain’t seen my real dad, so my step-dad was the man in the house. Most of the time if my mum’s not about it would just be us. We’d do things like taping pirate videos for the whole family, I’d run off 20 copies, he’s got lots of family. After that I’d be with him in the car and that’s how we bonded a little, he’d take me to his shop. I’d be sitting in the car, sometimes things happened like a fight, just seems normal, I’m seeing this every day, seeing everything he does.

I started to know about abuse against my mum. I used to be outside listening. Inside I’m getting mad cos I can’t do anything about it cos I’ve seen what he does to people. I’d listen to my mum crying. Then she used to take it out on me, but I know why cos she’s trapped in a situation she don’t wanna be in. It’s like going round in circles. This was before I went to school and where my anger first started. My mum changed cos his personality was too strong.

I started at primary school, it was straight to school and back, I wasn’t allowed outside to have fun. The only fun I had was sitting in his car outside his shop, watching people coming to the shop, big chains, big cars, just seemed glamorous.

Then I started to smell funny smells in the house. At the time I didn’t know, but later realised it was drugs innit. When I smelt the smoke if he hears me coming down stairs he’d shout at me and if I didn’t listen the violence started. He’d hit me, tell me he was doing it for my own good, toughening me up, making me stronger. I don’t know what it’s like in the outside world and I’d appreciate it later in life. I might not like it now but later I’d realise why he’s doing it. I’ve got
tears in my eyes, wondering why is he doing this and what he’s telling me ain’t helping me but it’s hurting me. It hurt me at the time but when I got to prison having fights with people or getting beat up by over-zealous officers it made me feel stronger. My pain threshold is more than other people. The older guys used to tell me you go to prison, when you get beat up don’t scream, if you do they beat you up more. That advice I took on board.

We always had material things like food and clothes but when you’re growing up those things aren’t important. It’s all about parental time, love and care but that wasn’t there. Everything was geared towards him and making sure he was safe.

He put me into boxing, I didn’t want to go I wanted to play football. I did boxing for years, from when I was proper young, aged seven. I was winning fights but didn’t enjoy it cos I didn’t want to be there. I told my mum I wanted to be a footballer and he beat her up innit for questioning what he wants me to do. Eventually he let me make my own way to boxing, so I didn’t go. I met up with my mates and had fun on the street for a couple of hours.

After a while, my older step-brother came over from Jamaica, where his mum lives. He stayed with us and we started to bond cos we was sharing the same room. He used to beat him more than me. I used to feel sorry for him, stand up for him and get more beatings. When I’m in the room with my step-brother at night we had fun. If they hear us they tell us to stand in the landing for an hour and not allowed to speak. That was when I was about 8, 9.

At school I had lots of fights, cos I’ve got a lot of pain inside from home and I was always getting suspended for violent acts. I would explode over the silliest of things but wanted to lash out, pressure at home innit. I never spoke to teachers about it. It was you done this, come to the office, you’re suspended. I was aged 8 or 9. I’d go home, wait for the letter to come so my mum didn’t get it, then go out pretending I was going to school and start hanging on the estate across the road with older boys until school finished. I started doing little bits of crime, just being in cars they was stealing, like TDA’s, joy riding. I’d have a little bit of drink, a spliff but no major crime, just kinda flirting with it. I was drawn by the excitement. My mum would find out eventually cos they’d phone her innit. I’d get beatings again and it would just go round in circles, I just kept getting suspended.

Maybe my pathway to crime could have been prevented when I first got suspended when I was 8 if I had someone to talk to instead of getting told off and being scared. Someone to tell what’s happening with me, to ask how I’m feeling, what I’m going through, why I did what I done. No one didn’t wanna hear, it was you’re suspended, do it again and you’ll be expelled. A lot was going on at home then, but
no one knew. I didn’t tell no one. I was dealing with it myself internally.

When I was 10 we moved house. Gates went straight up. We’d park far from home, then we’re walking and if we see anybody he puts my head down so people can’t see us cos I’m wearing a hood. It started to make me paranoid of everybody; he was putting it in me, you gotta be paranoid cos people try to harm us. I don’t know why or what he’s done, he’s telling me you have to be paranoid, can’t trust no one. You always gotta be careful, protect your family. I can’t question him cos he’s violent but he’s drumming this into my head innit. You can’t slip up or harm will come to your family.

There would be people that owed him money, so he’d bring me and my step-brother to them and make us beat them up. They can’t fight back cos he’s standing there, and they’re scared of him innit. We’re beating them up and he’s saying the money they owe is our money. It’s not cos he takes it straight away but he’s trying to put it into our head it’s our money. They’re big men so it kinda felt good beating them up, we was about 10 or 11. Now we’re starting to get more into this pattern of behaviour.

When I was 10 or 11 I was doing petty stuff, shoplifting, graffiti stuff like that. It didn’t seem like I was doing anything, just seemed like what everyone else was doing.

We still weren’t allowed to play out so at night I’d jump out of the window, go to the estate and hang around with my friend. We’d smoke weed, drink, hang around on the estate. That’s when I first met the Green Posse by the rail road when we climbed over the fence. I joined the gang when I was 11, they took a shine to me and we formed the Youngers. I started to fight innit, it was part of what we was doing in the gang. We’d go to other areas, have fights against other gangs, no knives or guns, just fist fights. We used to go to parties, try and impress girls. It was about that time, when I was 12 or 13 that I held my first gun when I looked after it for a friend.

I started to sell £20 wraps of crack for Yardie’s on our estate when I was 12, 13. I’d float round near my step-dad’s shop as there’s lots of customers there. I’d go back a forth between the estate and the shop. There’s big men who shot out there, if they see you shotting they’d say come off our corner. You’re trying to catch customers before they get to these spots. I’d get paid £80, it was a joke cos we was getting about £500 a night. When I got to 14 I said I’m not selling for the Yardies no more, cos they’d talk down to us, have bad attitudes. I went to reload from them, we had about an eight wrapped up, smoked it all, that was the most I’ve smoked in one go.

The first time I got arrested I was 13, it was for assault. I phoned my mum to come and get me and she wouldn’t. I started to feel
resentment towards her but also him as I knew it was him saying I’m bringing police to the house and that’s not good for him. I said never gonna talk to them again. I don’t wanna be a part of their life no more.

After that I started to commit the robberies when I was 14. When I was 14 and a half I was given 1 month’s detention in a young offender’s institution for a robbery and assault. After that they put me into care. I had a feeling of loneliness, was anxious and had to learn to be strong. I never liked it there, so I’d wait for my pocket money and run away to stay with friends. Police were always looking for me, so I was constantly under pressure. The people caring for us was involved in crime. Maybe that’s why I was running away cos they’re supposed to be looking after me and they’re involved, telling us to get this and that. No one ever asked me why I was running away. When I was in children’s homes I learnt how to steal cars.

I started to take harder drugs; I was getting more depressed cos I ain’t got nowhere to live. I’d go to my aunts and they said your mum said we’re not allowed to let you stay. I was really on my own.

I’m angry inside and when we had fights with gangs I’d be first to offer to fight, cos I was angry innit. I didn’t care who it was, it could be the biggest guy I’d fight him. It was a release kind of feeling. It was all about bravado and being on top in a peer pressure environment that mattered most. You couldn’t let anything phase you; it would have been a sign of weakness. Fighting was a way of survival, you wasn’t allowed to back down. If you did others in your gang would victimise you until you proved yourself again.

Up to then maybe some kind of therapy could have helped or changed me. I never spoke to no one about anything. Even my friend we didn’t speak just committed crime, smoked drugs, be around girls, go parties, there was never no deep conversation.

Then you get nicked, asked questions; at the police station I’m feeling defensive against people cos it doesn’t seem they’re trying to help. It seems they’re trying to get at me. Not liking the police was there already cos I’m going through my own problems, they arrested me and aggravating me more. They’re not asking if I need help, they’re just aggressive. It’s like there’s no hope for me. Maybe if there was someone to help things might have been different. Maybe someone could have brung some therapy, like people have rehab. Have discussions with people, what’s wrong, what are you going through? I never had none of that. It was if you don’t tell us this you’re going to prison. That was all I got at the police station. It was the same at school. I remember one teacher, but he used to do it in the wrong way, be aggressive, made me not want to listen. Now when I sit back what he used to say was the right thing, he had
the right intention. When you’re young you don’t wanna hear no one talking down to you, being aggressive. Cos, he was a Rasta man he thought he was from my heritage and could speak to me in this way, which I didn’t wanna hear. He was kinda putting me down.

Maybe if I spoke to someone I would want to have been taken away from my family. I didn’t like it at home cos it was like treading on egg shells. When I’m in his car everything’s fine; I’m seeing this glamorous world go by. When I’m in the house it’s different. My mum’s quiet, doesn’t speak, everyone’s quiet, it’s all about him.

Being in a gang meant everything to me cos that’s all I had innit. My mum didn’t wanna know, I wasn’t allowed to stay at other families houses. When I go to the police station or talk to anyone in authority everything is aggressive. When I’m with my friends we look after each other. That’s how it seems innit. They let me stay at their house so seemed like my family. I’d have done anything for them, they’d have done anything for me. Gang life provided mentoring, money, emotional support, somewhere to live, rules to live by, companionship, safety in numbers.

That’s how I got into hard drugs innit, crack. My friend was older and already into it. One day he passed me the spliff and cos I trust him I took some. I never took none again for ages. Then after that I kept taking it. At the time I was doing burglaries to get by, to buy new trainers, a few stones (crack), some weed. Cos, we never had a lot of money we’d buy weed to bring us back down, cos the crack would make us high. I was coming up to 15 then.

I used to listen to jungle music and there wasn’t much talk of killing in it. I can’t say music affected me to be violent. I would take drugs, it was about getting high.

My friends said we need more money, so we started more serious robbing. The first time, aged 15, I went into a train station, knocked on the door, we dived in and grabbed all the cash. Then we’d snatch money as people withdrew it from cash points. After that we moved onto banks. Wait in the bank until they opened the door, then bam flew in with the others behind the counter and grabbed the money. Some people hanging around with us weren’t smoking crack and they was scared to do it. We wasn’t on crack when robbing but we’d want crack later.

Then we thought this was too much hard work, so we looked for building societies with no screen, jumped over and ransack the drawers. The first time I done it, it wasn’t a planned and I got arrested. I walked past, saw money inside, ran in and grabbed it. It was only £100. I got bailed, done another and got arrested again.

First of all, we was getting arrested for theft but the police were not happy and changed it to steaming robbery – don’t have to touch victims for it to be a robbery just make victims fearful – they changed the law.
I went to proper prison for the first time. There was a holding centre before you got to prison. You’re there with all sorts, older people and I was worried. You hear big voices, shouting, banging on the door. When I got there and saw people my size it didn’t mean anything to me just meant the same thing on the street when I went to parties. I’ve been prepared for prison, kinda living with him, with gates up. Older boys used to tell me when you go to prison don’t say nothing just do your time, come back out, you’ll be alright.

Just after I went into prison, aged 15, I became a father, it meant nothing to me. At the time I wasn’t speaking to the girl. I met her in a children’s home. I didn’t want to know her cos we had some dispute, in my mind she was trying to trap me. I never had no feelings for nobody, my family, no one. She came to see me, but I never had no feelings of joy or happiness. It just went in one ear and out the other. I wasn’t interested. Me and her we’re alright now, talk all the time, we’re cool now.

Drugs played a big part in this and by the time I’m getting to this stage cos of everything that’s happened to me I’ve kinda turned numb. Feelings I don’t do, I was emotionless, didn’t talk to no one. If I was to express myself it was through doing something bad, bravado, fighting. I was definitely selfish but at the time it didn’t seem like that. It seemed no one cares about me innit.

In my teenage years there was no stopping me cos my mind was made up. I didn’t care about anything. No one caring about me made my mind up. All I got was aggression shown to me and I showed aggression back to the world. At the time no intervention would have stopped me. It’s like if you train someone to be a certain way, to do something? By the time they get to here (clicks fingers) they can do that, you should stop them before they can do that (clicks fingers). By the time I got to the stage where I can do that (click fingers) I’m not gonna go to someone and say I need help. By then I’ve become what I’ve become, I’m Mr Bravado now innit, I don’t wanna her about no help. The help could have come when I wasn’t so hardened.

In prison you had to make a name for yourself. As soon as you walked in you’ve got people being aggressive. Aggression all over again, but I didn’t mind cos it was like people had told me. The older boys told me if someone says anything to you don’t wait attack them then everyone will get the message. Anyone said anything to me I attacked them straight away and after a while I realised everyone in prison won’t trouble you no more. People start respecting you, offering you their weed to be your friend; give you shower gel to be with you. I realised that so I fought even more. It was like hell on earth, but you had to learn to thrive off it and go with its energy. If you can imagine how a surfer feels when he is riding the biggest, scariest wave of his life. Everything is against him,
it’s just him and his board against the world, and he just rides out the wave until it finishes. That’s how Zeta was, you have to go with the energy or get crushed, cos people will crush you.

Then they put me on the bully wing, you’re not allowed to talk but that didn’t bother me cos I ain’t been able to talk from when I was young, got taught not to talk. If you talk you can’t get off the wing. There’s a system and you’ve got to work your way up to get off the wing. They told me not to talk, I’m chilling out but then realised I don’t really care so started to talk anyway; I ended up fighting down there non-stop. They kept me there for 6 months. If you stay there 6 months they take you off and you go to this therapeutic wing. They assess you for a week to see if you’re alright. I stayed there for 6 months and got even more respect. The worse things you do the more people respect you. Your status starts to go through the roof.

I got moved to HMP Upsilon. It was racist there, there was me and one other black guy. There was trouble there too. He didn’t wanna be seen talking to me cos it’s like he’s thinking if we’re seen talking they might think we’re planning or trying to stick together. I didn’t care, started to have fights there. Then I got to the block and that was the first time I’d proper been attacked by officers. It was a shock cos I wasn’t ready for it. Most things I’d been kinda prepared for. You walk down stairs and as the door opens the screw officer pulls you in. They attack you straight away. That’s the first time I said to myself I don’t wanna be in prison, but it didn’t last long. I went to the cell with tears in my eyes, but it was tears of anger, I was proper mad. They took my clothes off me, I was in this strip cell by myself, no one came, I was kicking the door and was proper emotional. It wasn’t just the fact they beat me up it was everything, my whole life, where it had gone.

I came out, was cool for a while, just wanted to get out, I was 16, 17. They gave me a serving job on the wing. I didn’t talk to no one, just getting on with my sentence. Then one day I was in the TV room with these skinheads from Wales. There was a film on and I was laughing. He said what are you laughing at? I said the film. He said you need to shut your mouth innit. I said what do you mean? He said shut your mouth or I’ll shut it for you. I said do it then innit. I switched from being calm to I don’t care in that split second. I fronted it out, whatever innit. He said come to the shower, we fought, got the better of him. I was walking out and all I remember is I woke up on the floor, officers waking me up. After that they moved me on the wings, then I went to the block for three weeks and when I was 18 I was released from prison.

I was in don’t care mood again, met my friends, straight back out robbing banks, building societies and post offices daily. We bought crack, was smoking loads. That part of my life was fast, money came and went as quick as it came in. Cocaine, champagne, designer clothes were the order of the day. You had to have £300 jeans, £500
jacket, lots of jewellery, pockets of money and be smoking crack in large amounts. It was that or nothing and if it wasn’t that you were nothing. At raves it was about which crew were the most rowdiest, baddest. Then we began to want more and more money for jewellery, girls, drugs and champagne. Eventually I got arrested for robberies and got 5 years.

They sent me to HMP Zeta, then Theta, one of the toughest prisons for young offenders. I was a bit scared, cos I’ve heard stuff. I went onto wing and into don’t care mode again. Guys from Manchester started talking rubbish to me, so I attacked them but they was controlling the prison. Then I joined up with guys who I used to fight cos we’re all from London and other people are the enemy innit. Everyone needs to be protected innit. You start nodding at each other. On the pool table, you start talking, don’t like this guy and before you know it you do everything together like smoking cannabis, having a drink, sopping shower gels or food. After that no one troubled us. We started to have things our way in the prison. Then prison staff seen I was kinda in control of things.

When I got released if I saw them on the street no problem we’d still be friends. After I’d been to jail I never had no problem with guys from other areas, we was cool with each other. It was just before, when I was young.

I was still a gang member when I was in prison, but we drifted apart due to being in prison. I grew out of the gang lifestyle and started to think more business orientated even though the business I was now in was drugs.

When I came out of prison when I was 22, I decided I ain’t gonna do no robberies. I was chilling and started to get involved and talking with my daughter and her mother. That was kinda the first time we started to build up relationship. I was trying to stay away from people. I worked at my Uncles café, but it didn’t feel right. People from my past were coming in, tempting me, they had fast cars, jewellery, clothes, excessive amounts of money. One thing led to another and I fell right back into what I’d already come out of. It was now about money, power and respect. I started to get involved in selling drugs.

After that it was my sister’s boyfriend, he didn’t put no pressure on me. He sees me involved and said he’d help me out innit. People was shocked cos he was from another manor. He gave me money, drugs, and I started making money again. We was dealing together. I was right back into the swing of things, like I had never left. Money was coming in faster than ever. I weren’t smoking crack then just weed. But obviously jealous people start popping out of the woodwork, people wanna rob you. He got robbed, then his houses started to get robbed, where he holds his stuff. We started to get threatening phone calls, people breathing down the phone.
Then we went to a party, as we pulled up it was an ambush, but we got away. You gotta protect yourself. At first it wasn’t even about the guns, but after attempts on our life we never hand any choice. We decided to buy firearms to keep safe. We’d go to raves strapped up. We didn’t carry them, we’d keep them in the car. Like what happened, where I got arrested for the shooting, got ambushed as we went to the car as we need the firearm.

I was already paranoid from being young so wasn’t scared cos my mind is ready to accept these things are gonna happen to me. It was kinda self-prophecy he instilled it in my head these things are gonna happen. I was talking of going to parties even though people was looking for us. Could have moved away and still made money. I kept going to parties and bought a Mac-10. Then this thing happened with the police and I was on the run, I was paranoid of everyone. People was phoning saying they heard what happened at the night club, police are looking for men it’s been on the news. I was even more paranoid, started to take more weed and drinking. Before I went on the run I went and got my daughter and we stayed together. It felt I was gonna lose everything. I needed to be with her. I didn’t feel like that before. I came back and got arrested for a shooting at a nightclub.

I went to HMP Kappa, that was a different experience. Officers were very aggressive, telling me to strip off, squat and all this. I’m thinking I’m not doing that I done it before. I got attacked and all the feelings from the past started to build up in me again. Everything is repeating itself now. I’m getting aggression shown to me again. They can see I’ve done a bad crime but don’t know if I've done it or not. They’re showing me aggression all over again so it’s like the cycle of aggression. They show aggression, I show aggression back. It seems they hate me, I believe they hate me, and then I hate everyone. This is going round and round. My solicitor’s telling me I’m getting life innit, things start to hit me. I’m thinking I’m not coming out of prison. I’m thinking life, my life’s finished. I’m starting to talk to my mum more cos we ain’t been close. I’m talking to her to say I love her, I’m sorry for how things have been. She ain’t with my step-dad no more so it’s the real her speaking. We started to get close, she started to come to see me and bring my daughter.

Aged 23 they tried to give me life, but this got reduced to 14 years cos there was no violence used in my bank robberies.

Then my little brother started to get arrested. I spoke to him on a visit and had tears in my eyes telling him I don’t want to happen to him what’s happening to me. That’s the first time I’ve spoken to him like that and I felt proper emotional. I know the reason I followed that road was cos of my step-dad. I was starting to think he was gonna start following me and started to get scared for him.
After that my friend got shot. When that happened, I was numb. I didn’t know why he got shot cos I never had no contact. I phoned his sister at the hospital and spoke to him. He was weak, and it made me cry. I’m getting tears like I’ve never had tears in my life before. When I knew him, he was full of life, bubbling, soul of the party, but there was no laughing, he could hardly speak. That was too much for me. After that he passed away.

When I was in HMP Omicron I met this Rasta man and he was telling me about who am I. I never really questioned who I was or where do you wanna go. I’d go to his cell and wanted to keep on speaking to him. He said have you got a life plan? Do you think you’ve got a calling? He never told me answers to the questions, he said the questions are inside you and when you start asking yourself these questions people will start coming into your life.

When I was 25 two more friends got shot dead, one my best friend. He was working with disabled kids. He went back to the area; I spoke to him that day and told him he shouldn’t be around. He wouldn’t listen. It was deliberate; it was the same people that was preying on us before we got arrested for the shooting. The defining moment when I said I’ve had enough was definitely his death. I’ve had friends in my life, but we were proper close. The amount of time we was together he’s done more for me than most people ever done and even spending time with each other, laughing, having drugs, going out, just being there, not judging me, he was that person. When I have friendships with other people I’ve never had proper friendship. It was the one time I’ve had it and when he passed it was like there’s nothing out there for me no more.

After that I was down, started taking drugs in prison, ecstasy every day. I was brewing hooch, drinking hooch every day, smoking weed. I was high, out of my face. I was blocking out my best friend’s death cos at that time I couldn’t block nothing out. Everything was hitting me, over and over. Thinking about my mum, I was worried for her. Starting hearing people, we had problems with before were being aggressive with my sister. Everything is getting on top. I’m not speaking to no one in prison but I’m kinda dealing with it myself.

The next thing my enemies were in my prison and I got attacked which brought me down again. I got attacked cos I wanted to be me innit. I didn’t want to be part of the group, didn’t wanna be seen with these people. That’s what it stems from. I even looked out for the minority people. If I heard people was on to them, wanted to attack them for no reason I’d say be careful. This got back cos everybody was scared of the group but I weren’t. That’s why I got attacked but it took them long to do it. I know it was meant to happen because I got attacked the day I was supposed to be leaving. Got smashed over the head with an iron bar, my hand was mashed up and got cuts to the back of my head.
Officers came on to the wing, cards arrived, telling me how much people was looking out for me and hope I’m alright. That was the first time I saw love from lots of people. I didn’t think I was liked so that made me feel a lot better about myself.

They moved me to HMP Delta and I was almost the only black prisoner. There was no weed or drink, so I came down. I looked at my best friend’s letters. He was telling me music was the way out of our lifestyle. At first, I didn’t see what he was trying to tell me but then realised he was saying to write, this was a way for me to talk, write poems, music, be creative.

Then I went to HMP Gamma where I met this woman, a CARAT worker. She was my key worker on my focus course and I spoke to her one to one like counselling. She says she knows there are things wrong with me innit. Everything started to come out, I couldn’t hold it back and kept talking to her. Then I used to feel better. Before I’d feel pains in my belly and doctors who would say there’s nothing wrong with you. After talking to her the pains started to go, I started to feel more life. She told me everything you’ve been through is for a reason and you’re special. She was the first person that ever told me that. It kinda hit me and I’m thinking why is she saying this to me innit. Thinking does she like me or something. I couldn’t work it out. She said you’re gonna do a lot for yourself in the future. No one ever told me that, so it was a big deal. She weren’t interested in my past, just how am I doing today. I’d tell her I’m feeling better. She said you’ve got to start thinking for your future, what do you want to do? I was able to talk anytime I need to talk to her. She said I should do courses, I started to attack them one by one. I knew the answers to everything. Before I’d been shy to put my hand up. I knew the answers cos I’d been through everything they was talking about. I hit the nail on the head every time. That started making me feel more confident about myself.

I’m still asking myself why are all these people dying? Couldn’t understand why. People used to say I wouldn’t make it to 21. I’m starting to go into education, to rap, to write about things, like my community. It’s coming natural to me. Why are things the way they are? I started to write about the questions the Rasta man asked me, who am I, what do I wanna do?

Then Glen came into prison and set up a gang’s forum talking about gangs, guns and knives innit. I was sceptical at first. When you’re sitting with criminals you’ve got peer pressure, thinking don’t say too much. I’ve got a lot I wanna say now cos I’ve started to find myself inside, but I’m worried about people around me innit. I saw they was warming to him, so I started to be more communicating. Before I left I made a point of saying I like what he’s doing and would like to see him again. It started me thinking – I had a negative effect on my manor, I could have a positive effect, turn it round, I can start to have a life. When Glen came back I made a point of grabbing as
much people as I could to make sure his work is appreciated. Not a lot of people have come up to me before and tried to make a difference in my life.

Then my sister’s boyfriend got murdered, I told her not to be with him innit, but she didn’t listen, and he died innit. It’s not only affected me, affected her and now her baby has no dad.

Then my little brother went to prison and that affected me cos I see my little brother, I don’t see this criminal he’d become. It tore me up inside that he was gonna go to prison and I was scared for him, like gangs in prison, people attacking him. I was more scared for him than I’ve been for myself. I know it wasn’t his kinda life style cos the step-dad left, he wasn’t raised that way so that’s why I was worried. If you’re not prepared it’s kinda harder to survive.

Right now, I’m at the crossroads. I’m starting to think when I come out of prison it’s either end up in jail or dead or I can try and go this way into kinda love instead of going with the negative and hope that takes me the right way. That’s where I’m going cos I know how easy it is for me to come back to prison, I’ve been there all my life. I know how easy it is to die cos I’ve seen people around me die. I only have to look at my sister’s little kid knowing his dad’s dead, I know my lifestyle contributed to that. My sister saw what I was doing, got involved with those guys thinking it’s cool just like my brother.

I’m trying to move forward, that’s what I’m trying to do now. All my life people have wanted to be like me, in a negative way, but I feel with everything that’s happened I can be an inspiration.

After that I met you. Got a letter from you innit, I didn’t know you. It was small, but it was more than I’ve ever had before innit. That’s why it wasn’t nothing for me to write back, that’s what I was going through at the time. It came naturally at the time cos that’s where I was in my life, that’s where I wanted to be. Meeting all them people gave me hope I’d never had before in my life. Started to feel I kinda had a bit of support no matter how little it may seem cos I can’t see these people every day, I started to kinda believe that I’m here for something and all the things I have been through in the past is going to lead to something good. I started to get more confident, but you still have your downers, your doubts and I’ve been through that.

I look back on my life, I didn’t have opportunity, awareness or good role models. They are the three most important things kids need. There was no love. I was mad at the people that made it that way. I realised only I could change it. That’s when I decided to turn my back on it.

My message to youngsters today is - People need to understand what being real is. People are getting this being real thing mixed up.
Being real is not getting nicked, going to jail for life and leaving your mother to cry, your kid with no dad, your kid's mother to scrimp and scrape by herself, and probably end up in front of the same so-called friends, that’s not being real. Being real is being there for your family innit, at the end of the day there’s lots of things I’ve thought to myself. I’d rather be outside and have nothing just to be there with my family rather than having all the money in the world but being around people I don’t trust. It’s not a good feeling cos I sat in prison and thought I wonder if I can still hang around with these guys. But I thought I can’t trust them cos things change when you’re in prison, people start making money with this person and they make money to set you up. It’s a game of chess out there and I don’t wanna be playing chess with these people, this is too much just for a bit of money. I’d rather be around my family who I can trust, live a normal life and behave myself. What I’m saying is being real is being there for your family when they need you not being out on the road and fighting over some block you don’t even own. Block’s still gonna be there when you die. The bandanas still gonna be there when you die. It’s a load of nonsense. Before I went to prison there was no bandanas. Now everyone’s acting like America, this ain’t America, this is England possibly more civilised. It’s gone mad. People need to wake up and understand what being real is. Being real is being real to your family and to yourself first and foremost.

My interpretation of the roads - It should be the Roads IS a wasted life. The roads is the whole thing, not just where we congregate it’s the mentality, the hustle, the bustle, the flex, the vibes, symbols, music, money, clothes, girls, cars everything.

My final message to people is - think about this. If a group of black kids was going around gunning down white kids, there’d be uproar. If a gang of white kids going round gunning down black kids every week there would be an uproar. I don’t know why there is no uproar when these things are going on every day. People need to think about that cos at the end of the day we’re all one and we’re still doing it to each other. People need to realise it’s a waste and a big joke.

Young people about to go on the same route as I’ve been on need to know they’ve got a lot to lose. They’re where I wish I could be now. Wish I could go back and start again. But I’m not looking at it as a negative I’m looking like I’ve been through that, to be there for them and speak to them. Maybe one day I’ll meet you, talk and guide you on the right paths of people that could help you. If you think you need help, try and get it. There’s people out there, think positive and talk cos that’s what I done, and everything changed.

To authorities I’d say don’t judge everyone. Give people a chance. Some people are walking around with masks on. It’s not really them, it’s bravado. The most aggressive and loudest ones they’re the ones
who really wanna be helped cos that was me. It wouldn’t come across that I wanted to speak to anyone, but I did I was crying inside, I never showed it outside, I was in bits all the time. You need to find a way to reach out to these people, realise they are human, everyone deserves a chance.
Interview with Marcus at a Charity Trust on February 3, 2012.

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We lived in Kinshasa the capital of Congo. The whole family left Congo, my mum, my dad, me and my brother. I left my hamsters, my grandma, everyone else. We lived in France for a bit with my auntie, my dad’s sister; she lived in Paris, nice apartment. We lived there for a few months before coming to England. I remember speaking French properly, my French was good, it was Congo’s national language. I still understand French, but it needs a bit of work.

I was about 4 when we came to England. We lived in south London, near the hospital for a few years. The house was nice.

I used to get teased at primary school a lot because my English weren’t all that. I had to learn English. I also got teased about the way we looked, our trainers and clothes, they didn’t fit in. You could tell we was from somewhere else. That’s where most of my anger came from. I built up this defence thing that I need to be like these boys or be better. I’m not having no one cuss me and all that. I went to primary school and was a good student but always in trouble cos of the teasing. I couldn’t take it when someone teased me or about my mum or my family, it wasn’t funny to me when I was young. I used to snap at them.

When I was naughty at school they tried to sit me down but the problem with me is once my anger gets the better of me there’s nothing no one can do. Once I’ve seen red there’s nothing they could do. They used to sweet talk me “Oh you’re so handsome, why are you doing all this? Please calm down” Give me cuddles, things like that. Yeah that’s how they used to calm me down. When I was upset I was upset. They used to calm me down differently from other kids, I don’t know why but it worked.

My dad was going to university, he’s got a degree in IT computer programming. My mum she’s always worked in hotels as a maid. When we came home from school they were there. Sometimes I was left on my own with my little brother. I’ve kind of been the man; I’ve had to do something from young. I remember cooking for me and
my little brother when we were alone at home. I was about 7, learnt how to cook pasta and egg, that was one meal we had a lot.

Everything was sweet at home when I was very young. But growing up I’ve kinda seen a lot of abuse. My mum and dad would argue a lot. He used to put his hands on her most of the time. He would slap her, and she would always be crying. One time she looked at my face while she was on the floor, she was crying, and I looked at him thinking that’s my mum. I began to resent my dad when I was 8 or 9.

If we were naughty we got beated with the hoover pipe or a wooden spoon. Put your hand out and leave it there while he hit our knuckles. We got beat, we got it all when we were little. Yeah in a way I’m angry with him for the way we grew up, the abuse and beatings but it’s kinda made me who I am today. Sometimes I’m angry with him but sometimes I think they kinda raised me the right way.

When I was young I loved football, I was the best. Football was my world, every minute, that’s all you ever saw me with a ball. Everywhere I went I had my football. At secondary school I was captain of my year throughout and represented south London. I played for a football club. I remember always going football training on my own. I’d go with friends, but they had their dad’s there watching them, go on son and all that. I never had none of that, no one to cheer me on. After football I’d make my way home on my own. When I used to see other kids get scouted I used to play and give it all my best and it’s him that’s getting scouted not me. That kind of killed my motivation and football dreams.

When I got to secondary school that’s when I saw a new world kinda thing. I would stay out late, follow my friends, trying to mingle, fit in. My friends were local. I’m still friends with people I went to primary school with.

I went to secondary school in south London. The day I started there was the biggest fight I’d ever saw with the boys in the year above. The whole school was outside by the BP garage and I was thinking wow is this how it gets down, when it gets to this is this how it is? That kinda opened my head to all that. Seeing the ABC crew and older boys standing outside school all day while we was in school and they always had their cars. We’d see the ABC crew outside with new cars, new jackets, new this, new that. That’s what kinda messed us up cos while we’re trying to learn we had distraction right in our face. They’d jump over the gates and chill with their friends. It was just mad.

By then we were living on an old estate that got knocked down. I shared a room with my brother and they had a room, that was it.
Shoplifting was my first crime when I was 13. I had money on me that day I got £50 from my dad. The Warner Brothers Shop, that’s where I got arrested. I wanted to buy a Disney jumper with all the characters on the front. I had enough as the jumpers were about £35. I’m watching my friends shop getting trainers, jeans and jackets. I don’t know, my head just took me. Instead of paying for the jumper I tried to steal it, so I could still have money. If I had the jumper I could buy jeans too. I got arrested walking out by the security guard. When my parents found out they were upset “We gave you money and you went and done that”. I got cautioned, my first ever caution.

Just before Christmas when I was 13 we moved again to another house.

When I was 14 I was the victim of a robbery. That’s the day when I thought I’m not getting robbed again, I’m gonna be the robber, the one that’s taking peoples stuff. I was at school, I used to wear a gold chain with a cross on it, it was my mum’s. The ABC crew jumped over the gates, saw my chain, came over and I was just a little boy. I remember two of them, one big one, looking up and thinking this guy’s tall. He had his hands around me and the other one took the chain. I had tears coming down my eyes, trying to tell them please it’s my mum’s, don’t take it and they shoved my head, like shut up. I tried to tell friends about it, no one weren’t interested. That was the tip of the iceberg. That turned me into an animal. I thought my mum’s chain’s gone. I got in trouble for losing it, I made up a lie and said I’d lost it. I didn’t want to tell her I’d got robbed. That played on my mind for ages. Yeah that’s the one that kicked me off.

I was never the truant type. School was the best place to get away from my shitty home life. I thought we shouldn’t be growing up like this, like we should have everything other kids have got as well.

In the summer when I was 15 I started smoking weed, cannabis. Hanging out with friends round the back of the technology block at school smoking. I remember trying weed for the first time and thinking nnnn what is this, my eyes were rolling, my heart was beating fast, I’m thinking I’ll never do that again.

At school I got 5 GCSE’s A to C’s, the rest were D’s & E’s. Art was one of my main things, PE I liked. Design technology I loved too, making things like crafting wood. I got two C’s in English. Maths & science weren’t me, more arts, practical making, that’s how I learn. That’s what I tried to explain to teachers when I was little, but I couldn’t express myself. If I could tell them I was more a practical learner back, then I would probably have got something better now. Back then teachers didn’t know that, they didn’t understand. If one kid’s being disruptive then send him out. What they didn’t understand is we all have different ways of learning.
I left school and went to sixth form college, but it was too much like a church, and I weren’t into that. After a few sessions you have to go to the chaplaincy and I thought this is bullshit. I was studying art and design GNVQ level 1. I thought I can’t do this college. I applied for another college and studied the same thing. I carried on with that until everything started happening, getting arrested an all that, that’s when my education crumbled.

After 2 months at college, when I was 16, I stole a car, got arrested and my dad beat me. The way he beat me that day it weren’t a normal smack, it was proper clenched fists, like boxing. I retaliated, put my hands on my dad, grabbed him, don’t put your hands on me like that again. My mum came out crying “You two stop, stop” I said, “Mum I don’t want to be here no more, I’m going” My mum was begging me to stay. He weren’t that bothered.

I lived in a car for about 2 weeks, slept in it on the corner of my mum’s road. They didn’t know I was there. It was a mate’s car, a banger. I remember waking up in the morning for school, seeing people going to school and I’m waking up in a fucking car. From there I’ve never really looked back, I’ve always carried on just do this on my own.

Just before I was 17 I robbed a boy. We’d had an altercation in the past, so I seen him and confronted him, he was in his school uniform. Beat him up, took his phones. I got arrested, admitted it and got fined.

A couple of months later I got arrested for possession of a knife. I’ve come out of the gadget shop. I had a receipt for the little pocket knife I’d just bought. It wasn’t to stab no one. We’ve all been buying jokey little things in the gadget shop and I liked the knife, the way it flicked out. Got on the train and the police came on to the train. They’re searching people, for tickets and things like that. They’ve searched me, found a knife and I got arrested.

After leaving home I’d lived at my friend’s house for a bit. I’ve always gone from friend to friend. I’ve lived with a Chinese family. That’s how bad it is. My mum would phone. “It’s been 3 months no one ain’t seen you”. So, I don’t care. I’ll come round when I need to come, or I’ll pop in “Are you alright mum, is there any food” Say what I gotta say and I’m gone.

The relationship with my dad broke down from then and it’s still like that today. We’re big people now, I don’t say nothing, he don’t say nothing. Who cares kind of thing.

Coming up to 18 I’ve kinda learnt to survive on the roads by dealing drugs, cannabis and doing a few little robberies. Yeah, trying to survive on my own, I needed new trainers, I need to eat.
cannabis I made about £60 profit every couple of days. Started to buy my stuff, feeling like I was independent for myself, doing my own thing.

When I was 18 I got run down by a car. I’d come to see my friend and there was an altercation outside his house with some Jamaican men. I was talking to his mum, we’ve seen my friend arguing and his mum was saying “Take your argument away from my front door”. I’ve looked and seen a car coming at full speed driven by a Jamaican man. I’ve dragged my friends mum out of the way and the car’s got me.

Then I got arrested a few times for driving offences like no insurance, disqualified driving. At 19 I served my first time in prison for driving offences, it was about 6 weeks. I remember being home sick cos it was so far from London and it was all kinda Scousers and people like that, funny accents. A lot more has followed. I’ve spent time in five prisons. Always short remand times, 6 months or so.

At 19 I moved on to supplying crack. I managed to kinda support myself and because I smoked a lot of cannabis I thought I’m not making proper money, let me try something else, so that’s what I did. I earnt more from crack, but more trouble came with it. With crack I was at my prime. I’m not gonna glorify it cos looking back I don’t like what I was doing. I was better off I was getting somewhere with selling crack. I’d have £300 in my pocket before 12 ‘o’ clock, by the afternoon £500. I dealt in my local area. Why get a job when you get more for dealing crack? That’s the mentality I had for years. Once I got good at it, I thought I make more money than you lot anyway.

The reason I was so good at selling drugs was because I never looked at my clients as junkies. There was times when I actually gave them free stuff, I don’t want your money, take it, it’s for free. Birthdays I used to give them some. A few of them I had relationship with. It’s crazy, I never looked at them as they were from the bottom of the barrel cos a lot of them when I did speak to them I used to ask them, “Why are you smoking? Why are you on this stuff?” I’ve heard stories; I used to be a lawyer, a policeman, my wife divorced me, and everything went downhill. I stopped judging them straight away cos they had a better life than me. Something must have happened for them to go into deep depression and start taking crack. There’s a reason behind everyone’s situation, I learnt that selling drugs. “My life’s fucked, I used to be a policeman, since this happened, I’ve gone downhill ever since” No one didn’t take no time to listen to him, just like me. He didn’t hear it, didn’t know my situation, didn’t know the reason why I had to do what I did.
Even though I’ve had to sell drugs it’s not something I was happy with. At the time I had no choice, I didn’t know a way out of the situation I was in. What my friends presented to me at the time, crack selling, it was the best plan I’ve ever heard when I was at that age, no money and everything. I never used crack. I don’t think I ever would.

Apart from cannabis I spent the money on clothes, food, making sure I looked right. I always had the latest trainers. My life kinda changed when I started dealing cos I was looked at, everyone knew me in my local area. He’s got a new car, seen his new trainers, new jacket. That’s how I was, I was seen like that. The little rich kid in the area, always got money.

The status I had made me feel good but what they didn’t know is my family background or my family situation. They’ve just seen the outside picture. He’s looking nice, fresh clothes every day, but no one knew how or why I did it.

I’ve never been in no gang although when I was selling crack, police had me down as a ABC crew member but I’m way too old for that! What happened I was in my car with a young boy that lives a couple of doors away from my Mums and I’ve always seen him as my little brother. Always taken care of him or looked out for him. Didn’t want him to go the way I went so I’d give him money, if he’s hungry and asks me for money I’d try to do what I can. We got arrested in the car together, so they put me down as a ABC crew member cos he was. I tried to tell them I’m way older than the ABC crew, there’s no way how can a big 20-year-old man be in this gang. I’m more like the older boys. Cos, I got stopped with him, they labelled me.

My mum, that’s one of the reasons why I thought let me move out because I always used to come home with phones, laptops I got from the druggies. I’d always come if she needed a new TV. Yeah mum I’ll sort that out don’t worry, I’ll make a few phone calls, sort you out a new TV. Or my little sister, I need new trainers. Cos I’ve always seen them struggle I didn’t want to put more stain on them by asking for stuff. I’ve asked as a child and I never got it. I’ve got beaten for asking for too much. I’ve always thought I need to play a role here as the eldest sibling. Even when in prison I’ve wrote to my little brothers and sister, don’t do what I do. I’ve always stressed the fact to my little brother. I will beat you up personally if I found out you was selling or doing what I did. One member of the family has gone; is like a black sheep innit, I don’t want you being another. Whatever you need come to me if mum & dad can’t get it. If I can help I will try. That’s one of the reasons why I tried to always have money, to look after myself and my family. Don’t put so much stress on them as I know they can’t do it anyway. Even though I was kicked out I would not go around there but would give my little brother money.
My little brother got involved in crime. I blame myself cos me and him were years apart and he’s always tried to be like me or have the reputation I had. Go and get the status I’ve got around our manor. Instead of selling drugs he was straight on the Securicor vans. The first time he did that and got away with it that mixed up his head. A little boy getting 20 grand in one go, there was no way I could tell him to go to work or give that up. It don’t go in his head, it goes in one ear, it goes straight out.

Just after, age 20, I worked as a porter. I started to wanna change myself, do something instead of selling drugs. I did portering at a hotel at Heathrow. It was kind of busy. My girlfriend’s mum got me that job, cos she was the manager. She always tried “Stop selling drugs, you’re better than this, look how handsome you are, do something else”. I’ve always tried to work but once I get into work and start to get their attitude and abuse automatically my mind frame switches and I think I make more money than you, I don’t need to hear your shit. That’s the mentality I’ve had for years. I don’t need to be in this job, I could switch on my phone and make £500. Once I got involved in drugs and knew what I was doing, it messed up my head.

By then I was living in private rented places. My drugs money would pay for my deposit. Always nice places, private.

I moved away cos I wanted to start afresh. I knew everyone, I can’t walk out in my area without my name being shouted out. Or shopkeeper “You alright?” People know me, they’ve seen me in the hot cars. They know that’s the boy, watch him kinda thing. I wanted to get out and start afresh, I didn’t want no friendship around me. It was difficult but bit of peace of mind as well. It made me happy cos I’m still there till now.

A few months before I was 21, I had a domestic with my girlfriend, and she scratched my car, a brand-new Renault Laguna. She was jealous, me and her wasn’t working no more but she didn’t want to let go of what she had cos I would help with her rent, walked in with gifts, shoes, handbags, even if it’s not her birthday. She scratched up my car, the bonnet, sides, back, everywhere. That’s when we was coming to an end, we split up shortly after.

After that I got a plumbing job, through one of my landlords and I did a bit of painting and decorating.

Age 22 I was still smoking cannabis, selling drugs and then I got disqualified from driving for 9 months. After that I met my baby mother and when she became pregnant and I thought all this has gotta stop.
My daughter was born when I was 23. Once she was coming I was stressed, I wanted to have everything ready, cot, pram, everything and I weren’t working. All my drugs money I was trying to save up, and I would buy her clothes. Everything ready so her mum wouldn’t stress about things. Then I started thinking I can’t have my daughter seeing me doing this. Fair enough daddy brings home money but it’s dirty money innit. I don’t wanna loose her again, I don’t wanna go a jail cos I know when I’m doing my thing that’s what happens, I could go for 6 months and come back. I don’t wanna do that no more. Jail was like your mind being paused while you were in jail, like someone pushed the pause button for a minute. When you come out everything is moving fast, this has changed, that’s changed, you don’t know what to do.
Age 24 I drifted back into dealing crack just to survive.

When I was 24 I got shot. I went to a nightclub for my friend’s birthday; we didn’t go there to fight. We didn’t know the area, first time I’d been there in my life. I wasn’t even gonna come out, but my girlfriend pissed me off that day so much I thought I need a drink, Don’t phone me I’m gonna come home when I’m ready.
Got in the club had a nice time, some champagne. Got outside someone bumped into me and all I said was “Bruv what are you doing? What’s your problem?” His friends turned around “What you saying Bruv?” I’m looking at the gun thinking woe what do you mean what am I saying. Please I’m not saying anything, and he shot me.

The Police were like I explained to you before, I’ve applied for criminal compensation, that’s taken almost 3 years and I’m not getting no compensation. They’re talking about my character. So, when does someone’s character ever change? My character ain’t got nothing to do with my past, ain’t got nothing to do with me getting shot. Then not complying with the police investigation, the police lost my file, they’ve never got in contact with me, so where’s the victim support, what have you lot done for me? Nothing, so why should I help you, talk to you? What for, it’s crazy out there. These kids are not stupid they see everything.

As soon as I got out of hospital after my shooting enemies, people that didn’t like me, it was like they were praying that I died. For me to come back, I remember seeing one boys face, it’s like “You’re alive” “What do you mean I’m alive” It’s like they were praying I didn’t come back.
They weren’t another gang, just people I had conflict with or didn’t like. Since I’ve got shot it’s like they see me trying to do this good thing but then I’ve got names trying to bring me down. Allegations “He’s threatening to kill me, he’s doing this” I don’t know where it’s coming from, I don’t know why.

About 6 months after my shooting I got arrested for a knife robbery and it was NFA’d. The guy didn’t want to come to court. He done it
over the phone and that was it and because of my record they just come straight away, and I got remanded.
I sat in jail for 9 months. My daughter was nearly 2 years old coming to see me on visits every week. The guy didn’t turn up to court, no apology, nothing, right you’re free to go, that’s it. That’s where some of my bitterness and anger comes from with the police. 9 months of my life behind bars. That’s it, we know you didn’t do it you’re free to go. Bye, is that it? I was released age 25.
I’ve come out of prison a few times and said I liked it. It’s given me time to think about my dumb actions and I’m not really a people’s person, I like to sit on my own, think. I love my own company. I’ve got a friend who’s the same, I go to his house and me and him, not a word, just sit, he’s watching TV I’m listening to music but we’re both fine, that’s how we are. If I wanna talk, we’ll talk but if I don’t wanna talk I don’t wanna talk. When I go to jail sometimes, and where I’m really known, someone shouts out my name, I don’t know where it’s come from “Yah what you doin in here?” Then I’m always around people that are known but I like my time alone cos that’s when I think best. I can put my plans to action.

Since I’ve got shot I got wrote off with depression, highly depressed and very vulnerable that’s what my GP wrote recently. I started drinking and was on cannabis, got nicked for possession of cannabis a few times too.

Depression had a big effect on me but thankfully Trust came into my life. I’m 27 sitting in the house crying one day, tears came to my eyes, thinking my life is a shambles, everything’s a mess, and my girlfriend she saw a leaflet of the Trust. “Give them a call, why not, they work with people that have done wrong in the past, ex-offenders, people who wanna change their life, give them a call” I was like they aint gonna wanna see someone like me, they’ve already made up their mind, they don’t care about me. That’s the attitude I had before coming in. I spoke to the staff and realised most of us are ex-offenders and that’s why I love it here, cos they don’t judge you, cos you can still fix the wrong you’ve done. They’re giving you the chance and no one else ain’t given me that chance ever. I feel like I’m at home here. Even I’ve had a job recently here.

I’ve been volunteering for 9 months and doing NVQ level 3 Advice and Guidance was for 6 months, two days a week. 9 months was my choice cos I didn’t want to jump in to a job role I don’t know nothing about. I wanted to actually do it, get experience, know what I’m doing. The Trust supported me, everything was free. They pay for lunch, refund my travel if I’ve got receipts. It was like win win to me. If I don’t get a job here it will go on my CV and anyone that sees 9 months of free work they’re gonna want me.

I’ve also had a job working in a PRU, schools and centres. Did one to one sessions with kids, I would get them from their classroom if they
had work the teacher couldn’t get them to do I would sit them
down, go through the work with them and just talk, find out the
problems or issues affecting them, how I can help. But there just
weren’t enough days, just one or two days, I want consistency.

I’m looking for a job in case working, meeting clients in prison,
talking to them. I would like to do it at the Trust as I wanna give back
to my community out of all these years I’ve taken from it. I reckon I
could run the Damiola Taylor Centre better. I reckon I could do a
much better job if I had my own youth club and that’s what I’m
working towards, to get funding to do my own youth project. If I had
a chance I reckon I could run my place better than the Trust. I
believe that kind of.

I’d do it anywhere but my manor I feel more comfortable cos I know
the kids, they know me. It’s not like I’m pretending to them, they
know me, they’ve seen what I’ve gone through. I’m telling them look
I’m not doing that no more I’m working, they take me seriously, he’s
not fucking about, he’s actually real.

I’ve gone into prison and the client I have met I knew him, so I
advised him, he was happy to see me working “Mate I thought you
was someone else, I knew it would be you, what you actually work
now, When I come out please help me, try and get me to do
something as well” Yeah, I’ll see what I can do. It just gives me that
buzz; I’m doing something good. I’m actually helping.

I’ve never had no help from Probation. I came out of jail once, went
to my probation officer and stressed I’m homeless, and she said,
“probation don’t help with housing”. I’m thinking you’re my
probation officer if I don’t get myself housed I’m gonna be on the
road, offending again and I’m gonna be in jail soon so how can you
say that.

The Trust is the only people that have helped me, given me a
chance, that’s why I love the Trust. I wouldn’t even wanna work
nowhere else. Even though I was working elsewhere I still wanted to
volunteer at the Trust even a day, as long as I’m in here still. I
couldn’t believe it when I first come here. I always used to walk past,
see junkies and alcohol misuse people outside and think what is this
place? do they just deal with dropouts? It wasn’t until I come in here
I used to think OK now I understand what you lot do.

Reflecting on my past a better father and son relationship may have
stopped me going down this pathway. If I could bring my problems
to him and he could advise me. Even though he does I don’t do it.
I’m more the type to go to my mum. “Mum this is wrong”. He’s quick
to snap “Ah you’ve done it wrong” I think I don’t wanna talk to you.

I feel I’ve let him down and he resents me. I see it in his face when I
look at him, the disappointment in me. His oldest child is doing
nothing. He ain’t said it but that’s what I I’ve got in my head. He was
working but he had time. He was too strict. I didn’t know how to approach him with my problems. I’m thinking he’s either gonna beat me or start shouting.

I don’t think it’s cultural I think it’s him. He didn’t get far in this country, done his university thing and still can’t find a job even though he is a qualified computer programmer. That’s where his anger must come from. He ended up arguing about it all the time. He’s done this studying for no reason. This country don’t help no one.

Me growing up I’ve always had that mentality that I’m gonna work, but at the same time I’m gonna look after myself. So, if I have to bend the system and work around them, I’ll do it because that’s the only way you’re gonna survive.

A lot of things made me wanna turn my life round - my personal experience on the roads, living on the roads, growing up on the roads, selling drugs, being shot, I’m the best person to tell these kids. That’s what I see.

My biggest challenge now is money. I wanna be straight and have a career, cos these kids out there look up to me, not me precisely but I’m one of the heads they see and think I wanna be like him. I thought to myself I don’t wanna do what everyone does, made money, had the cars, I done all that. I wanna do something better, I wanna be one day talking on the stand or in colleges telling them I’ve done it, it’s not the way forward. Naah tell them lived that life, there’s nothing you can tell me that I don’t know.

Cos I was one of those kids. As soon as I saw them coppers I thought what’s him coming here for? He don’t know nothing. Tell him to go and sell drugs on the road and then come back. That’s how I was growing up. I know them kids don’t wanna see that, they wanna see someone that’s actually lived it, been through it and they see that person go through it; now he’s telling me do this, do that. Since I started working with the Trust I’ve got one of my friends in here volunteering; he was “Please man, help me man, get me volunteering like you man, I don’t wanna do this no more” Everyone thinks these kids wanna sell drugs, none of us wanna do it. I didn’t but I didn’t know what else to do. Knocked on how many doors for a job, no one would give me no job so how am I gonna eat for today if I don’t do what I have to do? Last night I was telling my friend “Yeah I’ve finished my folder, I’ve passed now, I’ve qualified I can go a job centre, go housing, I’m qualified now” He was going “Get me doing that, I’ll volunteer please” Once you actually show them what the deal is they’ll do it, everyone wants to do it.
Interview with Billy at HMP Beta on June 13, 2013.

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<td>I was born in north London and have two sisters and a brother, all</td>
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<td>older than me. I’ve got three children. I’m in prison for a shooting</td>
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<td>and near the end of my sentence.</td>
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<td>As a young child my life was happy at home. I lived on a big council</td>
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<td>estate and went to the local primary school. I played out on the</td>
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<td>estate like all the kids and I loved school. Up until the age of 10,</td>
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<td>I was being programmed to be a good person and didn’t know any</td>
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<td>different. Don’t get me wrong I could be a little shit around the</td>
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<td>estate, but it was kids’ stuff. I was certainly brought up to know</td>
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<td>right from wrong. My dad was an excellent role model. He was a great</td>
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<td>big man who was always smart, and people treated him with respect,</td>
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<td>even if they didn’t know him. He was my hero. He wasn’t violent</td>
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<td>in any way and he wasn’t a criminal. He was a former army soldier and</td>
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<td>the stories he’d tell me would fascinate me as a child. This was the</td>
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<td>man I wanted to be, I wanted to grow up to be exactly like my dad.</td>
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<td>My hero, my dad, sat me down one day and he was telling me he was</td>
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<td>dying, and I was supposed to deal with this in some brave way like a</td>
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<td>soldier, but the thing is I couldn’t. I was 10 years old and found</td>
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<td>it difficult to deal with. I ran out of the room. He died a week later.</td>
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<td>One memory that is very strong in my mind from that time was my dad</td>
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<td>asking me to promise him I would join the army while he was on his</td>
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<td>death bed. This was strange at the time as it was practically an</td>
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<td>unwritten law that I would. It was always my intention to join the</td>
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<td>forces, even the police force.</td>
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<td>My problems, my rebelling, because that is what it was, started then</td>
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<td>at 10 years old. I often look back now to that child and know that if</td>
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<td>someone had just asked me how I felt things would have been so</td>
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<td>different. There wasn’t the support around then that there is today</td>
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<td>for traumas like that for a 10-year-old. There was no talking it</td>
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<td>through at the time, so I had to deal with it myself. If I had a</td>
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<td>problem I just had to get on with it. The anger I felt at the time</td>
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<td>was intense. My dad had left me, and I adored him, he was my role</td>
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<td>model.</td>
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<td>What happened was even though the gangs were there, and a lot of</td>
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<td>people don’t realise this, you get involved in gangs at 4 or 5. I</td>
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<td>wasn’t involved cos I had a positive role model which kept me away</td>
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<td>from bad things. But when he was gone I started becoming more</td>
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<td>involved cos I was looking for role models.</td>
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<td>It wasn’t long after my dad’s funeral that I smoked my first</td>
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<td>cigarette at the bottom of the estate with friends I’d grown up with,</td>
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of us. Just smoking that fag wouldn’t have happened had my dad not left me. I was rebelling, sort of sticking my fingers up to my dad for leaving me.

Within months I’d had my first drink, same friends, same place, this was our young gang. Chipping in what money we had to buy a half bottle of whiskey, we all got drunk for the first time. For me it was getting over the trauma, it was the only time I wasn’t thinking about my dad’s death and being alone, it was great. That’s how the drink started to enter my life. We’d do that once a week. People talk about peer pressure, but it wasn’t, there was no pressure, it was a wanting to be alike rather than any pressure. In the next 5 years alcohol was a massive part of my growing up.

I have mentioned all this as it explains on a personal note how the impact of trauma coupled with peer pressure (family and friends) went on to alter my young mind so quickly.

When my dad died the immediate change in my life was profound. My estranged elder brother who I’d never met entered my life. Due to his criminal behaviour and associates my dad had kept him away from me. He was now the ‘father’ figure in my life, my new role model and I was confused. A better role model would have stopped me going the way I did, but my older brother appeared, and I focused on him.

My crime escalated through my brother. It wasn’t that he pushed me into crime but because of him being there and seeing. Learning his beliefs, his morals and seeing what he was doing. That was the only example I had. Waking up in the early hours and going into the front room as a youngster, guns fascinate kids, there was guns there, bags of money from armed robberies and things like that. Everyone being happy cos we had money. There’s a photo somewhere of when I was 10, sitting on the living room floor at home at seven in the morning in just my pants. I’d just been woken up by drunk adults. There was a look of confusion on my face as I had a sawn-off shotgun in my lap and was surrounded by bank notes from one of my brother’s robberies. I remember that morning well because it was freezing, and they gave me a £10 note for my troubles!

In those days on the council estate criminals wasn’t looked at the same way as they are now, they were heroes of the estate, like Robin Hood. So, there was the estate, it was set, the foundations for my future.

My brother seemed to pick up on my anger towards my dad for dying but mistook it for the hatred he felt himself at being disowned by my dad for his criminal lifestyle.

When my brother found out I was smoking he laughed, praised me and positively encouraged it. I craved the praise from him and the
other older lads in his gang. He would push me out of the front door to fight with people. I was being programmed into someone I didn’t like at the time but as time went on felt it was normal to be. So, the change was in place. I was smoking, drinking and fighting so as to stick my fingers up at my dad who as a Christian was supposedly looking down on me.

From there it was a case of progressive steps, of which there are thousands intertwined with thousands of others that eventually make up a person’s ‘lifecycle’ of activating event, belief and finally action and consequence.

Before my dad died I would go out to play on the estate but now I was starting to understand the language the older kids were talking, and people knew I was my brothers younger brother. I was being loved by different people now, but it felt OK. Gradually I started to crave the attention of the older lads on the estate but to do that I had to follow suit and for me it was an education.

The friends I had of the same age suffered in later life because of my influence. Bad cycles are passed on with very little pressure normally. Young minds crave education, attention and praise of any form. I was watching and learning loads from the older guys and then showing my friends who in turn taught the next generation.

Because I was hanging around with the older gang from time to time I was seeing them fight with other gangs. I’d relayed this information to my close pals who were thirsty for these stories. We would mimic them, going out and starting on other small groups.

This was the start of my gang and it offered me things I didn’t have at home, love, loyalty, respect. At times you felt invisible, you could get away with anything. Gang culture was beginning to play a big part in my life at 12 years of age.

Guns were always in our lives as a gang. From an early age I would get a glimpse of one here and there with my brother into armed robbery. As kids we’d imagine what it would be like to have one. Carrying guns was normal gang culture. I got a terrible hiding from my sister one day when she saw me and my friends out of her window with a handgun. It was my mate’s bigger brothers, he used to keep it on the top of his wardrobe. My mate managed to sneak it out for a little while but we wasn’t as smart as we thought as we got caught. We were 13 and promised not to go near guns again. We knew their power and the fascination was so strong. Saying that though, we were still living by the rules that using a gun was a last resort.

Our crime started off breaking into cars or shoplifting. I could go even further back. You remember the old parka coats? They had
perfect sleeves for going to the sweet shop, going to the fridge and pushing lollies up the sleeve. That was our first dare, to come out with 2 or 3 ice lollies. That was the first thieving we ever done. After that it was a little bit of shoplifting off the shelves and then out of cars.

Age 13 me and my gang started drinking heavily. This would give us the confidence to beat people up and here’s a very notable progression. The older guys on the estate liked us kids because we were fighters. They’d give us alcohol or buy it for us from the off licence.

Around 14 they then introduced us to glue, gas, tippex and other solvents and we started to abuse these for about a year. It was a slow progression on to drugs but to get drugs you needed to commit crime, but it was OK to commit crime cos my role model was a criminal. Plus, the gangs on the estate and people I was getting to know were criminals.

Knives were a massive step up at around 14 years old but only carried out in the belief of protecting ourselves.

By the time I was 15 I tried cannabis and that became a big factor in my life and started off my criminal lifestyle. As a young gang, aged 15, our problem was the price of drugs. We didn’t have the contacts either, but we could fight. We were known for it, so we went and took what we wanted.

I had to smoke more and more puff to numb my mind but to do that I needed money. First, I started thieving from cars, stereos or anything that wasn’t glued down. Eventually everyone I knew who bought things off me had them, so I had to think of something else to steal. Initially I was getting into building sites and stealing tools and building material. I started burgling factories and shops with a friend stealing cigarettes, electrical goods and stuff that we could easily sell. We got caught for around 20 of them and it scared us to death, we were 16. This was my first arrest I got 2 years’ probation and 24 hours attendance centre where all you do all day is exercise with ex-policemen. But it didn’t stop us completely.

At this time, I was living with my older sister as my mum had re-married.

The older guys hated the squatters on our estate and it escalated into a massive fight with one of the older guys getting run over. We started getting cannabis from them. These seemed like good times, the squatters lived on our estate, but we were the only gang of our age that had this connection, so we would be middle men for the other gangs.

We began mixing with other gangs from other streets and estates. We would deal different drugs to each other. Another gang
introduced us to speed and acid. Acid we grew out of pretty quickly, but we liked speed. Drugs were a massive push in our progression. Not just the effects of taking them but selling them as well. This was the drugs side of things. The stealing was being learnt from the older lads and the praise, the psychological side, was coming from home and particularly my older brother.

Our weapons up to this point had been knives due to our beliefs which were instilled on us by our elder brothers, families and peers.

The threat of being beaten up by my older brother or older lads on the estate for losing a fight was very real. At 10 or 11 years of age it was simple fist fighting but over that 5 years the consequences of losing were too much for some so a stick or bar was produced if there was any doubt.

Even though in this 5-year period a lot happened I can safely say we didn’t believe ourselves to be ‘criminals’. It was like it was normal to do what we were doing because everyone around us was at it or talking about it. The more crime we committed without being caught compounded our belief that we were good at what we did. My first arrest for burglary was a marked point in our lives and really brought it home. We saw the reality of the consequences of our actions for the first time.

I think an excellent role model like my dad, if he had stuck around at least till I was 16 or 17 then things might have been different.

At 16 we really got into girls as well and that took money. We found a pub where we could get served. We wasn’t stupid at this age but it took about a year to realise how easy it could be to make money from dealing. We could get just about anything; it was another course in our criminal careers. It was another element right up until I got arrested for the shooting I am serving sentence for.

We were dealing, some were thieving, and we worked legally too to earn money. We tried the usual stuff, building work, shop work, driving work, anything we could get but never managed to stick to anything. This money would attract girls which in turn would get us into more pubs because the girls looked older than us. Two or three pints into the night, half cut one of us would always kick-off with someone over something stupid. “He was looking at my bird” that sort of thing and this carried on for years. We would only fuck off in pubs out of our manor. Well we couldn’t, “we didn’t shit on our own” or “on our own door step”, did we! We was telling other gangs we were there, marking new territory, “pissing up trees” as we called it, challenging them on their manor.

We had morals, you didn’t hurt your own, you didn’t steal off your own. However silly these sayings sound, and they do to me now, they were unwritten rules that we based our morals and beliefs on.
On my 18th birthday, me and my friends went out to paint the town red. What we didn’t know was that the red would be our blood. We bounced around the pub, pissing up trees (marking our territory), not knowing a gang from another area had come to celebrate my birthday as well, just in a different way. There was 5 of us and we was oblivious to the fact that we were being hunted. We were out numbered 6 to 1 and got such a battering that we all carry scars to this day from that night. The psychological damage was massive and our reputation in tatters. None of us mentioned it again and even though we knew the other gangs were treating us differently we tried to laugh it off whenever it was brought up. As a gang at the time we should have hit back hard but because we didn’t little things started to happen. Small groups from other gangs would start visiting our regular haunts and there would be scuffles.

Within our gang there wasn’t a leader, but you did have the main characters that influenced. I was one of those, I used to be the ideas man, or the moral person. If someone had done something from another gang it was me who’d instigate with words that a fight should happen.

I got married very young when I was 18 and my first child was born just after I was 19.

I was now in my twenties and things were good or, so I thought. I was young with plenty of money in my pocket, girls, clothes, my own flat but best of all I had respect. The thing was it was from the wrong sort of people. People that were only out for themselves. My drinking started to increase and so did the violence. People I cared about didn’t want to go out and socialise with me and I couldn’t deal with everyday things because of the lifestyle I was leading. My marriage broke up and I couldn’t hold a proper job down.

When we was taking amphetamine speed we liked it and built a tolerance to it but to pay for it, cos it was an expensive drug, we decided to start dealing. It was easy to deal drugs the hardest part was the violence, if people couldn’t pay or if other dealers tried to sell drugs where we was selling then there was violence and that was the most difficult part of it. On one occasion when I was 20, we had a fight with another gang with knives over drugs and attacked their van causing damaged. I got arrested for violent disorder, but the case got discharged.

We came unstuck on a couple of occasions when we were outnumbered but there was one such night when I was 22 that brought about our step to serious crime, guns. The progression through the knife stage had happened, bigger and bigger knives. We always knew that guns would be a bigger part of our lives at some point.
A few of us were doing a cocaine deal with a new contact in a pub. Another gang that had been pushing us for months started again and we started fighting. The fight ended up on the street and I remember clearly a point when the two gangs separated for a moment and one of the opposing gang members pulled out a machete. He swung it at my friend; luckily, he saw it coming but didn’t move far enough and got struck on the shoulder. We started to run when we heard a bang and the chase reversed. Our dealer friend was carrying a handgun and had fired at the other gang. We didn’t chase the other gang far and no other shots were fired but we were impressed.

Our deal carried on at a friend’s house while my mate went to hospital saying he’d been attacked and robbed when the police turned up. We finished our deal in high moods and asked how and when he could get us a gun; he was quite surprised we didn’t already have a tool (weapon). This gun was classed as a gang gun, not an individual’s and was put away with conditions to its use based on our morals and beliefs i.e. Last resort, to earn money or for protection.

Having this gun at hand stopped me in my tracks and made me really think about what we were getting into. I never touched that gun, but others did on occasions, usually when doing a deal for protection. It eventually got sold to another gang due to paranoia, but we still had our contact if we needed another. That gun brought about a very big change in us, an awareness of the seriousness of all our futures and the consequences involved.

After that our lives slowed down and some went straight and settled down with girlfriends and got a real career.

The next time a gun was ever an issue was with myself. I was 23 and a massive family feud led me to buy two shotguns from our contact. What was going on in my life at that time I would rather not go into, but it involved myself, my eldest brother and a very serious threat to me, my girlfriend and my child’s life, which I took very seriously. Looking back now I realise how pathetic he was. He was a bully and I had nothing to worry about, but I didn’t realise at the time and would go as far as to say that I was close to a nervous breakdown as well as becoming an alcoholic.

One night when I was 24 after a silly comment in a pub from someone I pulled out a gun and ended up smashing his teeth in with the gun because of something he said and cos of my belief. I went on after that to commit and armed robbery on an off licence up the road to prove myself, well that’s how it seemed. Threatened the staff with a shotgun and stole cash from the till and a load of cigarettes. I was walking around the streets in them days like I owned them. It took 2 weeks for the police to catch me.
My brother was a prolific armed robber and by doing an armed robbery I seemed to be trying to prove something. I ended up getting a 2-year sentence and for the first time in ages I felt safe. You’d have thought this might have stopped things, but it didn’t.

I found you could actually use drugs in prison as a currency. The violence was the same if not more in prison, so nothing had changed. There was also hooch, prison alcohol, brewed by prisoners and is very strong. That created more violence when people got drunk.

A year later aged 25 I was released and had to get a job, or my girlfriend was going to leave me and take my daughter with her. I did manage this but had a rocky start cos I couldn’t help thieving. I did stop and got myself a good job as a computer fitter and tried to settle down, but I was already programmed to mess up. The stress started to build up again very quickly after my release. My drinking increased and my relationship with my girlfriend was breaking down.

I happened to have a chance meeting with an old friend and I’d had my first E, he’d given me my first ecstasy. Again, it was the same old shit but a different place and time in my life. Booze, E’s, cocaine, cannabis, violence, the cycle was running, I’d already made my cycle, so it was off again.

When I was 26 I was arrested again after going mental in a restaurant. I fought with staff, and I had a knife and cs gas. I got remanded in custody for two weeks but got bail because of the job I had. I wish I’d been kept inside cos I carried on that path even when I got bail, with my beliefs. I got fined for that.

After that it was actually a period where I was trying to go straight, just had a new baby, four-year-old daughter, nice house, and I’d managed to get myself a good job, so things were rolling quite well. I was still doing a little bit of dealing, ecstasy things like that.

Then one night just before I was 27 years old, everything came to a head and I used a gun on an innocent man. I was drunk and on cocaine and ended up shooting a man outside a pub after a silly argument. This day was the consequence of my whole life.

On the day of my crime I’d finished work early and gone to the pub. I was drinking early, alcohol was becoming a problem for me at the time, cos of what was happening with my family. I was drinking heavily, and a rival gang member came into the pub with his girlfriend. He got into a scuffle with one of my friends. That was broken up and the other gang member was thrown out, but I followed him out. Where I’d had a lot to drink and wasn’t thinking properly the words I was saying was my beliefs, “What are you doing on my manor? What are you doing in my pub?” Like it was mine, I’d
personalised the area. We ended up having a scuffle, it got broken up and I went back to the pub. I was sitting in the pub for a few more hours, it was about 11 o clockish and there was this phone call, it was this fella’s girlfriend. Because of my reputation she was worried for his safety so phoned to get assurance from me that nothing was gonna happen. I had no intention of following it on, maybe when I’d sobered up but not then. He grabbed the phone off her once he realised I was assuring her nothings gonna happen. This is what happens in gangs, one gang sees another gang’s weakness they’ll jump on that and use it against them. He started making threats, thinking I was scared of him, and then the old reaction came up, I fronted it out, that’s it, things are gonna happen.

I went home and got a couple of guns, told him to come to the pub. I had every intention of having one of the old Western shoot outs with this fella. Came back to the pub with guns, left one outside, which was the craziness of my thinking. I didn’t want to take it in the pub cos it was my pub, but I was willing to shoot at somebody, it’s crazy. I sat in the pub waiting, but in the meantime an argument started with the governor of the pub and another friend of mine. That escalated, ended up on the pavement and that’s when the victim got shot.

I wasn’t involved in the argument, my friend was dancing around the pavement, spouting these words “Who do you think you are? It’s our pub” He went for the gun but to stop him I took the gun out, it was in one of the plastic bins on the lamp post, and went and started lecturing the guy, what he was doing wrong, he was a grown man. I was moving the gun around, I can’t pin point what the exact thought was at the time of pulling the trigger, but I lifted the gun and pulled the trigger.

Once we’d run I didn’t know what happened. We didn’t know where to go. I was being asked by the other people why I’d shot the guy. I couldn’t answer, I didn’t know why, it was complete confusion, we ended up sitting in a friend’s house all night, trying to get drunk and I couldn’t put a sentence together. I couldn’t believe this had happened and the persons house we was in was panicking, they wanted us out obviously. The next day they got us a car to take us to one of my family members. I was looking for answers myself, asking people that weren’t even there. I had to get to a pub, to alcohol, that was my problem at the time. I thought it might help or dumb down what I had to deal with. A witness from the night before came into the pub, saw me, went out and called the police. They arrested me at the pub.

I was taken to a police station but wasn’t questioned straight away. The feeling for me was relief, I was gonna know now what happened. In the first interview, it all came out, everything about what had happened, I didn’t deny it. At the beginning I was saying he
must have pulled the gun to make it go off. It was hard to accept that I’d shot someone on purpose.
After the shooting I felt very cold at that point and completely blocked what I’d done out of my mind. It took me 4 years to stop denying that I had shot and very seriously injured someone, and that it was purposeful.

It took 8 months to come to trial and I didn’t want to know. I’ve been on trial before for armed robbery and thought I could actually think about the case and the best way to deal with it, really get involved but this time I didn’t want to know, whatever came. It was like accepting, whatever the system could do was acceptable to me because of what had happened.
When I was in the dock I kept trying to stop the trial because I could see what it was going to. It was upsetting. We always thought we was sensible enough for this sort of thing not to happen, that we could carry guns, that we would be safe. Like the kids today they think they can carry knives and nothing’s gonna happen cos they’re sensible. It was that sort of crazy thinking. To see people I’ve grown up with, that we’ve slept top to tail when we was kids, standing in the dock having to tell the truth, even though I’d reassured them, sent messages out of prison, to just tell the truth, I could see how hard it was for them. Being in that dock was terrible, that was one of the bad experiences to know how difficult it was for people. I stopped my family coming, I didn’t want them to see the reality of it. I felt ashamed.

When the guilty verdict was announced I felt relieved. I knew it was coming, it wasn’t a shock. Some family members did turn up on the day of sentencing and became angry. I had to calm them down from the dock and raise my voice.

Nothing much had changed going back to prison, but it had with me. I had a great lump of time to do in prison. I had lost my family and friends, that’s how it felt, and I had shot an innocent man.

Now alcohol and cannabis didn’t cut it, I needed something stronger. There was a boom in heroin coming into prison and a friend said try this. I did, and it was OK, it numbed my mind, stopped me thinking about what I’d done, and I had a terrible start to the beginning of my sentence. He started smuggling it in and I was on this cycle again of get the drugs, dealing the drugs, violence, and that was my life cycle for years. I could bounce around, I didn’t give a toss cos I was on this drug that stopped me caring.
In a cell one day with this so-called friend having a drink we decided to start dealing heroin in prison on a large scale and you can probably guess the rest. If you listen to my story it’s the same thing over and over. There was no stopping point at that time.

Prison is a waste of time to me, it’s a place for killing time. In my early years in prison I took to drugs and alcohol to make time pass.
Nowadays it’s terrible, there’s no way of progressing. The system’s gone to pot. Years ago, it was manageable. The worst thing about prison is being helpless with the outside, if you hear bad news you can’t do nothing. The complete boredom you never get used to that. The indignity of the searches, even after years I dread strip searches, they’re a regular occurrence. Prison ain’t great at all, there’s nothing hard about prison. You come into prison, everyone’s the same, doesn’t matter who you are on the outside, you’re nothing in here.

Now, I’ve been involved in the youth project for over a year and it’s had a massive impact.

A lot of people don’t realise what prison’s like, the reality of prison, the fear of it. The mask you have to carry around to pretend you’re brave when you’re walking around the landings, when you’re under threat from some manic on the wing.

A big thing is missing your family. The realities of prison that kids don’t understand. They watch some programmes on TV about prisons but that’s not reality.

My family have adapted. They don’t understand prison, I tell them every week, I’ve got parole coming up. They don’t understand how it works, I explain, and they still say if you behave yourself you’ll get out early. It don’t work like that. It’s too hard to explain.

I’ve been in prison a while this time round and I’ve seen people coming back. Their crime escalates, the first time they come in they’re quite meek and probably in for shoplifting. They go home, they come back for car theft, seem a bit more brave. Then they come back, and it escalates, burglaries, armed robberies basically the path I took.

I had a massive change 4 years into my sentence. It was in a simple conversation with a member of staff where I actually accepted responsibility (for the shooting), in a moment, it was like a flash where I realised it was nothing to do with the victim, and that started a catalyst for a change for me. I started challenging my own beliefs and realising the damage that it was causing me. Once I had that in place I could change, I could move forward and that’s what I’ve done.

When I went to Eta prison somebody introduced me to the youth and community project they ran. I met Glen who runs the project and found that it was the next stage in my development and he encouraged me to do the last change in my life. That was to prepare for the future and that is helping prevent kids from getting into the gang and gun culture.

I worked on the project with Glen which I needed, it was a therapy for me. It’s the first time I’ve seen my life in one hit, like a piece of paper, not all of it but a cut down version. It was the first time I’ve
seen that, where I came from and what I became. It’s made my future more stable, I know exactly what I’m good at, what I want to do, where I want to go. I’ve done a few bits of writing for the police, explained the culture I came from, which they’re interested in. Hopefully I’ll get sponsored in the future to do mentoring of kids that get into trouble.

We had schools and youth clubs visit the chapel lounge to listen to a presentation and ask us questions so what I intend to do is something along those lines. Hopefully I will be going to youth clubs and schools and doing presentations on the reality of prison life and crime, drugs and weapons. I can tell them of my life experience how my criminal behaviour escalated, my use of drugs, weapons, the carrying of guns, how everything escalated. If I pass that on, explain the reality of prison and the criminal lifestyle maybe I can help. Hopefully they’ll learn from my experience and will listen to me because of where I come from cos I’ve been there. I know exactly where they’re coming from, what their thoughts are, how they feel and how life can be.

When we were doing presentations and other inmates are answering questions I often looked around. I can tell by kid’s actions, the way they’re acting who could get involved in criminality, they don’t see me looking, I can pick them out because they act how I used to when I was their age. The things they ask. We had a few asking about murder, weapons, guns and you can see they’re touching on the path of criminality, even at their young age, I could see it because of the questions and the way they was acting. The questions were who did you shoot, why did you shoot him. It’s the fascination of it; they don’t see the reality of the crime and the consequences. I can tell they’ve got this 50-cent attitude of carry a gun, go shooting people when it’s all pretend. They’ve got to be taught the reality of it and the consequences of their actions. At that age they only look at the glamour of violence and that’s the big mistake I made. Kids think by glamorising violence they’ll get respect. They think if they’re violent and the big man on their estate they’ll get respect. The thing is it’s a false respect and they don’t understand that.

It’s glamorous to them especially with rappers telling them how glamorous it is, the money, jewellery, things like that but the reality is completely different. That’s what they don’t know about, the fear, the looking over your shoulder, having to carry a weapon to protect yourself.

I know through experience what gang violence has done to me. The things I’ve witnessed, things I’ve done myself and where I am today because of it. To be involved in gangs is an unpredictable environment. When I was young I didn’t care, I’d carry any weapons, take chances, we all took chances.
I found it easy to be involved in a gang as I didn’t have a good role model and my brother encouraged it. You got love, loyalty, respect and we were together all the time. The gang provided money, drugs, girls; it comes as a package. But the end result for me is not good at all. Some got out of it, settled down or moved away and others like me have gone to prison, some for a long time.

The advantage I have is I can see it from both sides now. I’m older now and understand the older generation’s concerns but I also understand the youth because I came from that background, what they’re getting into.

The government come up with all these great ideas and it’s all for politics, it’s not to solve real problems; just politics to please the public. Society need to get a grip back; the government need to leave off. They need to give parents back their responsibility and not scare them and they’ve got to stop telling kids they can’t get into trouble for things.

Violence has got to be tackled in all areas. I hear kids on TV, in the media, saying there’s nothing to do and it’s true. We had youth workers on the project that bring kids up saying their club’s gonna be closed soon, so there’s another bunch of kids on the street. There needs to be more put in place for the youth on the street rather than leaving them on the streets. Get them doing things.

Then you’ve got the home. Parents need to be taught to be parents in this country. It used to happen years ago. People don’t know how to parent anymore.

The police need to understand more of the criminal mind. They need to be more involved on the streets and be role models cos there’s a lot of single parents out there, a lot of missing dads.

To a kid getting into gangs I’d say you’ve got to be honest with yourself, be yourself. If you’re yourself not you become part of that crowd. Whatever happens nobody’s that close to you. Gang culture you get this belief that whatever happens your friends are more like family to you. They’ll drop you as soon as the trouble hits the fan. They don’t want nothing to do with you which is fair enough. It makes you realise that, you’ve gotta realise that at young age. It’s great having a drink and going down the bottom of the estate, messing about, kids’ stuff but watch yourself and be honest with yourself. Realise what you’re doing. Breaking that window, that’s how it all starts, breaking that window and running.

Looking back one thing that sticks with me is the hurt that you cause people through your actions. I’m talking about victims, their families, my family, the drugs, the crime, you know everyone. The victim of
the crime, their family, the society you are from, that’s the main thing that leaps out. Looking back, I’m able to understand that now.

When I think about the victim of my shooting I still get very choked cos it’s my fault. That’s the hard part to accept that I’ve ruined a lot of people’s lives. That’s something I think about all the time. But it helps me progress cos I can see what I done is wrong, I won’t do that again. I don’t want any more victims in my life.
Interview with Carlton at a Football Community Trust offices on March 4 and 11, 2013.

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<td>Mum &amp; Dad have been married 40 odd years. They’re from Montserrat a Caribbean Island. I’ve got 2 brothers and 2 sisters. My oldest brother is a customs officer, my oldest sister a florist and a teacher’s assistant. My older sister a local government officer. My younger brother a licenced street trader.</td>
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<td>Partners, I was married for 6 years, got an ex-wife. It’s complicated, she behaves like my wife but she’s not, it’s just one of them turn outs. I’ve got 5 children, 3 biological and 2 I call my own cos I’ve raised them, their dad hasn’t been about. The oldest 3 are mine from 2 different women.</td>
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<td>I was born in north London and grew up in an area known as murder mile, in a 4-bedroom council house. We moved there when I was 2. I shared a room with my little brother. When I say council house I used that term to say it was less better off, which today I don’t truly believe.</td>
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<td>My dad was a builder. I remember him coming back with big lorries. As I got older I understood he was a painter and decorator, he’s done all kinda building work. My mum, god bless her, has been a domestic cleaner most of her life. She had 2 jobs, at 4am she’d go to work, come back, get us ready for school. When I came back from school she went and worked in the hospital. Me and my dad picked her up at 8pm. I remember seeing her at night time working in the dark. If not, she was over the bath washing clothes.</td>
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<td>My mum cooked our dinner, but my older brother made sure it was there. Growing up my brothers and sisters would say I got more attention from my mum. They called me the black sheep, the prodigal son. They’d say, ‘Mum why are you giving this boy this attention, why’s it all about him?’ In hindsight I think she never had the skills to be effective in raising me not to commit crime, she didn’t understand that kinda stuff. My brothers and sisters have lived positive productive lives. For them my mum was enough but for me she didn’t have the skills, knowledge or effective communication.</td>
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<td>I supported Arsenal, my brothers Man U and Liverpool. We’d tease each other about football and made each other cry. When I was young I had no hobbies except football. Went to school came back, watched TV. I loved my home, the family environment, that sense of belonging. On Saturday we’d watch Chips, King Kong, and Grease.</td>
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We’d have the Saturday bag, a big packet of Opal Fruits, 4 packets of biscuits to last the week. We sat around, all the brothers and sisters and had biscuits, sweets or chocolate. It made me feel really warm, the family atmosphere. On Sundays they used to do the top 40 and we’d get round the radio and have a game about whose song would be No.1.

On the flip side I didn’t like my house. I liked the home, family and what goes on but not my house. I went to depths and lengths to prevent friends coming into my house cos my mum had containers to send clothes over, the carpet and wallpaper wasn’t spectacular, I wanted nice stuff. I don’t know if it was my DNA or how I was connected up, but I felt my house wasn’t nice.

My mum came to parents evening, she weren’t cool. I wanted her out of school as quick as possible. Love her to bits, god bless her cotton socks, but was ashamed, she never wore nice clothes in my opinion, again this is down to me, my selfishness, selfish desires, selfish wants.

Growing up I got hand downs from my brother. I hated it thinking this is old as in worn, old in fashion. I couldn’t get the wizz-kids and got cheaper stuff. Mum would tell me I looked nice and I believed I didn’t. I became very resentful cos I was trying to tell how it was making me feel but wasn’t listened to. My parents never had clothing as a priority. There’s a difference between need and want. We need to keep a roof over your head, to feed you, we don’t need you walking around in £50 trainers when you can have your brothers. For them to come from the West Indies, looking for a better life and knowing the struggles they had in Montserrat, for their children to expect this stick-on stuff as I call it, to make them happy, that’s going through 360 degrees; they’re thinking we’ve come to work, to put you in a house, give you the best start we can. Had they been British they’d have grown up with culture around material stuff and understand how it may affect children.

My house was cold when I woke. My parents didn’t put the heating on. I’d go in the bathroom for a wash and want to get to school to get warm. It could be they couldn’t afford it or because they felt why do you need heating you’re young. I weren’t aware of finances but with 5 of us with my mum’s and dad’s work it was tight.

When I was growing up if I done something wrong, which was fairly often, my mum would tell me off, do the talking but never hit me. Mum was the dominant parent and protected me from my dad. She spoke in an empathetic, emotional appeal. “Son don’t do it. I love you, I don’t want this to happen to you. Why did you do it? You shouldn’t do it”. It never sufficed

My dad never took that authoritative role, never gave one to ones, son listen, this is the consequences. There wasn’t no real
communication, what’s going on, why are you doing this, what’s wrong? It was don’t do that. We never had that father to son relationship, reasoning and connecting. When discipline had to be installed he’d draw the belt to give a beating but that was the only communication which might have been easier for him. I did lots of stuff for my dad, people used to say I’m my dad’s and mum’s favourite. I remember one time my dad saying put out your hand and the belt hitting my hand. There were a few thrashings with the belt and lots of threats. I had to have done something really bad and a lot of the time knew it was coming. It never stopped me from doing it again.

My dad was never violent towards my mum, just loving, been married so long, they’re supportive of each other

I loved school especially primary school. I looked at other kids, what they had and that affected me. My best mate got a fiver a day and I couldn’t understand why I got 20p. For me to get a 10p sweet mix-up was massive. I looked at other guys, I felt worse off, miserable and thought about my life. I couldn’t understand why some guys had nicer stuff. I would say cos of selfishness. When I’m in self, I can’t think of anyone else. I couldn’t see rational around bills, putting roofs over heads. I didn’t care; for me it was selfishness, which has been the root of my self-destruction.

My selfishness has never been questioned. My mum used to say, “Son you must learn to satisfy”. Once I learnt about myself and realised how selfish, self-absorbed, self-centred, I was, my mum was so right. It’s evident cos once I got stick on stuff I thought would make me feel better, I wanted more. I had food, nice clothes, trainers, now I wanted a house, expensive car, Rolex watch. Now I understood what my parents was talking about in regards to trainers. You can have a watch that cost £20 but you want a £5,000 one. For me selfishness prevailed.

It started aged 7, where I looked at others, feeling let down, angry towards my parents, resentful, frightened, fearful of what people would think. These feelings, emotions I was looking to others to fix. For my siblings everything was enough. It never affected them the way it affected me, maybe I’m wired up different. It affected me so much when I got to 11 I said “Mum, Dad you’re not fixing my feelings I need to fix them myself, acquire assets to make me feel better” and that’s what I did. This was a short-term fix to my discontentment in life, but I couldn’t see it at the time.

I started committing crime when I started secondary school. I remember buying a chip roll and tin of coke and other guys getting Cornetto’s and McDonalds, that was the difference. The pressure became more cos we’d go shopping at weekends and some guys
parents would give them money. Me and my mate we’d earn (commit crime) money to go shopping.

When I was 11 or 12 I’d get involved in theft and burglaries. I’d go to the bank, he’s got money, snatch it or I’d rob or steal from someone who’d done something wrong to me, use it as an excuse and take whatever assets I can.

We burgled houses at weekends cos everyone would go out. I wasn’t a good burglar, I was trying to earn bucks off my mate. You had to be devious, knock on the door, speak if they were in. We’d go to richer areas, take the train and comeback with suitcases full of money, cheque books, jewellery, hi-fis. Two older guys about 14 worked with us. We’d get through any window.

I took stuff down the pawn shop to a fence. We became entrenched in the lifestyle, they allowed us credit cos they knew we’d be back with bits.

I was part of a gang on an estate up the hill, from 11 or 12. Hanged out in the streets, the estates. We done street robberies and had wars for 2 years with another gang; They beat my mate to a pulp, he was in hospital and he’s still not the full shilling. I was about 14. We had stakes, knives, circled their estate. They was a massive gang, we caught them in little blocks and it kicked off a few times. One of their guys came to my back window with a gun and my friend slapped it out of his hand. It was so bravado, I looked in awe, the no fear he had.

When I was 13, I made some money and bought beds for me and my little brother, carpet, TV, hi-fi and fixed the way I felt. I redecorated my room, was passionate about it.

My mum lives on the first floor, if you walk up the hill, you come to my back window on the ground which became the front door. I was now comfortable to let friends in. I couldn’t before because I had flowery wallpaper, purple carpet, bunk beds and was ashamed. I was frightened of them finding out how I lived.

My mum questioned it “What’s this? Hope you’re not bringing stolen stuff into my house”. No of course not, helped my mate’s dad innit, he give me money. It wasn’t a plausible excuse.

Had my parents said don’t want this stuff in the house, maybe I wouldn’t have continued down that path. I learnt the skill of not communicating and once the dust had settled knew I was gonna be alright. My parents must have come to a point where it dawned on them I was involved in criminal activity.

My brothers and sisters had their say, asked questions. I’d ignore them, they disconnected. As far as I was concerned I was a big man. You can’t tell me nothing. That skill was a tool kit for me to deal with my family. This was my trade now. Selfishness prevailed, I didn’t care what anyone thought. My needs and wants were getting met.
Age 14 I played football for my school and district, a few of us trialed at Arsenal.

The group on the estate was like a gang. Some became involved in heavy criminal activity; knives, guns, jewellery shop and post office robberies. Some went to work, you had Arthur Daley’s wheeling and dealing but never too heavy. We’d hang out and have banter at the cost of the residents.

The more serious guys went with the elders as the youngers. We’d commit more serious crime. That started at 14 or 15. The elders were the Yellow Crew and it grew to bigger things. They were 3 to 5 years older than me which was a massive gap and saw me as the youngers leader. We all came in one cos it was part of the 5 miles, the 5 bus stops, the same area. They were guys you knew from the age of 5 that grew up on the estate.

I failed to see anything positive in anyone if they weren’t doing what I was. The elders were my role models. I’d look at my older brother, think you’re an idiot, didn’t admire him. Today I respect him. He’s a good role model, went to school, never committed crime, provided for his family, been working years, done it the right way.

Back then I wanted the short fix. Saw that guy doing it and my brothers working, he ain’t got this stuff. Now my brother can have those assets cos he’s got equity in properties but chooses not to. He drives a new car, has a nice watch but it’s not his buzz. This is when I realised people in life are different. My brother doesn’t need stuff to make him feel good about himself whereas I do so I was attracted to those guys cos they done it, right here, right now, real quick.

How do you measure a positive role model? It’s complex. I look at my dad now, admire him, got mad respect for him. He said once “Son you’ve got to work, it’s good for your morale” In hindsight he was the perfect role model. Worked, provided to the best of his ability and done everything a father should do.

I was a dog on heat waiting to be told what to do, when and how. I’d something to prove, wanted to impress, do the best I could, be accepted and liked. I wanted them to sing my praises and say my man’s active. I wanted what they had but wanted more. The same stuff that dominated my early years, that selfishness was surfacing in my life in a different way. My belief was the olders were having that impact on me, when really it was about me.

It was coming from all angles. I wanted my parents to think he’s great, my brothers to be dependent on me, the older guys to respect me and say the guys a smooth operator. I wanted friends to look in ore and wanna be like me. Primarily it was my own selfishness.

At 15 I was selling drugs for a geezer at the local pool café. He’d talk to me, showed me you’re a nice guy and I took to that. He’d give me bags of cannabis. I’d sell from my back window to mates. People started to like me, say he’s the man, I was the centre of attention. I
was happy, they was happy. When people had stolen stuff I’d buy it, pay a cheaper price and sell it on cos I always had cash. I was still going out and doing bits. The money I learnt from drugs was minimal, £30, but it was that buzz of having a sense of belonging. I wanted people to like me as opposed to how much money I’m gonna make.

I first held a gun aged 15. There was the gun and a suitcase of bullets and I put it in my dad’s shed. I bought it up to my room and loaded it. Everyone was geeing me up and out of my window I shot it, dropped it on the grass and my friend ran it to his mum’s and put it under her bed. His sister found and disposed of it. I was angry cos he’d lost my gun and wanted money for it. I got it when drug dealing, the guy got it from a burglary, let me see it, I’ll take it off you. I mollycoddled him to get it; I had drugs and money, that’s how I acquired assets.

My first arrest, on my 16th birthday, was for robbery. A friend robbed students at the Ice Rink. I thought we’re gonna do that. Next day I got people to tag on, 30 of us, it was a free for all. I didn’t set out to stab anyone but knew I’m gonna get paid. I was carrying a knife as part of my uniform, my symbol status.

I’ve seen this boy, “Give me your stuff or I’ll stab you”. I took his stuff, he kicked out and talked back, bravado came in, “You can’t talk to me like that, show me respect” I stabbed him in his leg innit. Whoosh police came, we got away. I was walking home at 1am when they arrested me. They chased me to a derelict building, arrested me for robbery, drove me to my mums and found cannabis, a DSS book and stolen equipment. I was scared, in shock, what’s going on. I told them everything, made a statement, didn’t know any different. “If you tell us what happened it’s gonna be easier for you” I believed maybe this guy can help me.

When I got arrested my mum was crying. She always comes with the emotional, empathy role, she knew there came a point where I looked to her to fix my feelings and she wasn’t able to do that. She kinda accepted it. My brother and sister said, “Mum that’s how he is, you gotta leave him now he’s a grown man” That was the talk before I went to jail. They knew I was going off the rails.

I was remanded in custody for a week cos of the seriousness of the offence. I was devastated, frightened, what’s gonna happen now? Those apprehensions and not knowing engulfed me. I got bailed with a 4pm till 7am curfew. I was allowed to go to school and my brother took me out at weekends.

I didn’t truant, I loved school. I remember doing homework but the desk at home wasn’t comfortable, so I hated homework. I done 9 GCSE’s, got 7, one I never turned up for cos I went to do a robbery. The robbery was more important cos I was on bail and knew I was
going to jail. My barrister said they’re putting you in prison cos the person was stabbed. That was my first conviction.

I was on bail for 14 months, acquired skills to manoeuvre the curfew and got some conditions lifted. Sometimes I breached it. Initially as there was a calming down period. I’m on bail, don’t wanna go back to jail but need money. What am I gonna do, I’m going to jail anyway, so I graduated, and I don’t use that word in a glorified way and done a couple of jewellers. It was easy, went in and all this jewellery came out. I put on all this tom (jewellery) felt like the man of town, I owned it, I really felt power. It made me saw street robberies was senseless, what am I doing them for? My burglary and street robbery was short lived That’s how my crime evolved. It was like an initiation

At 17 I passed my driving test, bought a mini, customised wooden dashboard for £1,500 and was the man about town. They called me Earn a Ton because I earnt so much money.

I was a YTS carpenter. We did some woodwork, it was a place to go, got lunch, money, and chatted. Carpentry was about my dad saying you’ve gotta have a trade. I wasn’t good at it. I got a carpentry city and guilds but can’t remember where, maybe prison, I never got it from there.

I first experimented with hash at a rave. It wasn’t something that gripped me. I was smoking to be one of the guys. That was before I went into prison.

A few months after my 17th birthday I was sentenced to 12 months in a young offender’s institution, my first time in prison. It was cold going into the cell, an empty shell, no toiletries, no TV. I thought how do guys live here and remember hearing guys talking like it was happy days, I couldn’t work it out. What about me? I’m down in the dumps, devastated. I thought “Can’t wait till I get out, gonna smash jewellers again”

The first prison I went to was Sigma, then Zeta Young offenders. Sigma was a holding prison when you’re sentenced. I was more comfortable with Sigma cos I saw older guys from my area who called me baby faced robber. They weren’t challenging. I was in an adult establishment so there was no competition, no sizing anyone up. It was you’re older I respect you. At Zeta, you had to put your back up, don’t try that stuff with me. You was always on the watch out for guys from south, north and even east London as we had our own internal warfare going on. It was who are you, what you about with everyone until you could say he’s my friend.

I came out of prison a few months before I was 18 and put teams together saying guys stop doing stupid little street robberies,
snatching gold chains. Let’s do jewellery shops, everyone for himself, just steam ‘em, get Rolexes, make vast amounts of money. Money was made and we (Yellow Crew) bought a Porsche and a BMW. We held a dance, the flyer said Yellow Crew Promotions presents with a picture of a Porsche and a BMW, brand spanking new. That first promotional rave kinda marked it. We’d have a sniff of cocaine once in a blue. Coming up was cannabis, if you had a bit of sniff you weren’t seen as favourable, so we went with cannabis. We used to have Thunderbirds alcoholic drink, I didn’t like it cos it made my head go real bad, spin me. I was never a drinker.

Just after I was 18 I committed a robbery at a Jewellers, it was my initiation, transition from other stuff I’d done. I scrapped the jewellery from the cabinets. When I went over the counter, clever clogs decided to wear no gloves, I left a palm print. The older guys held people at gun point. Two weeks later through the palm print and video they arrested me. I went back to prison 3 months after my release. I got sentenced to 4 years the day my son was born. When my son was born I never viewed having a child as anything. The responsibility, nurturing, passing on life skills, emotional stability, and natural security never existed in my mind. Got a little boy was just a landmark in my life. I wasn’t jubilant, I was in prison. The girl wasn’t my flavour or someone I wanted to be with for the rest of my life, I felt trapped. I didn’t say get an abortion, it was OK you’re having a baby and you’ll do what mothers do. I’m gonna be doing what I’ve gotta do. It reinforced my belief of criminal activity, I need to make money cos I’ve got a baby. Looking back, it was selfish; my way of rationalising and justifying my behaviour. I ain’t got no money, no job, I need money, how’s my son gonna eat? If I made money my son did get money.

Of my 4-year sentence I did just over 2. I missed the first 2 years of my son’s life, but she visited with him. It gave me a sense of belonging in a self-centred way. It wasn’t about providing or being a parent, it was more a sense of I belong to this child. I remember coming out of prison and he knew who I was, running down the stairs saying Dad.

Anytime I’ve come out of custody my kids had this expectation which I struggle with. Dad’s out, ain’t gonna worry, he’ll hit the pavement, get money. When they asked, and I couldn’t get it I’d feel shitty. I knew how it was for me as a kid. It was double whammy cos I understood it now. Initially when I started to commit crime it was like yeha. When I was older when I had my first son, gonna provide for my kids, they ain’t going without. I never realised I wasn’t giving emotional support. When I was absent in custody it was a worser off deal. I couldn’t see then because even if I could say I was doing it for my children really it was for me. When I give them money they’d feel good about me and I’d feel good about myself. This was the
psychology going on. Not much thought was put into it because what mattered primarily was me feeling good about myself. My parents weren’t doing that, friends were offering opportunities then that’s what I was gonna do. The pain and suffering was too long and I needed an escape. My mind closed down. I couldn’t see or reason on any rational level. As far as I was concerned it’s not gonna happen for me.

When I come out of prison this time I said don’t want my kids to ask. They do but children can’t understand what you got coming in. Again, it brought up those feelings for me. I still work on it today and it ain’t so bad cos my kids are older. For me taking on that role was something that came once the money came. When the money came it was another way of feeling good about myself. Got money, my kids loved me. I’d take them over the park, buy ice cream, take them in my brand-new BMW, buy them stuff. Although doing it for them it made me feel good about me. My family, friends, people love me. It was self-seeking, but it lead to self-destruction. That’s what selfishness ultimately leads to.

When I got arrested my mum never failed to come to the police station or visit me in prison. Neglect, abandonment, she never done. She was first there, wouldn’t leave, buy me food. My sister said “You’re rewarding him for doing bad. When he goes to prison you send him money, he’s in a young offender’s institution they give him money, food, let him work with that otherwise you’re feeding his habit, so he can have 101 toiletries. I had 20 bottles of baby lotion just to say I’m rich. The same behaviours were going on.

My dad never visited, not once. Mum said he don’t wanna see me in situations where he’s not able to do anything about it. I don’t know if he felt ashamed or should have done more to prevent it. She said “Your dad don’t say nothing, but when he thinks you’re starting to get into trouble he gets stressed. Everything he was feeling, every opinion, come through my mum.

I’d ring from prison, “Alright dad how’s everything? How’s work?” Do you want your mum? “No, I’m phoning to say hello to YOU dad”. I made it a point of doing that.

Gotta better relationship now but it took understanding on my part to get to that. I had to understand myself and empathise what was going on for him.

Prison second time round saw violence. I got stabbed. We was in the kitchen serving food drug dealing over the hot plate. This new guy decided to do his transactions on my territory. We had a dispute, he got stabbed too.

Looking at gang culture south London is about feuds, territory but west London it’s the money zone. Guys from west London in jail were earners cos they was walking around where the bling and money was. North and east London it’s border line.
There weren’t gangs in prison, more what area you were from. I got on with guys from west London. I found south London were holding on to a banner they never belonged to, in their heads it was Brixton. You’d have guys that preyed on the vulnerability of those from a smaller manor. I came out of prison aged 20.

A few months later I was robbing jewellers but got arrested 18 months later by the Flying Squad. If they knew you was active and was having issues convicting you, they’d put a knife or gun wherever and arrest you. Know you’re at it, gotta get you off the street. The robbery I was arrested for I never did but was active doing others.

Shortly before I was 22 my second son was born, and I rushed to hospital for the birth. He was premature, the size of a bag of sugar. It was like he wasn’t gonna survive he was that small in your hand. There was a lot of trips to the hospital over the next few months while he was in the incubator. I was emotionally engaged, saw the pain, the birth. We took him home and not long after I got a private rented place. I was there for him until just before he was two.

When convicted for the jeweller’s robbery, aged 23, I was angry, 10 years, couldn’t believe it. Not only the length but the way it come about. I was stunned for 3 months but had faith, said I’m gonna bust this on appeal. The witnesses didn’t see if it was me and clearly had been shown photos. There was discrepancies, the case got weaker and should have got thrown out. I thought during the trial I ain’t got a problem, never done it.

I was fast out of the blocks for my appeal, thinking you can’t do this, someone’s gotta hear me out. I went through discrepancies in the case, my belief grew. I got knocked back on my first appeal.

Through that time, I sold class A drugs. I was angry, hated everything. I got moved to maximum security prisons, was Satan in human form. I had run ins with prison officers, they rushed my cell at 6am, the mufti squad, designated drugs teams and took my drugs.

During this sentence my baby mother had a friend and allegedly she’d bring in drugs to be passed over. She was arrested and told police I’d got money to buy a BMW when I come out and they’d got the drugs from my younger brother. Police arrested me, I was looking at 7 years on top of my 10. My sister and brother got arrested, it looked like I caused lots of problems for my family. I was fuming. For 18 months I was a shell of myself. I no longer had communication with my baby mother or family, there was lots of animosity. I had a good solicitor and they withdrew the case against me. She brought the girl with drugs to the prison. With my baby mother I knew it was over. I left her when I came out of prison.
After over 4 years in prison got my conviction overturned at the Royal Court of Justices and I thought might try and change it up a bit here.

When I came out of prison, aged 27, I was in a drug fuelled state, on crack. I don’t remember most arrests. I was angry, resentful and in a sombre state of mind. I didn’t get hooked on drugs in prison it was when I came out. I stopped robbing the queens people so to speak. If you rob the queen, you go to prison but if you robbed drug dealers my thinking was you don’t. I hit the pavement robbing dealers, but with that came the risk of getting shot. We robbed dealers working off of the ethos of the police. Do homework on our suspect, know everything, his movement. We’d have a van, slide it open grab them, tie them up, where’s the keys, where’s the food, make a phone call. We know he’s worth 3 kilos, 60 bags. We’re not going away unless we get 2, we know what you’re pulling. We made substantial amounts, between 3 people. Crack, heroin, cash, Rolex watches, diamonds, firearms, it was unreal. If we wanted firearms drug sellers had them. They’d never use it, it became a uniform in their heads, to say they’ve got a strap. They’d get robbed, re-load and make that money back. They’d say I’m not a criminal, a thieving little git, I’m a business man.

I reached my American dream; bought a £28,000 BMW, paid for a 3-bedroom semi, had a Rolex watch, and remember feeling what next? Where’s my buzz? I got to a place where I didn’t like what was going on, I was losing momentum. I was checking with my sub conscience, something was awakening in me. I didn’t feel the drive. Some say it’s connected to age. I’ve read the age criminal relationship theories. Having been stabbed, seeing friends dying I thought phew what’s going on? What am I aspiring to cos I have everything? When you come out of prison people gyrate towards you and give you opportunity. Your mistakes are wiped clean. It’s a fresh slate to knock on doors, give me a leg up. Stuff was coming my way and money was coming in. So, age no, I was consciously aware I didn’t know where I was going. There was no objective, I didn’t know what else to do. Money was rise to fall, fall to rise. I had no plan. What’s your motive? What do you want? Do you want a family? You got a family and still want to sleep around. Still want to be this guy with money and stick on stuff that makes you feel better about yourself. I was clubbing, partying, taking ecstasy, buzzing, bit of sniff, smoking crack spliffs. I’d reached my American dream I didn’t know what I’d got beyond that.

Doubts started coming into my mind when I was about 28. I weren’t happy, no matter how much money I acquired. My head told me if I had these assets I’d be happy. I’d have 50 grand and weren’t happy. I realised money don’t make you happy, it makes life comfortable. It
can’t buy happiness. That feeling was worse than anything god could know. With money I found myself spending it, cos I wanted to make everyone happy.

Money, it’s cost a lot in respect of people suffering, victims, secondary victims, my family, everything. The cost of me coming to that conclusion has been most of my life, from age 7 when I was preoccupied with myself. I should have been going to school, concentrating on exams, thinking about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I want a BMW, a house, this was my thinking from very young. I don’t know where it came from, maybe I’m wired up differently. I knew what I wanted and the way they were telling me to go about it I wasn’t seeing.

Never did it dawn on me to think about victim’s cos as far as I was concerned I was victim number 1, the guy without. That was my job, to get money. Now I see it totally different. Selfishness is an illness because that’s what ultimately self-destructs. You’ve got fear, anger, resentment they’re the secondary things. Primarily it’s that feeling of selfishness and once I’m in self I can’t be thinking.

There came a time in my life, a contemplation stage, where I started to think about the effect on others. I started to primarily think about me. Do I wanna do it? No. How does it make me feel? Shit. What’s the outcome? Jail. How does it make me feel? Horrible. What’s the outcome? Negative. I thought I don’t wanna do it no more. How do I not do it? Don’t know. What am I gonna do? Don’t know. Next robbery comes up I’m in. Next robbery comes up I slip out, switch off my phone. I don’t know which way I’m gonna go. I’m questioning it now. That transitional period went on for a long-time cos I didn’t believe anyone was thinking like me. It was about getting identification of my thinking with others. In my world you don’t talk about not wanting to do this stuff. To say I didn’t wanna do it, I struggled.

I met my wife when I came out of prison. She lived next to my sister. She’s Asian, very strict family. What attracted me to her was she wasn’t street, wasn’t a road girl, she was from a sheltered place, well spoken. I realised I wanted that but not with a girl with a street mentality. It was like baam, working on trying to get with this girl, that was a major turning point. We got married quickly at the mosque. I took my Shahadah to convert, it was a 360 degree turn but I knew in my heart I was holding on to something. For the first time in my life I’ve got something I’ve longed for, make your decision and I went with it.

Aged 29 I brought a beauty salon, a little business to get myself sorted. I’d just married, the shop was for her but started to weigh me in. Before I’d sort problems with cash. If I ain’t throwing cash at it, I’m in jail gripping bars so I ain’t got problems. I’d taken on a new way of thinking and didn’t know how to manage it, how to do family
life, money wasn’t fast and furious as I’d known it. If I wanna make money I ain’t waiting for someone to come for a facial. Watching money trickle in weren’t the way I made money. I done it to give her a lease in life, help pay bills. I lost my mojo of committing crime, making money, but I was trying to go straight and keep out of trouble.

I started smoking crack to fill that void cos I didn’t wanna do stuff. Going to meetings, there’s a mac 10; I’m thinking what the hell’s going on? Guys talked like they were in movies. What’s the objective? Is this just for reputation? I need financial security. These guys thinking is about spraying cars like in a movie. I had that play time in my life, but I was in contemplation mode to stop.

I was still on crack. This was where I had made decisions to stop; I was still doing bits. Although I was smoking I had the uniform, the attire. At this point I wasn’t on my last legs, I still had bits around me. It wasn’t visible until a couple of years later. We had the shop running. All this inter-twined and overlapped. Gonna start doing things properly, not gonna do this, then I’d have a slip, I’d get up again. Only when I was 34 was it surrender, I’ve had enough of doing this shit. It came to a point where I threw the towel in and said I’m in trouble here.

When I was shot, aged 31, it was linked to drugs. A firm shot me in murder mile, there was lots of talk on the street. That was part of my new lifestyle, smoking crack. I wasn’t doing jewellers I was on the streets. The game had changed, armed robbers started dealing or robbing drugs. Heavy armed robberies slowed down, too much bird, people saw this as a soft option. That took place with myself and in the midst of it I started smoking, my behaviour became erratic and frightening. We had firearms connections up north and to trusted white gangsters. When we got into the drugs game our leader masterminded acquiring firearms. I’d have firearms on me all the time or be rolling with someone that had.

When I got shot, I was slipping. I felt invincible, drove round, strapped up, crack spliff in my mouth, you can’t tell me nothing, cos I have everything. I lost the car, started losing my bits, my uniform, the game was all over the place and when I got shot people said You’re on the Ends Couz, what were you doing?

At 33 I was living in supported housing but couldn’t keep to the house curfew. After I was doing geographics. I lived in out of London with a friend. This time was productive cos I came round a bit myself here the drugs and that. I wanted a fresh start. I done voluntary work with the youth offending team for a few years. I addressed young people in schools.

I started to come back down as I wasn’t comfortable there. This was a sticky patch for me cos I was trying to sort my life out but there
was situations with my family that needed addressing. The youth work I started to drop cos I was getting nowhere and losing my momentum.

I got flats in London & Essex. I was still back and forth, doing geographics. I moved to places that were private, paid cash for 6 months, how much? £700 here’s £5,000. For 6 months I was off the radar.

At 37 I got divorced, about 6 months before I went back to jail. It wasn’t working out with her and the kid. It was strange cos I was going home on my own, knowing I wasn’t married, and she’d bring round food, it was mad. We’re still best friends.

There was a clean period for me; I was still finding situations in my life difficult, if I had been on drugs that wouldn’t have got addressed, I’d have been off in cloud cuckoo. Stuff was changing. My son wasn’t happy I was absent in his life. I was trying to make it up to him. I had the divorce, then had to find accommodation. I thought is this what it’s about now? Here I am no one, what now? Feeling there was a vacuum being created. I’d cut off a lot of people, people had heard I was a youth worker. My life was in transition and at the toughest time I tried to keep the momentum up.

The most vulnerable time was living on my own, just divorced, work wasn’t working out, they were never gonna give me the money I deserved. I tried to set up my own company called breaking the cycle but it weren’t going nowhere.

I went to a wedding and met a guy I hadn’t seen for 12 years. He knew I was active in criminal activity. I said I don’t do that no more. Going home I thought I ain’t got nothing to lose. I felt that sense of belonging had eluded me again, I need this pick me up, it was my choice.

With this guy I committed fraud, taking money when no one was about and made 6 grand. With that money came partying, smoking. He started talking about 20 grand touches, my ears have gone up, and I’m waiting for the phone call. My energy went into this and I started smoking drugs again. His promises never came to pass, so I went on my own on a spree robbing bookies, sporadic, anywhere one looked doable. With the machines you could get ten grand. When I done the one I got 4 years for I got £300.

I was arrested a few months later age 37, my system was clean, cannabis everything. Because even when I committed betting shop robberies I had gone into a bad state. I always had the fear of these robberies coming back up cos I knew with firearms police don’t let up.

When they arrested me the police said “Mate what went wrong, was you on drugs? My house it was immaculate. I had my study, I was trying to engage. My urine and swab test was negative.
When I went to prison I had a clear head and didn’t wanna speak to anyone. I was devastated, I’d let myself and everybody down. I sat back, kicked myself in the teeth and thought what am I doing here. I had the fear of getting IPP, interest of public protection, hanging over me. God have I screwed up my life forever, I ain’t coming out. Once sentenced I felt I’d been given a reprieve and it inspired me to crack on. I chose not to hang around with people, my MDT’s were negative from day dot. If I keep myself straight there’s something I can engage in here. There came a point where I thought I need to change, I can’t wait until I get out.

I kept going to libraries, reading, researching, writing programmes. In prison it evolved for me. An interventions officer said do you want to be my orderly? He heard me talk on a course delivered by a charitable group. I shared my own experiences openly. He asked if I’d help facilitate interventions around offending behaviour. So, Fathers inside, I delivered a couple of those. I had my own programme and used the office to enhance it. He’d looked, statutory organisations ain’t gonna want that they’re gonna want this. We learnt from each other.

Then there was the transition into coming out into society and writing to charities I wrote to Kickz, charities and projects. I was released from prison to attend a meeting with the growing against gangs (GAG) programme. Met people, got myself and my programme out there. I done presentations to young people. Kickz wrote back saying 2 football clubs were interested. Football Community Trust came in and we done a project. He said would you like to tell your experiences to young people we’re working with. U Turn project was the first project. I delivered workshops on fear and anger to young people, it went really well.

When I came out of prison I was deflated cos I’d had a room, electric, free meals. They put me in a hostel I got bitten by bed bugs and though phew I need somewhere to live. My basic needs weren’t being met. I felt disassociated, cut off, tried to keep my momentum going. I was walking round with my clothes in bin liners. It was pride. I didn’t want to go to my mums with my tail between my legs; didn’t want to go back to my area and see younger guys, thought I wanna stay away, don’t want no pollution. Eventually I went back to my ex-wife’s, then my mums, then got a flat where DSS was paying my rent.

I made contact with the Football Community Trust and started doing work again. They said come and do a bedding in period, got ideas where you could be of use to the Trust. We can get you some pay, done some workshops, presentations, made contacts. They took me on, started giving me some reward, there it was born. There was a
sticky period at first cos I was at a place where I don’t really know. Here I am today, just under 1 year from my release.

When I first delivered presentations in prison I found it difficult, but it was a step I needed to take. Everyone knew what I was about, I’d keep it real clean, no involvement, no drugs, no smoke, no hanging around with the wrong people, I took the responsibility of my choices.

I got invited to the House of Lords for a discussion panel on desistence to stop crime with the National Director of Cenomis, that was massive. I think they’d be shocked to see I’ve come out and abstained from criminal activity.

When I got out I got invited back to House of Lords as a speaker at the International Juvenile Justice Conference by a professor I met whilst in custody. He looked at my programme, gave me some views.

Whilst in custody I was interacting and communicating with people doing positive stuff in the community. That inspired me because people hear my story, they wanted to listen. I interacted with ‘normal people’ and they conceived me in a positive way, it inspired me to continue. It started to outweigh the balance of guys trying to bring back the destructive part of my life.

What made me decide to turn my back on crime is a million-dollar question. If I’m honest there was a time I wanted to stop and couldn’t. I didn’t wanna do the things I was doing but found myself doing them. That’s how it was. That was my problem. I made decisions over the years on hundreds of occasions. Lacked the willpower to take those decisions. Making and taking, two different things.

My transition period was long, years. It was falling in the right pot at the right time. That happened with the Football Community Trust coming on board. Previously when I did voluntary work I expected someone to say hey you’ve been naughty all your life, you’re doing well, have a job. Looking back, I was exploited for my vulnerability around employment, my previous convictions.

When I went back to prison I thought you’ve gotta keep the hunger you had for money when you was involved in criminal activity but don’t act running parallel to it. I had to keep that character around getting paid because my honesty became so much I wanted to carpet the whole world; it didn’t matter as long as I had a roof over my head. Realising if I don’t have goals myself someone will use you to reach theirs was what I came round to.

When I came out I reiterated I needed money and it was hard cos sometimes I was speaking to a charity and wanted to work with them because they’d helped me. How was I gonna turn work down and I was battling with knocking back the work to go and do this.
There was that balance where I was finding it hard and at the end of the day I realised time is money. You have to get the rent in, but I struggled with that from time to time. It was my vulnerability that I picked up here, this time round now I am always aspiring to do better.

With regards to the Football Community Trust, they have been exceptional, kept knocking on doors for me, trying to get hold of me, would pick up that phone, couldn’t get hold of me, I’d have a meeting, not turn up but they kept knocking on the door. I was going through stuff, got more pressing stuff, that was my attitude. I knew this was an avenue and was sabotaging something good. Their persistence paid off cos they laid it on the line, read the riot act, let me know my worth. I told them what was going on for me they kinda understood. They was an advocate of me, some would have gone leave him. For me that was that sense of belonging.

A lady in prison used to tell me about stuff I could be doing. She’d say I can’t see how you fit into prison, you’re intelligent, and we’d have deep meaningful talks. I also met the Interventions officer who believed in me. They were instrumental people that have been major players in where I am today.

Its lack of knowledge what’s out there. When you know how it works, get some knowledge and you’re exposed to new ways of thinking and living. You realise there’s a way I can do what I wanna do, achieve what I wanna achieve, and the gamble ain’t nowhere near as much as going against guys on the streets with guns, against the police, against being incarcerated. What you lose is nothing compared to the risk you’re taking.

Along the way a lot of my friends died. The first when I was 17 and in prison; He got murdered in a Nightclub. When I was 25 and again in prison another got murdered in murder mile, guy on a motorbike shot him. Then another friend got murdered, he’d just come out of prison. Another friend got shot when I was 29. Then the gang boss got murdered 5 years later. Those guys I grew up with, some were 5 years older, some 2; there were 3 sets of us and from every part someone was dying. The dynamics of the gang was changing but the core people remained.

There came that point where I understood victim empathy, ripple effects, understand parents going up to young men, supposed to be providers and protectors of families, going home with smashed up faces, stabbed or shot and their son looking at them, this is my hero, the guy that looks after me, look at the state of him. I understand cos it happened with my son. I got shot he was at hospital, cheeseed off, not saying a word, thinking about what could have happened if I was in the car with the kids. My sons got his hand round me, I’m on
crutches, trying to help me, he’s 6 years old. Dad, what’s going on, you’re supposed to be looking after me. I realise the ripple effect in the communities was deep. I thought about my victims, the ripple effect on that victim, their family, the community, society at large. I’ve got to understand it and only then was I able to take myself out of self.

Interventions could have been put in place when I was 7. That’s the first time I identified I was paralysed by fear, full of resentment. At school instead of focussing on education I was concerned about people knowing how my house was. For a young boy growing up with that stuff going on, people would say that’s how it is; your Mum loves you she’s a hard worker. I accept that, but this is what’s going on for me, schools out the window. It was a chore to go to school with this stuff going on in my head. By 8 I remember thinking this is a full-time job I can’t do this no longer. Aged 13 I went and changed that physically myself.

My mum wasn’t equipped to help me cos she had 5 children. For one guy to act a bit strange I don’t think teachers are trained to identify that, it’s outside their remit. My behaviour wasn’t bad, it was in my head. How do you read the mind of someone not showing signs, cos I was always respectful? My upbringing never allowed me to be rude, to swear. It was internal anger, internal fear, I couldn’t speak about it.

Probation could have helped but there’s no intervention, just a standard interview. I call it the 15-minute compulsory Hello, how you doing, have you been arrested? Anything for concern? Probation protect the public from you. I’d argue but I’m the public. They need to know you’re complying and if that’s documented happy days. They’ve got it documented and if you get nicked you’ll go back to prison. If I say I’m homeless they’d give me a list of shelters, no real support.

Once I was remanded into social services at juvenile court. Gonna remand you to a children’s home, asked my mother if she’d take me back, she said yes so, I’m back at home. It was a formality for the judge to remand me and Social Services to assess my home circumstances. I got remanded cos my criminal behaviour got strong and social services wanted order on me. That could have been a good time for an intervention, find out what was going on. Social Services I can’t remember doing an assessment with them. I do a tick box questionnaire with young people, with smoking, drinking, drugs, lifestyle, it enables you to find where that person is at. I never had nothing like that.

For me it was people phoning, reaching out, showing interest. You fit in somewhere. People I’ve met at the Trust have been amazing and are people I want as friends. I’m talking to people about their life.
I’m your age, I ain’t got a mortgage. It’s like I’ve been in debt all my life. It’s making me think I could have done that. Inter-acting with normal people, was so welcome. It’s OK to be normal, exciting, set goals, aspire, your self-esteem builds. It was massive for me. Today I don’t have people engaging in negative activities on my phone. I’m grateful cos it’s pollution to my mind.

In 5 years what I hope to be doing is this. Community Trust I’d like to be able to put programmes out in regards to crime reduction. We done one last week, criminal gangs with the Council, we should put one on for tackling youth crime. I’m passionate about my work and have programmes I want to put through the Trust.

We was with the homicide squad today doing a joint enterprise. The combination was absolutely amazing because it was the bridge between young people and the police. Police interacting, playing football with kids, that’s what it’s all about, that bridge that’s so necessary and needed.

I’m writing a mentoring programme, putting in place the cost etc. I feel through Community Trust crime reduction, put stuff out there and grow it. I want to register my own company, that’s an aspiration, battling with the legal structure. I’ve looked at limited companies and funding streams. The more I get into that the more I come away from the ground work, documentation it’s not me. My mind’s quite obsessional and I get bogged down. I need to get that right balance. I want crime reduction work to last for as long as it can. Within 5 years I want to have bought a property. Gotta clear debts, I’m addressing those, get some credit.

If my kids have kids I wanna break that cycle of social supported housing. My oldest son has been to prison, he’s doing well now. I haven’t put in place financial security, emotional stability which I’m doing now. If I can do this for the next 30 years whatever time I have left then I’d like to break the cycle, it’s so important. I’d like a grandson I could nurture the way I never nurtured my own. I messed up with my kids but it’s never too late. It’s about planting the seed in my own mind going with it and seeing where it falls. If work goes good, cos without no work you ain’t getting no credit, no mortgage. It’s not about me, it’s about a legacy. I wouldn’t say I’ve lived my life but having done all the mad living, drugs, expensive cars, it was assets. When you die you’re not gonna go with them? At my funeral I want people to have good things to say. That’s my goals, continue building family relationships because there’s a long way to go in that respect.

My message to youngsters today is remain teachable, have an open mind, reach out. Communication and thinking. Be vigorously honest to yourself cos without that you’re flawed. Be honest as to who you
are, be who you wanna be otherwise it’s based on lies. That was the hardest thing to do, be me. Be the boy that doesn’t know how to do this or that instead of being something in my head that I’m not, portraying something that I’m not and living on things. Honesty underlines those 4 issues I’ve mentioned. The hardest thing is reaching out. No matter how far you’ve gone down the road you can still change. Lots of young people say no my criminal record man, my education’s not good..... stigma, stigma.
Interview with James at the Cinema Café on July 16, 2014

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<td>I was born in Jamaica and lived in a rented house in St James. My</td>
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<td>sister is ten years older. Our family was poor but content until my</td>
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<td>dad started gambling. This caused violent arguments between my mum</td>
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<td>and dad. Witnessing that first physical fight between them was</td>
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<td>the first disconnect of whose side do you take. At the end of the day</td>
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<td>it’s my mum cos she’s a woman I’m gonna risk my life and run out in</td>
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<td>the dark to see where she’s gone. Mum and dad worked all hours, mum</td>
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<td>was a seamstress, dad a hospital security guard.</td>
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<td>Aged 5 I played with dirt and stones or my sister’s dolls, I had no</td>
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<td>toys. I spent most of the time at home with my sister alone. When we</td>
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<td>played she would try and perform sexual acts on me. Once I came in</td>
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<td>to find the boy from next door with his trousers down and they were</td>
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<td>having sex. My dad told me not to let people in the house, so I got</td>
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<td>the broom, hit him and he left. I felt I was being punished for not</td>
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<td>letting the boy come to the house that’s why she tried that with me.</td>
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<td>For years I blocked this out of my mind, but this makes sense now.</td>
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<td>Aged 6 I started to want things other kids had. I had no toys, became</td>
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<td>jealous and realised I shouldn’t be playing with dolls. I wanted boys</td>
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<td>stuff, but my family priority was paying bills, providing food and</td>
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<td>clothes.</td>
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<td>When I was 6 we came to England to visit our grandparents for</td>
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<td>Christmas before returning to Jamaica. Shortly after returning my</td>
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<td>sister moved into a young girl’s home. I found out much later she’d</td>
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<td>made claims my father had touched her sexually. She hadn’t got on</td>
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<td>with our mother. Her grandad had fathered her, but our mother</td>
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<td>wouldn’t admit it. When our mother was young she was abandoned to</td>
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<td>give birth to her and threatened not to speak out. I found out when</td>
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<td>my mum was on her death bed. It sent me into depression and filled</td>
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<td>me with anger. It makes sense why my mum left England with my sister</td>
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<td>when she was 7 and moved to Jamaica, she was running away.</td>
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<td>My father went to England to look for a better life when I was 6</td>
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<td>leaving us behind. This proved a major turning point in my life as I</td>
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<td>was deeply in need of a strong father figure. It was traumatising. I</td>
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<td>became like other kids that didn’t know their dad. You made up lies</td>
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<td>to say your dad’s in the army or a policeman, so you didn’t get</td>
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<td>picked on at school. I didn’t know when or if he was coming back. He</td>
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<td>sent money and clothing to us from England.</td>
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At that time, we witnessed real poverty and suffering; we had no food, just fritters made with flour, fish, peppers, onions, fried like pancakes.

My mum was devoted to the church and took on extra jobs, so we could eat but also to pay back money she borrowed to send my sister to England. She washed people’s clothes, cleaned their house. I looked up to my mother who became the disciplinarian and would beat me if I was naughty.

I came to England aged 8, for 6 weeks school holiday, dad sent me a ticket. I stayed with him at the house of an aunty who I quickly realised was the new woman in his life, in effect my step-mother. Before I arrived, my dad had fallen out with his sisters who told my Gran not to sign for me to come to England thinking he’d dump me on her. My step-mum thought I was on holiday. My dad hadn’t broke the news I wasn’t returning. He waited until the last minute to say he’d like to get me to a school in England. He thought it would be better for me as my mum wouldn’t be able to cope if I went home.

My step-mum had a 2-bedroomed maisonette. My step-brother who was 2 years older, had his own room. I was imposing being the son of a guy who’d moved in with his mother. You can guess how he felt having lived with his mum for years without any male figure around. I marvelled over his possessions and toys.

I wasn’t made welcome, felt alone and unwanted. My step-mother made life difficult and disconnected the phone, so I couldn’t talk to my mum. She was my mother in England and contributed to my unhappy childhood. She failed as a parent, never considered me part of her family but I was forced to consider her part of mine. My childhood showed me good and bad love.

Aged 9 I got beaten up by an older boy on the estate. My step-brother intervened, this was my first example of bonding on the streets.

Age 11 I went to Jamaica for summer holidays. I was happier than I’d been in ages and despised the thought of returning to England. I returned, and my step-mother made it clear it was her money we were living off as my dad bet it all on horses. He’s been betting since he was young, it’s an addiction, like drugs. Most Fridays he’d come back saying he’d won. It caused arguments cos he’d spend £500 and not always win that back. That money was to pay bills and she refused to cook dinner for him and me. My step-brother never suffered, he’d get takeaway, Chinese, KFC. I learnt to cook at a young age to survive, corned beef and rice, tuna rice or pasta. Punished for something my dad had done.

My step-mum’s insecurity saw her stop all contact with my mum as letters from my mum stopped.
My dad was an opportunist, smart and could hold conversations on anything from politics to the street. He taught me to be safe on the streets. I loved him. He married my step-mum when I was 11. He needed her as she was carrying him.

The neglect and discomfort made me open my heart to the streets. Now 12 I grew mentally stronger, felt anger, cold inside and incomplete. My heart had cracked, I was no longer the loving smiling child from Jamaica. I was ready to be guided by local youths.

At secondary school I found encouragement and loyalty from friends who were the family I’d craved for. Just after my 12th birthday I committed my first crime. I collected the school meal register and stole meal tickets. I sold these for £1 making £20 a month. I felt a sense of satisfaction.

My dad brought me into an environment where I’m suffering, being tortured in the house. I’m going to school pretending to be OK. Coming to this country, getting accustomed to the way of life, no one helped me with the language barrier, how to behave. I’ve come here, kids are not listening to the teacher, what am I’m gonna do? Follow them, I’m not gonna be good, I’m gonna act out my madness. Kids at school liked me, I fell in with the naughty kid’s cos what they’re doing is fun. I’ve been in Jamaica getting beat for what you do here and get away with.

I gained a reputation for fighting and was in the top 5 fighters at school. We regularly had fights with other schools. Fights proved ‘realness’ and ‘gangsta’. I earned respect that I still possess today. Gangsta = GANG (his gang members) and STA (the reputation you build on the streets).

At school you’d have to fight, there was no running off even if you got beat up. That’s how respect came. Most of my respect came from school days. I had so many fights I was known as the guy. I was bigger than other kids so had an advantage plus my friends were friends through and through. There weren’t no 1 on 1 fights, if I’m fighting my friend’s in there that’s how we was.

Age 12 I saw my first real gun. I was friends with a young traveller. I learnt a lot from him and his family. They were more advanced than us, if they had a problem they’d call an uncle who’d get you a knife or gun. Their caravan was like a house, it had everything. We pointed the gun at each other, just kids playing. The gun was heavy. I felt I could do whatever I wanted cos I’ve got access to a gun, he said anytime.

In school people felt that aura coming off me. I thought they must know I can access a gun cos it wasn’t a normal school. They mixed two boys schools together and everybody became gangsters once they left. Every person that committed murders or got murdered came out of that school. There were loads of gangs but in school
everyone was friends. Once 3 o clock came it was different. The rule was if in school, partying, at the carnival or out of the area we’d call a truce.

Age 12 I was bunking off school hanging around with older boys off the estate. I’d sign in, bunk off and sneak back at the end of the day. That was with my traveller friend, his family had respect, so he was allowed to hang out with the older guys. I never got expelled I was too smart for that. I’ve been suspended for a few days. I attended raves with older guys and got drunk on shandy.

Aged 12 I tried smoking for the first and last time. My step-brother and his friends were smoking weed. It wasn’t for me it burnt my chest and I was coughing but it was good to try. I don’t drink or take drugs. I’ve always had the thinking anything could happen to me at any time and I need to be alert and sober. I don’t want substances to cloud my mind.

Once we became teenagers and fights were going on at home they moved the freezer out of the little room by the front door and made that my bedroom. It had no windows, it was like living in a vault. I didn’t mind as it was my own space, I could sneak people in and out and sneak in and out myself, it worked perfectly.

My step-mum ensured she was the victim of all disputes with my dad who had not divorced my mum. She tried committing suicide numerous times. Aged 13, I’d come home to the fire brigade in my house who’d broken down the door cos she’d taken an overdose of tablets and alcohol. Once I heard her playing music, smoke coming out of the garage, opened the garage and she said close it, I’m trying to kill myself. You continue your day pretending you’re alright but you’re not cos it affects you.

At 14 I’d sneak into the local mixed school; whose uniform was the same and chat up girls. I was more interested in robbing their phones than getting their numbers. We’d pretend we were new boys and teachers would go with it until someone complained we’d robbed them.

My mates and me at 14 had a ‘cotch’, an empty garage under a tower block. We’d plan robberies, sleep with girls there and snatch their phones. We got braver and moved on to street robberies snatching handbags off women from the city.

Aged 15 I was having regular sex with a girl. When a woman gets involved with a man in a gang she gains a place in his downfall. After your best friend women are most dangerous when you’re on the street and men often let their guard down.
Home was like a battlefield with continuous disputes. I stayed out late and became a full-time employee of the streets. I’d been running away from home from about 14, I’d stay at a friend’s. By 15 I was a street robber targeting the wealthy. I got a rush from robbing and assaulting people. We’d steal motor bikes from white boys to get around. It was like a game, cat and mouse. I robbed someone, we’d then phone and intimidate them to drop charges. There was no way we could have went to jail and the silly things we were doing was out of boredom.

The first time I fired a gun I was 15. We robbed it off a guy outside a club. We took turns firing it out of the car. We didn’t understand the seriousness of this, how easy it is to squeeze this thing off, it was like a firework. I didn’t feel anything at all. The first time I felt something was when people was trying to kill me, and I had to defend myself. That’s different, you’re engaged in warfare, trying to survive. A total different feeling from firing it playing about with friends. When you’re under attack the whole world stops and starts going crazy.

My first contact with the police was just after I was 16. I was arrested with a friend for stabbing a guy on a bus. I pretended I didn’t know my friend in court and we got off. He was involved in gangs and respected. He was one of the first people I knew when I came to England, we had an unbreakable bond. When arrested my parents were fed up but there’s only so much talking you can do. Me getting out of control was something new. Police were coming and making sure I was in, my curfew. It was an embarrassment for the neighbours.

My step-mum sent my step-brother to Barbados to stay with his grandmother just before I left school. He was off the rails, on drugs, robbing and had debts. People threatened to kidnap me cos he owed money. He gave them trouble, came back to England, was good for a while, then got right back into it. I was partly to blame as by then I was fully into gang stuff. His peers didn’t respect him hanging out with me and my friends. My dad and step-mum were oblivious to what was going on or didn’t care.

I never caused trouble where I lived. I was part of the Blue Road Boys by default as we went to school and started committing crime together. I wouldn’t willingly say I’m part of the gang but would have died for them. They were like a family, gave me a feeling of belonging. The gang delivered fake love. I knew who the real soldiers were from early fights.

England was a land of opportunity for my dad, but I wanted more. I couldn’t wait to leave school and be a real gangster. I had a taste for what the streets had to offer and wanted my share. I attended school until the end, I acquired more skill on the streets to make a success of life than any I’d acquired in the classroom. I got a few GCSE’s, not good grades, I didn’t revise. I felt I was being
robbed by the educational system when I could be on the streets earning. My dad got a tutor but if someone don’t wanna learn you can’t force them.

My dad had to leave school to work cos he was the eldest, my mum same thing. The only person who got a top-class education was my sister at private school and university in Jamaica. Sometimes with all the education in the world people don’t want to work.

Aged 16 I found out my mum was in bad health and didn’t have long to live. The last time we spoke I was 11. I got a call to say your mum’s in the country. She lasted 9 months, died the month I got caught with a knife. She’d had cancer for years. I recall as a kid she’d to go in the chemist, buy pink liquid and drink it. In a country where you haven’t got money to pay rent and eat how are you gonna go to hospital? You go to the doctor and buy something to hold it out until god blesses you with money. It’s a mixture of poverty and neglecting yourself.

When she came here the cancer was advanced. She was in constant pain, wanted to sleep and went into a coma. They said would you like us to turn the machine back on, I said is she gonna be in pain? They said yeah, and I said let the woman sleep.

It was a blow to my heart and rage built up inside me. I felt my dad and step-mum had robbed me of loving my mother. I blamed them for stopping my contact with her. I could have sent money if I’d known she was ill.

It was hard growing up without ‘I love you’ and hugs. I treasured every moment before she died. Leading up to her death I felt bitter and cold. I didn’t let my dad attend her funeral. Her death left a void in my life. She was/is my inspiration. Emotionally I needed someone to reach out to, but no one reached back.

I broke up with my girlfriend. I was into money, didn’t want nothing to do with girls. Girls liked me, you’re the bad guy with money. One girl forced me to go out with her. I thought Wow that’s attractive, she ain’t scared of me. Then dumped me cos I was being nice to her.

I went back to the streets and held a major position in the Blue Road gang. We had a reputation for robberies and gang fights.

At 16 I was homeless and slept at a train station for a night or two. I was fully into gang life, it was ride or die. If someone had killed me then it would have been a good thing. I found a friend to stay with at a hostel. Then moved to a flat we afforded from crime proceeds. Made money playing on-line poker with credit cards, learnt from Nigerians. We signed in to play each other, we can’t lose, one wins, you split the money. The Nigerians were bosses of fraud. They’d give you instructions go to Thomas Cook, the bookies, or internet café and do whatever they told you.
I started drug dealing after I started college, aged 17. I lasted 2 months in college doing music. They offered me sports, but I don’t like getting sweaty and running. I indirectly bullied the music teacher to let me rap for the whole day.

From dealing heroin I bought a car from the profit which we used to go robbing people. I was more interested in robbing than having a girlfriend.

I met a guy, 14 years my senior. He had sayings of ‘Death before dishonour’ or ‘Do or die’. He was like an elder brother. I looked up to him, he schooled me on work and staying safe on the roads. I reached out and he reached back. Drug dealing was too much hard work and now I was robbing drug dealers. We drank champagne at nightclubs. I was paid for making sure there were no disturbances at the clubs. I spent my time stealing watches and chains. I’d go down the pawn shop and sell them.

About this time, I moved in with my sister. I robbed drug dealers and gave her money. Eventually her boyfriend didn’t want me staying so she threw me out and I cried internally.

I grew out of the Blue Road Boys and became a member of the Red Crew when I was 17. They controlled the local drugs market. I’ve known them since we was kids. They put me on little bits of stuff, exposed me to machine guns. I was the youngest in the firm and that’s when I saw the different world of gang lifestyle. What we’d been doing robbing, stabbing and shooting was child’s play compared with these guys. It was like the movies, we was a part of the underworld. I’ve never seen anyone except white gangsters live the life we were living, even to today.

People from all over London was in our gang, we was like the Krays, going to clubs in a convoy, the middle cars carried guns. We were prepared for trouble, robbed everyone, celebrities bought us drinks, we controlled most clubs from East to West End. I became a ruthless member and we partied anywhere crossing post codes and enemy lines. It was like living a dream.

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Money was not an option, drugs was not something to worry about, all it took was a phone call and that’s when you learnt the rules of real gangster lifestyle. Come in, leave your phones, what’s said you don’t tell anyone. It was a whole different world. You understand how someone could own this place, they’re a gangster, they’ve got someone to buy it in their name. When I see young kids trying to be something they see on TV I wanna say you’ll never get there.

When I walked away from that lifestyle I was lucky. Most bad feeling came cos I went to work with the police. Is this guy gonna shop us?
What’s he doing? It took a while for people to understand I’m trying to help, not get people locked up. There’s information I know that you can’t trust other people with. It’s took 8 years to understand I’m not a police informant. Police need people like me but how many people wanna work with the police. Sometimes I see stuff and have to get back that balance. Everywhere you go its politics, it depends who you’re working with.

A few of us caused trouble, now the rest are involved. We was about money, now we’re gangster’s cos people are gonna try and shoot me cos I’m friends with you. I’m not gonna disengage my friendship cos someone wants to kill you. I don’t want you to die so I’m gonna do what I have to do to keep us alive. But I’m not a gangster I’m about money, never wanted to be a gangster but I’m not gonna let you rob or victimize me. That’s where I ended up getting caught up in gang lifestyle. We were friends, went to school, some went into fraud, some drug dealing, some shooting, stabbing and fighting, the rest went outside London to make drugs.

I was that guy, you phone me, need someone sorting out, how much? I’ll come and do what I have to do. You pay me, and I’ll come back. You want me to rob someone I’ll do that. I’m in easy work. I want money now.

So, no risk of police, even the police liked me. When I got arrested they said you wasn’t causing us bother, cos I learnt the formula, don’t rob innocent people and you’re fine.

I’ve got a really cold side to me, that’s why I survived on the streets, I’d just switch off. People think you’re sick, crazy. At one stage everyone thought I was on drugs cos I’d do what you see in the movies, but it wasn’t anything to do with that. When you’ve grown up and your mum and dads never said, ‘I love you’ or shown affection and the person you’re left at home with is dangerous you become cold. My whole family is mad, and these people are meant to love me, this whole world’s mad. The only way to survive is to be cold. When you go through life seeing people trying to hurt you you think OK this being nice and friendly thing’s not working. My whole family was in England, but no one sent for me. So, you wanted me to continue starving out there? I can’t come here, be nice and love you. That’s both sides of my family. My own sister didn’t attempt to send £5 to stop us suffering.

All the money I earnt I spent. If you were my friend I’d give you money. I’ve been poor, seen poverty, I don’t like people to tell me they’re broke or suffering. I didn’t do drugs. I brought jewellery, clothes, £100 jeans, £200 jacket, £150 trainers. Money went on family, pretend family cos when you’ve got money there’s a lot of them, girls, bikes, cars and giving people money. If someone phoned for £1,000 and I’d just robbed a dealer of £6,000 what’s £1,000. It
was about helping people, being like Robin Hood. When I went to prison I had a lot of money, within 6 months it’s gone. I had a house on St Lucia, but it’s gone now. I was 18, I thought I was from CSI, the best at what I was doing. My solicitor was a diamond, got me off everything it was like a drug. It looked like I couldn’t get caught doing anything. So why would I respect money?

I moved back home aged 18 having been away for 2 years. I wanted to be closer to my dad. He and my step-mum detested I was a gang member and wanted none of it in their home.

On my 19th birthday we went clubbing. I wore a Nike outfit and leather gloves to install fear in enemies and leave no fingerprints. I went with my mate; a rival gang had blown up his car. We decided to give it large. We bundled in cars, as we went past the nightclub we saw one of the rival gang. I approached a girl to carry in our guns as she worked behind the bar so wouldn’t get searched. They either saw us or someone told them so the person we was looking for wasn’t there but one of their friends was. Everyone was hesitant to shoot. I said if you ain’t gonna shoot what’s the point of bringing guns and left. As I came out a rival gang boy was there. I knew I was dead but wasn’t willing to die. I charged into him, as I got across the road I cocked the gun and accidently shot myself in the hand. I screamed they thought they’d shot me. It burnt me I grabbed the back of my leg. I started firing back. My friends came out firing and they ran off. We drove to hospital and spent half hour there. I could have been dead that day.

We went to a party in north London and other gangs were there. We started talking to girls and a fight broke out which we won, and a boy got stabbed. The following week we sought revenge for the disrespect of challenging us. We felt like we ran North London I was making money at the time selling cocaine and heroin to wealthy business men. I was living nice having learned drug dealing from a girl. I was her body guard, she’d do the dealing.

Then this university boy who was a gangster at weekends rings me to do a robbery with him. Worst mistake of my life! But a blessing as I wouldn’t be where I am today. I’ve gone to rob a lorryload of designer jeans that turned into mayhem. I done the robbery, they panicked cos they didn’t do their jobs of taking phones off people. It was chaos, we threatened the driver, unloaded the lorry but no getaway van arrived. My rule is ‘If you’re still at the scene of a crime after 4 minutes you’re going to jail’. I unloaded the van, took it away, cleaned and hid it. The police arrived, I’m the only one that got away. The rules are if you get away nobody says your name, but these university boys don’t understand the code of the streets. I should have cancelled it but went ahead thinking it’s a simple robbery, they’re selling stolen stuff, they can’t call the police.
I hid, found a station and made my way home. I shouldn’t have done a day in jail. The robbery I pulled off was fantastic. Only 3 people were seen and 4 of us in the dock, nobody could explain that. Police arrested 3 people, victims said there were 3 people, witnesses saw 3 people. I got stitched up on joint enterprise, they had no evidence. Police found out I was involved and kept calling at my dad’s. I stayed away for a month.

I got arrested and detained for 6 months. My bail application was turned down as they found a gun they thought was used in the robbery. There was no evidence on the gun or in the van. No witnesses picked me out in the ID parade. They felt the victim would be intimidated and put him in protection. They offered me a plea bargain of handling stolen goods as they were trying to stitch me up. I wanted a clean sheet so didn’t go for it. I’d have been out in 3 months.

Before that police gave me a deal. I didn’t go for it cos I don’t work like that. They said give us an alibi, tell us where your friend is cos he’s wanted for attempted murder we’ll let you go. I said I can’t give up my friend. They spoke to my dad, tell him to co-operate, there’s no evidence. I’d probably have been doing 18 years with my friends or be dead.

It was a blessing, one of the best things that’s happened to me. I got stitched up, the jury couldn’t come to a vote, the judge bullies them and they’re back saying guilty. Age 19 I was sentenced to 5 years.

Everything I did in prison was strategic. I know how to use the system for my benefit, from school to work to prison. They labelled me a gang member. I was banned from London jails, from youth offending institutes, they sent me to Omega adults prison. I caused chaos, they sent me on every single wing. The Governor said it’s never happened before. They then sent me to HMP Kappa who chucked me out cos I was having too much fun. I spent 6 weeks locked up for 23 hours a day. They sent me to Upsilon where I manipulated the system and got sent to Epsilon. I enjoyed it there, I got bored. The prison was 75% Midlander’s, they hated Londoners. I formed a gang of Londoners. I found I had a leader’s glow, the ability to captivate an audience, hold their attention, the gift of influence. Spent my 20th Birthday there. Was there for a year and it was all about survival. There was the same problem in all the prisons, gang affiliation. I had about 3 fights and 1 attack.

Whilst in prison there was not a day when I didn’t regret not listening to my dad who continued to love and support me. It caused me heartache and pain. He was all I had left now. His prison visits were no pleasure but reminders of the past. I craved for the streets, I wanted to maintain my position on the streets.

Just before my 21st birthday a friend was murdered, shot in the head. After that I questioned if I wanted that lifestyle as it could have been me. I reflected on my life. My conclusion was I’d made a
poor choice of friends. Peers are the biggest influence on the streets. In the gang I’d spent my time trying to prove I was real when the lifestyle and people were fake. During the last year of my sentence I spoke to people from the past, had a few visitors and felt stronger than ever. I believed I had the ability to go right where I’d gone wrong.

I learnt how to use the system. To get out of prison you have to do courses, so I done all the courses. Told them I was on drugs, so they done a monthly urine test. I wasn’t on drugs but got 3 years of certificates, done every single drugs course. Hung around heroin addicts and understood how drugs affect your body for when they ask questions. Where did you inject? How much drugs did you smoke a week? I learnt from people taking crack so on courses they’d believe me. Classed a drug addict my risk lessened cos they think I’m doing crazy things for drugs. Do all the drugs courses in this prison, then caused trouble, need to go somewhere else cos every prison’s got different courses. Came out of prison with more certificates than anyone doing a 3-year sentence. Anger management, ETS, drugs courses, every course you could think of across the country. When I came out I volunteered to do boosters, so probation was happy.

Near the end of my sentence I was such a model prisoner they made me enhanced with special privileges, was sent to a C Cat, where you could eat your own food, wear your own clothes. I was living like a king in prison.

With 3 weeks left in prison, police took me to court, to stitch me up for driving, to disable me when I came out, which they did. They sent me to Pentonville. I was so depressed I’ve never seen a prison like that in my life. I didn’t mind suffering for 3 weeks, I was with people I thought were dead, crack heads, ex gangsters now on drugs. I thought this is sick, I’ve been good for years, but that’s what it is.

Prison taught me who I was and how far I’d go to stand my ground when my back was against the wall. My 3-year sentence saw me in 9 different prisons. I was released aged 22.

Leaving prison there’s inadequate service from probation. It’s easier to send people back than support them. Inside prison inadequate, no rehabilitation, just this is your release date, get your stuff together you’re going home tomorrow, make sure you get to probation. Where’s the support? Probation are like security guards, do nothing for you, want you to come in and cause no trouble. They’re like babysitters. Don’t offer you jobs, accommodation, therapy, they’re useless. You go there, yes, I’ve been looking for work, I’ve been good. As long as there’s no police intelligence you’re OK.
There were a new set of Red Crew members now. The olders were using the youngers as an inspiration to keep their lives thriving on the streets. It was all about reputation.

The day before my release I thought ‘I’ve been shot at, wrestled men twice my age but none scared me more than the thought of becoming a legit member of the community. I wanted to go straight but didn’t want to fail. The thought of people lost to the streets and my mother made me think life ain’t fair. What’s the point of adhering to the rules either way you’re gonna die. I remembered my mum’s words ‘Everybody gwan die but it’s how you die that matters’. She died hard working, respected, loved. I wanted to make her proud, wanted to find pride in myself.

I was released from prison with £80 plus £400 I’d saved. I borrowed £400 to get drugs (£800) to sell to get me on my feet. Two weeks later I was robbing drug dealers. I came home to nothing, dad gave me £20, my clothes was gone. People know I’m home, I’ve got no money. Nothing had changed. It was like I’ll have to fall in line, my friends were ready for me to take up position. You see your family struggling after 3 years what you gonna do?

I was on £91 per fortnight benefit. With no job, qualifications or income I was tempted to hit the roads and did. I started doing robberies on my own as I didn’t trust anyone. I was back in with the Red Crew just after I was released. I broke off from them aged 23 cos they started to go to prison for Securicor vans.

Although on a driving ban I bought a bike. I thought police won’t catch me on a bike.

I reluctantly signed up for counselling course. I felt the need to connect, to bring to an end to the suffering I’d endured, to gain some freedom. I done 2 years counselling at college. I’ve got a detailed mind so doing courses is a doddle.

I met with my sister who apologised for sexually exploiting me when young and referred herself to counselling. She admitted my dad had raped her just as our grandad had raped our mum. She thought it normal to sexually exploit me. I always felt women wanted to use me for sex. I found it hard to love people as I never felt love from my family.

I wanted a better life. The more I stepped away from my peers and the gang the more I had to watch my back.

My step-brother was on crack and ruling the estate, a top robber, feared and in business. I don’t know if it was drugs or rebelling that sent him on the gangster road. Maybe he was trying to prove a point to me? Because of his lifestyle there were stolen goods, drugs and weapons at home.
Within 2 months of leaving prison, police raided the house for firearms and found nothing. My step-brother had robbed a load of guns and kept some. My step-mum said you’s are gonna have to move out, but she really meant me. We decided to move out and went to the Council housing department. As I wasn’t 25 and on probation they didn’t want to house me plus all the gang business. My step-brother got a hostel room. I returned to the Housing Office every day for 3 weeks, then they referred me to an anti-gang’s project.

At the anti-gang’s project, I met a guy who had a flat for me in return for participating in the project, producing a CV and looking for work. We’re still friends today. I was 22. They housed me but everyone there was from my area. I had to manoeuvre my way out of that flat and orchestrated a few attacks. They moved me, with the help of police and my GP. I was the first client on the Project. They gave me a job and it was a conflict of interest to be tenant and employee, so I moved to Essex. When I got into the project I surrendered my ideas and thought I’ll do it through you, you’ve got a 3 million turnover cos you’re connected to housing associations. These kids that need help let me give them a flat and support them. That’s what kept me going. I worked for them for 4 years and ended up as manager. They set up the project but didn’t know much about gang life, so I’d go over as senior worker, there was always work for me. They wanted me to get involved in corruption, so I left, set up my own company where I am now.

Having said that the project inspired me. In trying to go legitimate I saw friends killed or go back to jail. The street was watching me, times were hard, and I was tempted to go back to my old ways for quick cash. Loads of times I wanted to go back to the streets, I’m working for £1,000, £2000 a month when I could easily pick up the phone. You think what’s the point. For 2 years it was hard. Detaching from associates was hard. I no longer had the brotherly connection with the gangs. Instead I rolled with a few that kept it real. I was learning how to read people. I found ways to see the inner person not the exterior they were. I linked up with an old prison mate who was going straight and making music. I met a girl a month after I came out of prison whilst rapping. After 4 months she became pregnant. With a baby on the way I wanted to give it security, love, support, affection and a dad to be proud of, everything my parents failed to give me. Our relationship weren’t meant to be. I don’t believe in abortion so stepped up to be a man, got a flat cos that’s what a family is meant to be, a home with your woman and your kid. I tried to make it work but it was a relationship that was doomed from the start. I still see my son, we’ve got a mutual understanding, I do what I can do for him.
Just before I was 23 I was approached to do a hit. From young these people have been getting calls from Triads, Turks, white gangsters to do things. The stakes have gone up, they want you to take people out. When a man’s telling you, I’ll give you £20,000 to shoot that guy you’re not gonna think about the guy cos you’ll just go and shoot someone if he says me and that guy’s got problems. If you’re gonna pay me £20,000 why not. The difference is he’s telling you I need a guy dead. For me I’ve never killed so I had to digest that, but I wasn’t looking to go to jail for life for £20,000. May be if the stakes were a higher I’d think about it, closed my eyes and done what I had to do. I’d done a lot of crime but never murder. Half was to be paid up front and half when the job was done. He offered me £15,000 and had ripped me off £10,000 cos I found out it was £25,000 for a hit. It would give me all the money I needed for my baby. Two nights before the hit it played on my conscience, so I gave the job to another contact who got arrested before the hit in possession of a gun.

Just after I was 23 one of my best mates got murdered and I wanted revenge. I could be a cold individual and could switch off for the right reasons. I was ready to kill whoever. Those that killed him were the people that brought me onto the streets. I’m caught in a position where I’m gonna have to do stuff to people that have been there for me. Now I’m gonna come and kill you. No one was up for killing anyone. I’m on probation, got more to lose than anyone and everyone’s scared. I thought this whole game’s fake, I’m the only one ready to kill. I said if you’re not ready after the funeral to kill I’m done. It had all sorts of politics not just that people were scared. People didn’t believe that was the right way to go. I learnt everyone talks the talk when it actually come down to it. I’ve never killed but for a friend I felt obligated. No one wanted to and that’s when I said I’m done, I’m walking away from this. The police didn’t help. It’s like they watch the whole thing or they’re not smart enough to know what’s going on.

Aged 23 my son was born. For the first time ever, I loved. He gave me motivation to pull away from the crowd. Had he not been born I would have ended up back in prison and doing the hit. That’s one reason why I left the street. I didn’t wanna be driving around with my kid and some guy tries to shoot me or I have to kill someone and go to prison. I didn’t wanna be a part of that life. I’d been given a second chance, a reason to live and achieve.

Age 24 I became more involved with my mother’s family. I was working with gangs as a mentor and getting in contact with my cousins involved in gangs. I couldn’t tell police they were my family. I’d visit my gran, head of the family, nothing moves unless she says so. I started seeing my family and building a bond with them. I met my cousin who had links to white gangsters, been boss of a gang and spent time on the streets. He spoke with wisdom on how to free
yourself from the streets. I dropped my old acquaintance. I made more money in 6 months with my cousin than I ever did with my old friend.

I was now working with my family, as doorman or security in nightclubs, restaurants or bars, wearing shirts, being a gentleman and keeping out of trouble.

Age 24 I met a policeman, we’re still friends today. He supported me through the transition and although I was thinking of leaving the road he invited me to the Police Station, flipped back this chart and I was there. Everyone’s gone to jail, I’m the last one left. 100 youths under my command. The power was mine, the whole empire left to me, and I’m gonna walk away from it. He dealt with me like a son saying, “you’ve got to stop man cos if you carry on it’s not gonna be nice”. He got me a job in the youth offending service, took me to meet the Mayor. I’m walking around the House of Lords like I’m meant to be here, talking to round table people. It was things people only dream of on the streets. When he exposed me to that world, apart from the money and the fame, I felt I was the man somewhere else, cos it was like being on the streets in Parliament, it’s the same game. It’s just that people play a different game where they don’t shoot each other but they will do things. I felt at home, just a different way of playing the game.

I worked with the council and police on a witness protection project as part of the anti-gangs Project. I set up gang disruption units in north and south London and a Pan London Witness Protection Programme. Within the project I was the specialist gang member who’d make sure everything was in place working with young people, where can’t you move them, who’s got problems with who, what do they need? A gang member comes out of prison, they need money. These things people overlook. How’s he gonna pay his electric, buy food? He’s gonna rob someone. You give them vouchers, find out what facilities they’ve got. Work became my life. Clients respected me as I was real with them. I educated them on life skills, that they weren’t alone and there were people who cared. I got hassle from old gang members for working with the police. Not once whilst working on this project did I think about returning to the streets.

Age 26 I enrolled at university to study a BA in Law and got a 2:1 on the first part but dropped out to focus on the anti-gangs Project. When I study whoever the lecturer is they want me to stay on. I’ve been through the criminal justice system so what they’re teaching I understand a different side to. I was my own solicitor and barrister in court so what you’re telling me you’ve just taught me things I didn’t know, rules I could get away with. Studying was hard work but there’s a secret to the madness called YouTube. I’ve helped young people by saying go on YouTube. 90% of what I’ve had to do, driving test, university, college I’ve studied on YouTube or pay someone to do your assignments.
Age 27, after I wrote my first book, my biography, lots of people disengaged friendship. It turned my family against me, they got a permanent marker and blocked me out of the family picture, so I had 3 years fun with them until they coloured me over. People don’t like you speaking the truth, but it is what it is. I’ve also got a daughter, born when I was 27.

Now when I look in the mirror I want to be the person staring back not the guy people felt threatened by due to a violent reputation and convictions. I often wonder if I and others had applied ourselves to education and a career the way we did to street life if half the deceased in my generation would still have their lives. I’m now proud when I look in the mirror and see a businessman.

I mentor young men giving them advice and guidance. I find it easy to hear their stories, struggles and can connect with them. Working with offenders I’ve found most have learning or mental difficulties. Throughout my childhood I searched for someone to teach me, lead me down the right path, inspire me. Nobody told me there were people who wanted to help. From my experience parents, teachers and police need to work closer together.

If interventions had been in place in primary school I wouldn’t have ended up where I did. I started school in England aged 8. People come to the country and need a system to help them adjust. My primary school was alright but there was no systems that worked. At secondary school, there was no intervention. I was in a gang from the start. You can’t put people that have been reject from other schools in the same one. We all went to prison.

The most dangerous part of a young person’s life, crucial, is when they leave year 11. If they haven’t done good in school what are they meant to do? Parents pressure them to go to college, get a job, an apprenticeship. If you’re sleeping in this house get up and do something. You can’t get benefits, if your parents ain’t giving you no money where you gonna go? On the Roads but pretend you’re going college. People become dangerous then cos you’re jumping into a game where there’s already dangerous people. You have to become more dangerous than the guy that left last year. Now you’ve got 4,5,6 dangerous people walking around. Or they start selling drugs, you ain’t got no money, do this for me, bring drugs back, you’ve left school now, you’re a big man.

There’s people that have seen my journey. My solicitor has been with me since I was 14, seen the whole transition. Anything I do, if I’m in the newspaper, on radio, I tell him. He wasn’t just my solicitor he was my friend. I’m always thinking outside the box. If I’d just become like this, I’d have a long criminal record. I’ve been arrested over 50 times for all sorts, kidnapping, false imprisonment,
robberies, TDA. Most arrests before I was 15 doing silly stuff, riding a moped, carrying a knife, taking someone’s phone. All of them my solicitors got taken away. I’ve been to court so many times it’s ridiculous, there’s always a reason why they have to throw it out. Either police didn’t read me my rights, lack of evidence or witnesses don’t turn up.

I tried to do Mothers against guns, doing public speaking. Set up the company for young boys that wanna leave gangs, that didn’t have the opportunity to get out. Nobody wanted to fund me because I’ve got armed robbery with intent. Don’t trust me.

When the riots happened, I’m thinking in our day we’d be in Hatton Garden. Different mind-set of these pretend gangsters, we were about money. People should see there isn’t any real gang warfare cos if you killed my brother and there’s riots going on I’m coming for you cos the police are busy.

Me and my dad we’ve got a good relationship, we can talk. What he done to get me here I respect cos he didn’t have to. Certain things I now understand as a man with two kids with two different people, I understand peoples’ personalities and being with a woman you have to learn to be flexible. I have to respect the guy at the end of the day when you’re in a relationship and there’s a child holding you together your relationship’s doomed. You’ve come to a country and you’re gonna make sure your son’s safe. He wanted me to have an education, have a life, be where I am today. I’d have done the same for my son. He wasn’t raised with his parents, so nobody showed him parenting. Not gonna agree with certain things, I don’t gamble, don’t waste money. That’s his weakness. I respect the guy, you come to a country and you don’t know what’s gonna happen, but you try things and it works.

I’ve known my current girlfriend since I come out of prison, we were friends, one thing led to another and we’re so close we might as well be together. I’m not perfect, cause a lot of trouble. We’re engaged but it’s got to the point where I think I’ll find someone else. But I’m not, I’d rather stick with the trouble I’ve got than go and make new trouble.

I do lots of university and college work now, love it. The side of the job I don’t like is when I move someone to the other end of the country, they come back and get murdered. Things affect me, and I have to see your mum. I think stupid boy because I’ve been there, these youths are never gonna get where they think they’re gonna get. It doesn’t give me a sense of failure just loss. The reason I say it hurts is none of these kids you hear on the news are bad. They’ve either got mental health issues or they’re active. If you were that bad you wouldn’t be standing on a corner where someone could blow your face off. When you’re really in trouble you aren’t seen.
When we hear about gangs these youths are good boys they just need help and a hug. That’s what most need is hugging or a holiday, take them to Africa, to Somalia where people are suffering. Take them to the war let them see someone lying naked with gunshot wounds or stabbed then you’ll see how harmless they are. I took one kid, meant to be the most dangerous boy, in a black taxi to Westfield, he took his hood off and went I feel free because he’s trapped in his area.

So next 5 years hopefully my business will be like a little Tesco Express, all over the place. I won’t be asking Government for funding, I’ll get private funding. I’ll be travelling the world stopping all this sexual abuse. My company support people in the community, I’m a director. Apart from daily contracted work I give talks, training how to engage with hard to reach children, safeguarding training, that’s what I love doing. If I could do that every day, travel the country.

In 5 years’ time I might not be here. My dream would be travelling the world, doing public speaking and living life. Hopefully win the lottery! Or one of my books make me a millionaire. For my company to be doing well, I could pass that to someone to run.

My message for youngsters is enjoy life cos tomorrows not promised. Don’t join gang’s cos not everyone makes it out. I’m one of 40 the rest are either still there trapped, traumatised, dead, in jail or got mental health. They’ve all done drugs or alcohol. I still see people’s faces that are dead. If I go to a shop and someone looks at me funny I think have I robbed, you in the past. Don’t put yourself through that. Use the system to get everything you’re entitled to. If you die tonight what are people gonna say? What have you achieved? Nothing. He was a gang member, he was loyal... tomorrows not promised.

I was never a gang member, I was out for money. Sometimes you get caught up in gang activity or gang banging as they call it, but I’ve never been a bad man or a rude boy but won’t let people take advantage of me. If that makes me fall into that category, so be it. I’m no gangster, if anything call me an opportunist. When I see an opportunity I’m gonna take it.
The Roads

Everyone likes to think they are real,

Most people in the hood are fake; nothing is what it seems on the streets.

What is real at the end of the day?

Having a gun? Killing someone? That ain’t real; that is a joke.

Some people like to think there is some sort of technique or skill to this road ting.

A skill that leads you to death or jail is not really useful at all.

You pick up a gun in January then you get killed by March.

What’s it all for?

A fake little bullshit name on the road to impress a couple of ghetto birds?

Make the next man fear you so much he has no option but to kill you.

To every action there is a reaction, if you don’t know what you’re doing everything can go wrong.

Everything does go wrong as no one knows what they are really doing even though they think they know it all.

They’re just pursuing something that seems reachable, they actually think they can grab it, touch it, taste it.

All you need is a little force and balls and it’s yours.

That’s how it seems when you have this illusion in your head, but it never pans out the way you saw it.

Things happen, if you’re not strong life becomes bitter and the resentment for life starts to build up and eat you up.

You change and the same feelings you were trying to escape in the first-place hits you back in the face ten times harder.
Life ain’t no joke but the roads is, get off it, it should come with a health warning, the amount of stuff I’ve lost because of the road, it really hurts my heart.

The roads give a little and take back a hundred times over, for a car, couple of girls, money that disappears, fake rep, in exchange for your life before you’re 22, is it worth it?

You want to be hated? Trust me you don’t. Everything changes, families get scared, you can’t trust no one, your friends will snake you for less than nothing, then cry at your funeral, then start moving in on your wife or girl, smile at your kid.

Road is not nice, there is no love so don’t be fooled into thinking the game is sweet.

Six-foot-deep is not sweet, never coming out of jail ain’t sweet, watching your family scream because shots got fired through the letterbox ain’t sweet.

Remember once you decide you want to be that man, you have declared war with a thousand other men that have the same mentality as you.

You are even a threat to your friends as they want to be the man also.

There is nothing on the road you can trust except yourself, and while you’re in street mode you can’t even trust yourself, you are a threat to yourself.

You want to rep your postcode? Start a legit business, make money and hand around like-minded people and stay off the road.

Strive to be the first one of your friends to really make it when the rest are locked up or dead . . . .

Enough said

Stay of the road

Harry - September 2009


