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DAILY Mirror INVESTIGATES



Pictures:
ROGER ALLEN
Picture posed
by a model

62 of the worst London gangs are responsible for..

22% of serious violence..

17% of all robberies..

50% of shootings and..

14% of rapes in the capital



▲ REFORMED Arfan Naseer

TOM PARRY
t.parry@mirror.co.uk

STARING me squarely in the eye, Ali casually brushes off his chances of being shot dead as an occupational hazard.

A street gang member at the age of 14, he exposes the true scale of Britain's gang crisis when he says chillingly: "To be honest you're going to die one day; it's just one of them, isn't it?"

Ali, who still lives with his parents in Nottingham, has decided that being a drug-dealing foot soldier for a local criminal network is his career choice. The gang comes first.

He adds: "My mum has been crying on my shoulder telling me I'm taking too many risks. She tells me I could get shot at any time."

Ali is part of a severe epidemic in Britain's inner cities in which boys as young as eight are being coerced to join older street thugs.

A 10.6% increase in serious youth violence in the six months to last October has been linked to gangs.

Sitting opposite me with his hood

My mum has been crying on my shoulder, telling me I take too many risks

STREET GANG MEMBER ALI, 14

up to disguise his identity, Ali tells me about his day-to-day life. "My mate has already been shot four times," he says. "He's only walking again recently after the last time."

"That's just the life that we know. Last week even his little brother got shot at. I only carry a knife if there's a real threat. I hide it in my belt."

Another threat is kidnapping. "Someone phoned one of the guys I know to say they wanted a couple of draws (cannabis), and then they just kidnapped him," he says.

"They were asking for three grand for him. It was because he was selling drugs on their land."

Schoolboys like Ali are drawn in by older gang leaders with diamonds in their teeth. When I meet Ali he unfurls a wad of £10 notes tucked inside his jacket. He has come into the city to get his "grillz", gold caps fitted over four of his front teeth. The bill is more than £1,000. For Ali, it's well worth it. The bling will win respect, he says.

Despite being just 5ft 6in tall, there's an air of menace about him, and a single-mindedness about his "work". It is difficult to believe this boy,

whose face is just beginning to sprout stubble, is so casual about violence.

"I was very young when I first got involved," he says. "I had only just started secondary school."

"It all starts with where you grow up and looking to your elders and thinking, 'I want that lifestyle. I want that big gold chain that they got, I want that flashy car; I want them flashy clothes they got.'"

"It will start from street robberies to house robberies to drugs. Some of the elders would just say, 'Don't you want to jump on this? There's more money in this than there is in that.'"

"I've sold coke, E and heroin. Weed (cannabis) is really minor. If you're doing it from scratch you're only making a couple of hundred quid a day, but you can make a grand a day shooting food (selling hard drugs)."

In an unguarded moment, Ali shows a glimpse of a paranoid mind. Asked if he has a girlfriend, he replies: "Me, I don't trust no female. I keep myself to myself. They could set you up."

More than 150 miles away in East London, the story of former child gangster Taylor is similar.

Now 15, he started hanging around in a gang on a notorious estate in Leyton when he was eight. Recently, he had to leave his family and flee the area to avoid retribution.

"I started out holding on to drugs

CHILDREN IN PERIL: DAY THREE



Three boys wanted me to look after things so they wouldn't get caught
GANG TARGET JAMES

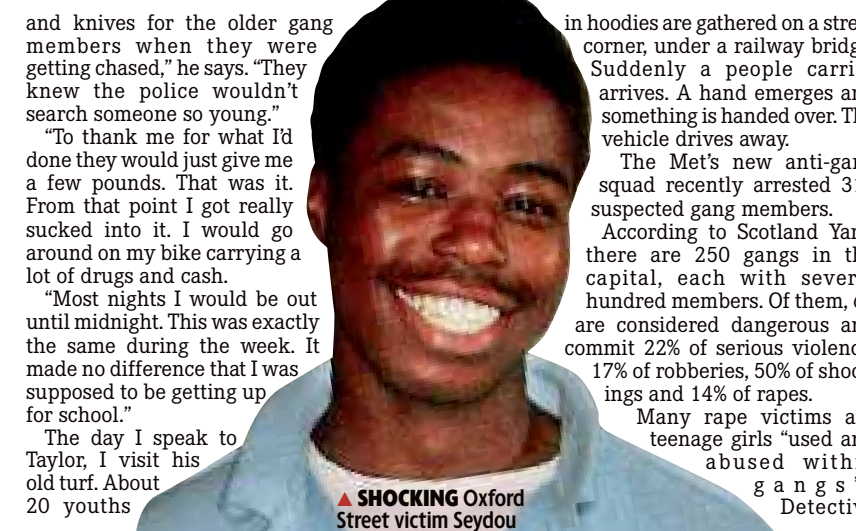


▲ DISGUISED Ali wears hood in interview with our Tom

▲ BABYFACE Gangsters tried to recruit James

One of my mates was shot four times, another was kidnapped but even at 14, I know this is the life I want

YOUNGSTERS IN STREET GANGS EARN THOUSANDS DEALING DRUGS



▲ SHOCKING Oxford Street victim Seydou

HOW TO SPOT WARNING SIGNS

HAS your child recently changed appearance, started using new slang, got new friends or fallen out with mates they have known for a while? All these are warning signs they may be involved with gangs, the Home Office said. Ways to prevent this are

to talk, be open and be as involved in their life as possible, experts say. If your child has joined a gang, they advise that you should stay calm and rational, then point out the risks and potential consequences of carrying a gun or knife. Seek help from local

community organisations or youth services. You could also contact the assigned safer schools police officer or community support officer. For information, see www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Yourchildshealthandsafety/WorriedAbout/index.htm.

and knives for the older gang members when they were getting chased," he says. "They knew the police wouldn't search someone so young."

"To thank me for what I'd done they would just give me a few pounds. That was it. From that point I got really sucked into it. I would go around on my bike carrying a lot of drugs and cash."

"Most nights I would be out until midnight. This was exactly the same during the week. It made no difference that I was supposed to be getting up for school."

The day I speak to Taylor, I visit his old turf. About 20 youths

in hoodies are gathered on a street corner, under a railway bridge. Suddenly a people carrier arrives. A hand emerges and something is handed over. The vehicle drives away.

The Met's new anti-gang squad recently arrested 315 suspected gang members.

According to Scotland Yard, there are 250 gangs in the capital, each with several hundred members. Of them, 62 are considered dangerous and commit 22% of serious violence, 17% of robberies, 50% of shootings and 14% of rapes.

Many rape victims are teenage girls "used and abused within gangs".

Detective Allan Davis says. Gang warfare spills on to the streets sporadically, as when Seydou Diarassouba, 18, was stabbed to death in front of horrified Oxford Street shoppers on Boxing Day.

It is thought he was a member of the ABM - All 'Bout Money or All 'Bout Murder - gang based in Stockwell, and was spotted by enemies in the O-Tray One, or O31 Bloods gang.

Taylor explains: "All the different circles in different estates would be part of the same postcode gang."

"Rivalry starts over petty situations and jealousy. Leyton might have had a bit of drama with another area over clothes or money and this could easily escalate into stabbings."

In Croydon, Surrey, one of the flash-points of last summer's riots, I meet 13-year-old James.

Small with blond hair and impish features, he is an ideal recruit because police would never target him.

"Three older boys said I should join their gang," James remembers. "They wanted me to look after things for them so they wouldn't get caught."

"I was really afraid. I didn't think I would get away. I was surrounded, and I was followed a few times after that."

He was lucky. David Mitchell, who runs the Gang Avoidance Project in Nottingham, says many school-age gang recruits are made to look after drugs and weapons with no firm promise of being accepted.

However, once they are involved, the financial rewards can be huge. "They believe there is nothing else out there," says Mr Mitchell. "Some can easily make four thousand pounds a week."

A US-style initiative in London to dissuade schoolkids from joining gangs is offering families a way out - or immediate police action.

Waltham Forest council leader Chris Robbins says the £3.5million Enough is Enough project is getting results.

"In our area there are several indi-

viduals who were involved in criminal activities at a very young age," Councillor Robbins says. "Often it is their mothers who come to see us. They are terrified and would much rather their children have a fear-free life."

Also helping tackle Britain's gang problems is The Prince's Trust Team Programme. It helped Arfan Naseer turn his back on gang life and become an example to other youths.

He linked up with a "firm" in his home city of Bradford when he was 15 and became a street drug dealer.

Six years later Arfan, who goes by the street name Naz, was jailed for nine years for Class A drugs offences and gang affiliation.

While in prison, he took part in the programme. His commitment impressed his tutors and on release Naz got the chance to work for Prince Charles' youth charity, becoming the first ex-prisoner to do so.

He says: "I took care of drug dealing, but some of my mates were getting involved in armed robberies. That big sentence made a lot of my firm think twice about what they were doing. I couldn't believe it."

A petty drama over clothes or money could easily escalate into stabbings

FORMER GANG MEMBER TAYLOR