Britain's Mean Streets

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HELP WANTED: With the support of Kids Company, Londoner Danny Mullins, at left, wants to become a plumber and dreams of starting a family. His friend Chris Abnett, at right, who is also being helped by the charity, has qualified as a painter and decorator, but has struggled to find work.

Jason Steen isn't an obvious target for muggers. The 40-year-old heads his own company advising on mergers and acquisitions, and usually strides through life like a Master of the Universe. This evening, though, he looks shaken. Two days earlier, he was accosted outside his central London home by eight kids — the youngest was 11 — who punched him to the ground, hustled him to the nearest cash machine and forced him to reveal his PIN number. After a series of attacks in the area, local residents have gathered in Steen's apartment to talk to the policeman handling the case. His advice: "Don't go out unless you have to."

Staying home in the face of danger isn't the British way. After suicide bombings in July 2005, Londoners continued working and socializing. Yet a survey by kids' charity TS Rebel found that last year more than a fifth of Britons avoided going out at night rather than risk encounters with a different form of terror: groups of children. Britons are frightened of their own young.

On any given Saturday night, in any town center across Britain, it's easy to see why. "It usually starts outside McDonald's — that's the hot spot," explains one London youth. "You might go with one mate, then you get a phone call. Give it an hour, there'll be 10 people there, with nothing to do. Intimidating people is something to do, a way of getting kicks. Like, 'Oh my God, did you see how they ran?' "

The boys and girls who casually pick fights, have sex and keep the emergency services fully occupied are often fueled by cheap booze. British youngsters drink their Continental European counterparts under the table: in 2003, according to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), 27% of British 15-year-olds had been drunk 20 times or more, compared to 12% of young Germans, 6% of Netherlands youth and only 3% of young French. British kids were also involved more frequently in fights (44% in the U.K. to 28% in Germany). They are more likely to try drugs or start smoking young. English girls are the most sexually active in Europe. More of them are having sex aged 15 or younger, and more than 15% fail to use contraception when they do — which means that Britain has high rates of both teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Small wonder, then, that a 2007 UNICEF study of child wellbeing in 21 industrialized countries placed Britain firmly at

the bottom of the table.

None of those indicators are good, but it's the increase in nasty teenage crime that really has Britain spooked. Violent offenses by British under-18s rose 37% in the three years to 2006. Last September, 29-year-old Gavin Waterhouse died from an assault by two boys. It was recorded on a cell phone by a 15-year-old girl. In January, three teenagers from northwestern England were convicted of kicking to death 47-year-old Garry Newlove after he tried to stop them vandalizing his car. In the wake of their trial, the *Sun* newspaper declared "the most important issue now facing Britain" to be "the scourge of feral youngsters." That isn't just tabloid talk. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, at his first press conference of 2008, said: "Kids are out of control ... They're roaming the streets. They're out late at night. There's an issue about gangs in Britain and an issue about gun crime as well as knife crime."

It should go without saying that tens of thousands successfully navigate the dangerous waters of a British childhood. And that children from all shades of the social spectrum feel they are being demonized. ("People believe we're all yobs carrying knives," says Tilly Webb, 14, from Suffolk in eastern England.) And that the British have a long propensity to recoil in horror from their children — whether they be Teddy boys in the 1950s, mods and rockers in the '60s, skinheads in the '70s or just a bunch of boisterous teens making a lot of noise but little real mischief. And that the world's most competitive media market loves a good story, and that wayward children can always be relied on to produce one.

All that is true. But it is also true that for what Bob Reitemeier, chief executive of the Children's Society, calls a "significant minority" of British children, unhappiness — and the criminality, excessive drinking and drug-taking and promiscuity that is its expression — really have created a crisis. Says Camila Batmanghelidjh, the founder of Kids Company, an organization working with some of London's poorest young: "If I was sitting in government, I'd be really worried — not about terrorist bombs but about this."

Alien Nation
All over the world, teenagers give their parents headaches. Why are the migraines induced by British kids felt across a whole society? Part of the reason may be that parents aren't always around to help socialize their children — or even just to show them affection. Compared to other cultures, British kids are less integrated into the adult world and spend more time with peers. Add to the mix a class structure that impedes social mobility and an education system that rewards the advantaged, and some children are bound to be left in the cold.

Meet Danny Mullins, 21, from London — now training to be a plumber and dreaming of starting a family. Mullins wasn't just born poor; he was born into a living hell. His mother, a heavy drug user, died aged 40, leaving her son emotionally scarred and destitute. "Many people I know need to go out and thieve just to survive," says Mullins, whose friend Chris Abnett is trying to find a way out of a vicious circle of prison and unemployment. Abnett says he has a qualification in painting and decorating but can't get work because of his criminal record. Both Mullins and Abnett are being helped by Kids Company.

Batmanghelidjh, who set up the charity in 1996 to support "lone children" growing up without a responsible parent or carer, says that she and her team encounter many British children who have been neglected or abused, leaving them too damaged to benefit from education or training. "The level they're at is just about survival," she says. "The public can't imagine having a daily life that's so empty and exhausting." In such circumstances, girls are often drawn into prostitution. Many have babies while still teenagers, partly to jump queues for social housing but mainly to find some affection. "What do you need to care about if no one loves you?" says Mullins. "If no one has love for you, you aren't going to feel love for other people when you get older."

Batmanghelidjh tends to agree. Love and understanding, she thinks, can transform problem kids into responsible members of society. It's not an idea that appeals to all Britons. Indeed, many British

adults seem to view children as an entirely separate species.

Britons have never been very comfortable with the idea of childhood. ("Culturally, Britain just doesn't like children much," says Batmanghelidjh.) In Victorian England, rich children were banished to nurseries and boarding schools, while their poorer contemporaries were sent out to work. The British are still expected to function as adults from an early age. At 8, Scotland has the lowest age of criminal responsibility in Europe, followed by England and Wales, where youngsters answer for their crimes from the age of 10. Yet children venturing into the adult world often feel rebuffed. "I don't get the feeling that Britain is the most child-friendly culture," says Emily Benn, who was selected to contest a seat in Britain's House of Commons three weeks before her 18th birthday. "When you go to France they're nicer to you in restaurants, on the streets and on transport. When I go around Britain on the railways, I get treated like rubbish by guards and officials."

Rapid social change has not helped. Family and community life have been redrawn in most rich countries, and none more so than Britain, where marriage rates are down to a 146-year low. A study in 2000 by the OECD found that British parents spend less time with their children compared to other nationalities, leaving them more open to influence from their peers and a commercially driven, celebrity-obsessed media. Elder Britons too often see their youngsters as a problem. Dominique Jansen, a Dutch mother living in England, says she recently took her two toddlers to her local church. She was startled by sour looks when her younger child asked her for juice. "It was uncomfortable," she says. "We had to leave." "You can see very vivid differences between the U.K. and countries in Europe," says Reitemeier. "You go onto sink estates [poor housing projects] in this country and there isn't a single element designed for children."

Culture Clash
Cold-shouldered by grown-ups, young Britons have developed an especially potent culture of their own. "Young people live in a world with very little meaningful contact or engagement with adults," says Professor Richard Layard of the London School of Economics, who has made a study of the causes of happiness.

This youth culture echoes and magnifies aspects of the adult world around it. Binge-drinking, for example, is hardly the preserve of young Britons. A report by the organization Alcohol Concern noted that one in three British men and one in five women drink double the amount considered safe at least once a week. And, unlike many British sports, this pursuit is popular from the bottom of the social spectrum right to the top. Photographs of Princes William and Harry emerging flushed from nightclubs are tabloid staples.

Last month, the elder prince enjoyed a night at a club in Cornwall, southwestern England, which lures customers with shots of alcohol selling for $2 apiece. Soon after William left, a fellow patron was slashed with a broken bottle. In 2000, Euan Blair, the son of the Prime Minister, was arrested for being "drunk and incapable." "A lot of my friends, if they've worked really hard during the week, go out and get drunk on the weekend," says Claudine Biggs, an 18-year-old London schoolgirl. Biggs has written a play that premiered at a north London theater in February. Her teenage protagonists are dysfunctional and knowing, their cruelty as casual as their sexual relationships, their racy behavior only partially camouflaging palpable misery. There are no adults in the play to intervene or to comfort. For too many British kids, that's not drama; that's real life.

It isn't just the absence of adults from their lives that contributes to unhappiness among Britain's teenagers. So do pervasive but invisible social barriers of class and race. Income inequality is greater in Britain than the rest of western Europe, and the gap between its poorest and richest citizens has been growing since the 1980s. Social divisions have proved remarkably resilient, and British kids born into poverty — as many as one in three, according to the Children's Society — still start life at a serious disadvantage. Britons "continue to believe that poor people just need a kick up the backside to break out of poverty," says Reitemeier. And while skin color doesn't

determine social class, darker-skinned Britons are likely to be less well off than their paler counterparts. Around 40% of people from ethnic minorities are poor — twice the rate for white Britons.

What's life like for poor kids in Britain? They will likely live in an area where unemployment is high and aspirations are low. There's probably nowhere to play, and home may not provide much of a refuge. Such conditions breed trouble, according to a recent report by the IPPR that identified the factors inclining a child to criminality. Children who try to stay on the right side of the law find it increasingly difficult to resist the growing influence of gangs.

Violent teenage gangs are not new to Britain: in 1953 a group of Teddy boys stabbed 17-year-old John Beckley to death near London's Clapham Common, and anyone who has suffered British football hooligans in the last 30 years — and that's a lot of people in a lot of places — know that "violent" and "British" are two words that belong with each other. But the new gangs appear to be uniquely deadly.

Twenty-seven teenagers were murdered in London last year by youths wielding guns or knives. All but a handful of the dead teenagers were black or Asian. More than half of all black Britons live in London, many in hardscrabble housing projects such as the Moorlands Estate in Brixton, south London, where Solomon Wilson, 23, and his friend Nathan Foster grew up. Wilson says he was "no saint" when younger, but he benefited from a happy home life. "I take my hat off to my mum," he says. As he saunters along Brixton's Coldharbour Lane, he's trailed by a posse of local girls and boys who just want to hang out.

But Wilson is missing one companion, Foster, whom he calls his "little brother." Last summer, Foster was shot dead in a street next to the Moorlands Estate, apparently attempting to mediate a dispute about a stolen piece of jewelry. Wilson thinks everyone in his area faces similar dangers. "You could be walking down the street and suddenly you're shot and nobody knows why you've died," he says. "It used to be just the top dogs that had guns. Now a 14-year-old might pull a gun on you."

Earlier gang cultures defined themselves by clothing, musical taste or — in the case of some skinhead groups — right-wing politics. Today's gangs aren't even that discriminating, determining fitness for membership by nothing more meaningful than postal codes. Hanad Ahmed and Tashan Edwards, both 14, live in east London. "I can't bring friends around my area because I'm putting them in danger, as well as myself," says Ahmed, who lives in a different district from his school. "If they don't live in the same postcode, there's a chance they'll get robbed."

Ahmed says he joined a local gang when he was 12 but left after he was pressured to carry a knife and sell drugs. The son of a childminder from Somalia and a retired academic from Kenya, he plans to become a doctor. Edwards is aiming for a legal career. Why have the two of them turned out so differently from friends who are embroiled in gang life? "Most of them come from poorer backgrounds," says Edwards, who then adds what may be the most important factor. "We're smart," he says, "and we've got our education."

History Lessons
At the Association of Teachers and Lecturers annual conference on March 18, members debated why so many pupils seemed "unhappy and anxious." A week later, the larger National Union of Teachers (NUT) expressed concern over a rise in students taking weapons and drugs to school. But schools can be part of the problem. Ofsted, the official body that inspects educational institutions, says that 10% of state high schools are "inadequate." A 2007 report by the OECD found that class sizes in British high schools are among the largest of 30 Western countries. NUT members have resolved to launch a campaign to push for smaller classes amid reports that teachers are struggling to teach as many as 55 pupils at one time. Average class sizes in the state sector are 26.2 compared to 10.7 in fee-paying schools. A report by the Sutton Trust, an educational charity, found that children from poorer homes who were given scholarships to fee-paying schools dramatically

outperformed their peers at state schools. They also went on to out-earn them, with almost a fifth attaining salaries of over $140,000 a year, more than twice the proportion from state schools.

This institutionalized inequality doesn't only harm low achievers. The system emphasizes academic attainment over social development. British children start school earlier and sit more exams than other Europeans. Many of them complain of stress. "Britain is a very individualistic culture, in which a huge emphasis is placed on personal success and less on good fellowship," says Layard. "We've made a virtue of competition, which means other people are a threat, not a support." Emily Benn says the drive for good results can let down pupils who find the work too difficult: "When you're in a competitive environment and someone is obviously struggling, the teachers assume they're not trying. They should make them feel better about themselves. Instead they make them feel stupid."

"I want to be a maid or a babysitter," says an 8-year-old over a soggy school lunch in east London. Her school's neighborhood includes large Turkish, Asian and West Indian communities, where there is little tradition of higher education, especially for girls. Many parents speak English as a second language. Although the school's academic record has improved, most of its students have little chance of going on to university. The picture is similar in working-class white communities, where many children follow the family tradition of leaving school at 16 to take up an unskilled job. "You can often find whole towns in which the level of staying on at school at 16 is much lower than in other areas," says Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. "It's about the attitude of the whole community, and its sense of ambition and enterprise. We've had a culture that for decades told families in those sorts of areas that you leave school at 16 and you get a job. Changing those aspirations is central to what we need to do."

Building a Better Place
How does he mean to achieve that? An ambitious target of halving child poverty by 2010, set during Tony Blair's premiership in 1999, is unlikely to be reached. However, in December, Balls unveiled a 10-year plan "to make England the best place in the world for children and young people," including a commitment to investment in facilities such as playgrounds and youth clubs. Balls wants to ensure free childcare is available for 2-year-olds from the most disadvantaged families; he has also just announced a $53.5 million package of funding for Kids Company and four other charities helping youngsters. The plan is based on the principle that it is always better to prevent failure than to tackle a crisis later.

A chorus of voices from politics, the media and the heartbroken ranks of victims' families says the way to do this is to get tougher with children in trouble rather than coddle them. It is true that the criminal justice system does not inspire much confidence. Some cases never come to trial at all. Steen's assailants were not charged. "The police knew who the perpetrators were, but were powerless to act. The burden of proof is so great," he says.

Yet if Britain really is to become a better place for its children, it will have to acknowledge the roots of its crisis. That means focusing on helping kids more than on punishing them. A start might be listening to children themselves. Kids Company alumnus Dan-Dan Walker is proud to report that he hasn't been arrested for a year and a half. One of nine children born to parents with drug problems, his first arrest, at 7, was for stealing baby milk and disposable diapers for his siblings. Now 18, he learned about Kids Company seven years ago as he rode on a London bus. He was about to snatch a handbag, and his accomplice was already seated next to the target, hemming her in against the window. As Walker moved to grab the bag, a stranger tapped him on the shoulder. "You don't need to do that," he said, and gave him the address of a Kids Company drop-in center. "I fell off that cliff," says Walker, "but someone caught me." Would that all British children could say the same.