

YOUNG PEOPLE AND KNIFE CARRYING:

What to do?

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Since the start of the English summertime barely a week has passed without some media report about knife crime or, in particular, children and young people carrying and using knives. The Government response has been to rely heavily upon a national knife amnesty, planned by the police before those high profile incidents, and measures contained in the *Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006* – due to come into force soon. Neither approach is likely to be successful. Government action has been constructed hastily in response to media pressures and without any meaningful appreciation of the nature and extent of the problem. In reality, the need to be seen to be doing something, anything, has hijacked any hope of a useful and considered response that properly acknowledges some basic realities about young people, knives and interpersonal violence.

WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM?

One of the major issues in considering and 'dealing with' the involvement of children and young people in knife carrying and knife offences is that there is simply not enough relevant research currently available. Everyone says the problem is growing and there exists a good deal of anecdotal evidence to that effect, but little specific research has been conducted.

What we do know, from the two best, yet inadequate,

studies of youth offending and victimisation, the Home Office's *Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS)* and the *Youth Justice Board-MORI Youth Survey (MORI Survey)*, is that significant proportions of young people carry knives, but often this is innocent or innocuous.

The 2004 *OCJS*, found that:

- 4% of young people said they had carried a knife of some sort in the last 12 months either 'for protection, for use in crimes or in case they got into a fight'; and
- carrying of knives was, according to the respondents, most common among 14- to 21-year-olds (6%).

The 2004 *MORI Survey* found that:

- just over a quarter (28%) of children in mainstream schools and 57% of excluded children said they had carried a knife in the last year; and
- a large proportion of the knives being carried are penknives, which are usually legal and may be carried for entirely innocent reasons.

It is not, however, possible from this research to know how often children were carrying knives – only once in the last year or daily – or whether the knives were carried 'as a weapon' or whether the 'carriers' intended to use them. Consequently, the picture provided is fragmented – parts of the puzzle are missing.

As for children and young people using knives in crime or to cause injury, very little data exists. The *British Crime Survey (BCS)* does not include in its sample those under 16 and police recorded crime statistics are of little help either. What the *BCS* does

tell us, however, is that use of knives in violent crime and to cause injury has declined over the past decade – although admittedly the last year has seen some significant increases.

What is needed is high quality, specific, reliable, longitudinal research on the nature, extent, motivation for, frequency, cause and possible growth of knife carrying and the use of knives in crime, particularly with regard to young people. Despite this, the Government has not undertaken such research and has been quick to react to the proliferation of media reports.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

In addition to the laws currently on the books restricting the production, sale and possession of knives, the Government, via the *Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006*, plans to:

- raise the minimum age at which a young person can buy knife from 16 to 18;
- introduce a power for head teachers and other members of staff to search pupils for knives;
- create a new offence of using another person to mind a weapon, and include an aggravating factor in sentencing if the person involved is a child; and
- increase the maximum sentence for possession of a knife or sharp instrument in public to the four years already available for possession on school property.

What is clear from the Act, however, is that the ‘knife problem’ is attributed to young people almost exclusively and the focus, almost exclusively, is young people as perpetrators and not as victims.

WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE CARRY OR USE KNIVES?

Once again, there is insufficient information available on the motivations for knife carrying beyond anecdotal evidence provided by youth workers, teachers and the like. But, from the research available, it seems that the greatest motivator is that young people do not feel safe.

The *MORI Survey* found that 2% of the children in school and 10% of excluded children surveyed had ‘*taken a weapon to school to defend [themselves]*’. More tellingly, the same Survey found that children who have been the victim of a crime are more likely to carry a knife than those who have not been a victim:

- among children in school, double the number who claimed to have been a victim of crime carried a knife compared to those who had claimed

not to have experienced victimisation – 36% compared with 18%; and

- among excluded children, 62% who had been a victim of a crime carried a knife compared with 51% who have not been a victim.

This is of some concern, particularly considering the high levels of victimisation among children and young people. The same Survey found that among children in school, 49% had been victims of a crime in the previous 12 months, up 3% from 2003.

If knife carrying among young people is indeed linked to whether they feel safe from crime and victimisation, other figures are disturbing too. The *MORI Survey* found that 15% of children in school felt ‘*a bit unsafe*’ or ‘*very unsafe*’ while in school. One report commissioned by the Bridge House Trust, *Fear and Fashion*¹, which sought the views of practitioners working with young people, concluded that fear of crime, experience – direct or otherwise – of victimisation and the desire for status in a society ridden with inequality are the chief motivations to carry a knife.

YOUNG PEOPLE: ALWAYS PERPETRATORS

Knife-related offences, as with most types of crime, appear to affect different segments of the population to greater and lesser degrees. From the research available, it seems that children and young people generally – and young people living in poorer areas in particular – are more likely to be the victims of crime, violent crime and knife offences.

Compared to adults, children and young people experience greater levels of violent crime victimisation. According to the 2005/06 *BCS* the risk of becoming a victim of violent crime is 3.4% for a British adult. However, the available figures for children and young people provide a depressing and stark contrast. For young men aged 16 to 24 the risk was almost four times greater: 12.6% experienced a violent crime of some sort in the year prior to their *BCS* interview. And, according to the 2004 *OCJS*, just under a fifth of young people (aged 10 to 25) said they had been assaulted in the 12 months prior to questioning.

More specifically than young people, all the evidence suggests that it is young males who are most at risk. According to the *OCJS*, males aged 10 to 25 were almost twice as likely to have been the victim of an assault as females of the same age. In addition, a man’s chance of being murdered doubles between the age of 10 and 14, doubles again

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between 14 and 15, 15 and 16, 16 and 19 and then does not halve until age 46.

Generally, since young people are at greater risk of becoming a victim of assault and homicide, it is that age group too which is most likely to be stabbed and to die by a knife.

The problem is worse still for those living in poorer areas. For 10- to 25-year-olds, those at higher risk of being frequently victimised were more likely to have four or more 'disorder problems' in their area, more likely to perceive their parents as having poor parenting skills and more likely not to trust the police. Despite the rise in the homicide rate that Britain has experienced over the last two and a half decades, the wealthiest 20% of areas have actually witnessed the homicide rate fall. Meanwhile, the homicide rate in the poorest tenth of areas in Britain rose by 39% in the eighties and nineties. Moreover, by far the most common way in which people are murdered in the poorest fifth of areas in Britain is through being cut with a knife or broken glass or bottle.

AMNESTIES, PRISON SENTENCES AND EDUCATION: WHAT WORKS FOR KNIFE CRIME?

The Government's response to the perceived rise in knife carrying and knife offences has been one that has focused on the instrument rather than the cause and relies heavily upon a police, courts and corrections approach.

AMNESTIES

With much fanfare, a national knife amnesty was declared and began on 24 May 2006, running for five weeks until 30 June 2006. According to the Home Office, a total of 89,864 knives were handed in during the national amnesty. Assuming that there are approximately 22million households in England and Wales, each possessing a single kitchen knife, the amnesty has been successful in removing 0.0041% of knives that might be used in crimes. Of course, most households contain many more than a single knife and it is barely worth considering the tens of thousands sitting in shops waiting to be purchased. As such, it is, at best, questionable whether this will result in a reduction in knife carrying and knife-related offences.

STOP AND SEARCH

Increased use and extension of police stop and search powers is also a problematic response to knife offences. A 2003 Home Office report on knife crime and police stop and search in targeted areas noted that:

*'...hit rates' are surprisingly low, and suggest that police actions alone are unlikely to have a huge impact on the carrying of knives. They need to be backed up by educational campaigns.'*²

The *Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006* seeks to extend the use of search powers. It contains provisions that allow for the searching of pupils by school staff in order to look for a knife or other weapon and permits the use of reasonable force to carry out the search. According to reports, the Education Secretary, Alan Johnson, is minded to seek to extend these powers to allow whole-class or even whole-school searches so as to avoid a weapon being passed from one pupil to another to avoid detection. Part of the reason why this is claimed to be necessary is that most teachers and head teachers are reluctant to search pupils who might have weapons and tend to call in the police to do the searching which, among other things, potentially allows time for the 'suspect' to get rid of the weapon.

If these measures increase the safety of staff and children, they will be useful. Yet, given this understandable reluctance, given the possibility that police may now be called in to frisk long lines of children during class time and given that child knife-carriers may merely deposit their blades outside the school gates, it is hoped that other less obtrusive preventative measures will be successful. Routine and obtrusive searches of children by powerful adults will also have some impact on a child's sense of wellbeing and personal integrity and this must be considered properly. To date it has not been. Expecting the police through stop and search to make large reductions in the number of people carrying and using knives is unrealistic and unreasonable.

INCREASED PRISON SENTENCES

The Government is now to increase the maximum available sentence for carrying a knife in public from two to four years. The doubling of the sentence for possession is intended to send a clear message about the severity of the offence of knife carrying and deter would-be offenders.

Again, it is far from clear whether this will reduce knife carrying, particularly among young people. The Halliday Review of sentencing, carried out on behalf of the Government in 2001, found that although sentences had a deterrent effect, there was *'no evidence to show what levels of punishment produce what levels of general deterrence'*. The Report further noted that:

*'It is the prospect of getting caught that has deterrence value, rather than alterations to the 'going rate' for severity of sentences.'*³

Knife carrying, as discussed, is hard to detect. Consequently, these sentences are unlikely to have a deterrent effect. However, accepting that knife carrying is most common among those aged 14 to 21, this new sentence may well result in more children and young people going to prison for longer.

Evidence from the introduction of the mandatory minimum sentence for possession of a firearm in January 2004 also points to the fact that increasing sentence length is unlikely to reduce the levels of knife carrying. Firearm offences, excluding air weapons, actually rose in 2004/05 having remained steady for the previous two years. Furthermore, the most recent data available, police recorded crime statistics for 2005/06, show that firearms offences are a more common occurrence once again.

Government promises to increase sentence length for knife carrying following a widely publicised series of tragic knife offences, and spurred on by Conservative challenges following Labour's failure to vote for an increase in November of last year, smacks of a knee-jerk legislative response. It does not appear to be a response based on the available evidence and research. Its focus is children and young people as perpetrators and it does not properly consider them as victims and appreciate that there is not a clear line of division between these two categories.

Longer sentences for knife carrying will likely hurt children without ameliorating the problem. Particularly because such behaviour is most common amongst children and young people who are less likely to provide much thought to their actions, less likely to appreciate cause and effect and are most likely to be the victims of violent crime. When young people carry knives, out of a sense of fear or bravado, it is for reasons that Government and society must properly address. This has not been done to date.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS RAISING

Educational and awareness-raising campaigns might help reduce the prevalence of knife carrying and 'knife crime'. A 2003 Home Office report that considered possible approaches to reduce homicide rates concluded that first among 'the most promising weapons-related strategies' were '[e]ducational campaigns regarding the dangers and penalties in relation to the illegal carrying of knives and other weapons'.

Whilst the educational approach may well be useful, few of the programmes have been evaluated for their effectiveness in reducing knife carrying

and knife-related offences. Newham's *Be Safe Project*, which 'goes into schools to educate young people on the harsh realities of what can happen when they carry a knife', and the Damilola Taylor Trust's *Respect your life not a knife* campaign look interesting and useful. However, more systematic assessment and evaluation of educational projects would be beneficial.

The evidence also suggests that who delivers the programmes is important. Community and educational organisations that include former knife carriers, victims of knife offences and experienced youth workers have an important role to play, though police officer delivery appears currently to be more common. Given that according to the 2004 OCJS, one of the factors associated with a heightened risk of serious offending and frequent offending for both 10- to 15- and 16- to 25-year-olds is 'does not trust local police', community groups might have more of an impact than police officers. Despite this, the Home Office has made available £500,000 to police forces in England and Wales, in part for education programmes. There seems to be a lack of strategic or coordinated thinking on the issue.

CONCLUSION

Knife carrying may be increasing, especially among children and the young, although there is no hard evidence of this. Young people who carry knives are more likely to do so if they have been victims of a crime, they often do so because they feel unsafe and easy distinctions between victim and offender do not necessarily apply. Furthermore, there exists a very real possibility that enforcement and punitive action on knife carrying fails to take account of the fact that it is merely one expression of interpersonal violence and a reduction in the use and carrying of knives will only occur if the incidence of violence is addressed by a long term strategy.

The knife is merely an implement used in crime. Without dealing with the underlying causes of violent crime, initiatives to reduce knife usage will have only a limited impact. Ultimately, stabbings are not caused merely by the presence of a knife. More essential is the context within which the resort to extreme acts of violence unfolds.

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FOOTNOTES:

1. *Fear and Fashion: The use of knives and other weapons by young people*. 2004. The Bridge House Trust.
2. Brookman et al. 2003. *Reducing Homicide: A summary review of the possibilities*. Home Office.
3. *The Halliday Report – Making Punishments Work: A Review of the Sentencing Framework for England & Wales*. 2001. Home Office.

