

The year of the knife

Chris Eades argues that the facts about knife crime and knife carrying are at odds with public policy, media and public perception.

Over the last nine months knives and 'knife crime' have barely been out of the news for we are, according to reports, in the grip of a knife 'epidemic' largely caused and spread by legions of 'feral', blade-wielding youngsters (Slack, 2006). The level of consensus as to the frightening scale and progenitors of this canker is almost matched by the level of agreement that traditional, largely criminal justice-based, interventions will prevail in the fight against it. In August, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies published a report on knife crime that sought to gather the available evidence in an attempt to better understand the problem and what might work as a solution, but the movement on this issue since then has been largely disappointing.

The knife crime report

The report itself reached two central, broad conclusions. First, there is a lack of 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. Without such research, constructing responses that might achieve even small decreases in illegal knife use will amount to fumbling around in the dark. Second, due to the easy availability of knives, there will always be abundant opportunities to commit knife offences. Since it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to limit the availability of knives and knives are merely a tool used in violent crime, success in fighting knife usage will only come with success in dealing with the underlying causes of violence, fear and insecurity.

In reaching these conclusions, the report collected all the available evidence and research to date which revealed data and facts surprising in light of both the media reporting and proposed responses by the Government.

In terms of knife carrying and, in particular, the involvement of young people in it, what we know from the two best (yet limited) studies, the Home Office's *Offending, Crime and Justice Survey* (OCJS) and the *Youth Justice Board-MORI Youth Survey*, is that significant proportions of young people carry knives but often this is innocent or innocuous.

The 2004 OCJS found that the carrying of knives was, according to the respondents, most common among 14 to 21 year olds. The 2004 MORI survey found that just over a quarter (28 per cent) of children in mainstream schools and 57 per cent of excluded children said they had

carried a knife in the last year but 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 such carrying was 'as a weapon' or with the intent to use it. Consequently, the picture provided is fragmented – parts of the puzzle are missing.

As far as the use of knives in the commission of violent crimes goes, the *British Crime Survey* (BCS) indicates that levels have remained steady since 1995 – eight per cent of violent incidents involved the use of a knife in 1995 and that figure was seven per cent in 2005/06. According to the BCS, violent crime has dropped by about 43 per cent since 1995's high of about 4,256,000 incidents to this year's 2,420,000 incidents. What this means is that there were approximately 170,000 fewer violent incidents involving the use of a knife against the groups represented in the sample in 2005/06 than in 1995.

In terms of knife use to commit acts of mugging (robbery, attempted robbery and snatch theft) or knife use in 'wounding' offences, again the recent figures put the numbers of such incidents below 1995's levels. The BCS estimated that knives were used in approximately 104,750 muggings in 1995 and 42,020 in 2005/06; knife use in wounding in 1995 was put at 82,260 incidents and at 32,820 in 2005/06.

However, for overall violent crime, muggings and woundings, the estimated number of incidents increased quite significantly between 2004/05 and 2005/06. In 2004/05 there were 24,290 incidents of knife use in mugging (about 18,000 fewer than 2005/06) and 28,850 in wounding (about 4,000 incidents fewer than 2005/06).

The use of knives to kill has remained broadly level too – homicides by 'sharp instrument' accounted for 231 deaths in 1994 (about 37 per cent of total homicides) and 236 in 2004/05 (about 29 per cent of total homicides).

Solutions and reactions

The report noted that strategies to deal with knife crime could be located among four themes: the national knife amnesty, increased use of stop and search, increased prison sentences and education and awareness-raising programmes.

As for the much-trumpeted knife amnesty, the report noted that it would likely achieve little. A 1993 amnesty in Strathclyde yielded no reduction



in the use of knives to cause injury and the total of 89,864 knives collected in 2006 represents only 0.0041 of knives in our homes – assuming each of the 22 million households in England and Wales has only a single knife.

Increased use of police stop and search was, the report noted, also unlikely to be of great use. A 2003 Home Office report noted that ‘hit rates’ in searches aimed at detecting knives in searches made in anticipation of violence “are surprisingly low, and suggest that police actions alone are unlikely to have a huge impact on the carrying of knives” (Brookman and Maguire, 2003).

Much the same was said of the likely success of increased prison sentences for knife carrying given that the Halliday review of sentencing carried out on behalf of the Government in 2001 found that “It is the prospect of getting caught that has deterrence value, rather than alterations to the ‘going rate’ for severity of sentences” (Halliday *et al*, 2001).

Educational programmes looked more promising but, noted the report, none had been properly evaluated. Who delivered the educational message, and how, were likely to be key to success.

What’s happened since

Concern about knives has continued unabated. The report received widespread media coverage but the emphasis was much changed. The *Daily Express* headline “Knife Crime Soars by 73%” – a reference to the one-year rise in muggings – was quite typical. The cautionary message had become one of alarm.

The Government’s planned intervention via the *Violent Crime Reduction Bill* has now passed into statute. The Act, *inter alia*:

- Introduces a power for head-teachers and other members of staff to search pupils for knives.
- Increases the maximum sentence for possession of a knife or sharp instrument in public to the four years already available for possession on school property.

Data is now emerging on the effect of the amnesty. The Metropolitan Police have found, unsurprisingly, that six weeks after the end of the amnesty, knife offence levels have returned to pre-amnesty levels. The effect of increased stop and search powers and usage and increased prison sentences will not be able to be evaluated for some time, but the evidence

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suggests that they will also have a negligible impact.

There has, however, been a renewed emphasis on educational programmes. Rio Ferdinand has recently signed up to the Damilola Taylor Trust's campaign, 'Respect Your Life Not a Knife', which hopes to reduce the levels of knife carrying by children and young people. "Rio: knives aren't cool, kids" ran the headline in the *Sun*, which has backed the campaign. Funding to the tune of £1 million has also been provided by five charitable trusts to five organisations to carry out anti-knife work in London. It is hoped that these will be successful but that remains uncertain until they are evaluated.

And so, back to the beginning. First, there has not been enough research into knife carrying and knife use; the nature and scale of the problem is far from clear and, thus, designing successful interventions will be difficult. Second, 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. Knives may have recently occupied attention and resources, soon it might be guns again, and the public debate will lurch from one tool or expression of violence to the next, all the while leaving the root causes untouched. As research commissioned by the Home Office has stated: "First of all, one of the most consistent findings is that homicide, like most other violent crime and predatory property crime, is strongly associated with poverty and social inequality. This suggests that preventive strategies focused upon particular offences should be complemented by, and complementary to, broader long-term initiatives against poverty and social exclusion" (Brookman and Maguire, 2003).

Until these problems are addressed, illegal knife use will continue to be a problem. ■

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Knife Crime: Ineffective Reactions to a Distracting Problem? A Review of Evidence and Policy is available on the CCJS website, www.kcl.ac.uk/ccjs

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