

The sharp end of politics?

Roger Grimshaw and Enver Solomon explain their research on 'knife crime' in the context of increasing political attention on the issue.

In the last two years, the use of knives in crime has suddenly become a major public and political issue. A spate of high-profile fatal attacks involving knives—16 teenagers were stabbed to death in London last year—has focused the attention of both David Cameron and Gordon Brown on the issue. The opposition leader has accused the government of 'staggering complacency' following the deaths in London and has called for a 'crackdown on knife crime' (BBC News, 2008). In response, the Prime Minister has told the police in 'hotspot' areas to report for prosecution any person caught with a blade in a public place. The details were set out in the government's violent crime action plan, which also said the police and other agencies would be given '100 search arches and 400 search wands to increase detection of knife crime' (Home Office, 2008).

As is so often the case with law and order, both political leaders are seeking to out-tough each other with a 'cops, courts and corrections' approach, while underplaying the important questions about the extent and nature of offending involving knives, why young people in particular are carrying and using knives and what works in tackling the problem. In the action plan, there is acknowledgement that education should play a greater part in crime-prevention with plans for a five-year awareness raising programme about the 'dangers of knife carrying' (ibid.). But it must be asked whether politicians are ready to make a serious attempt to listen to those most affected and to engage them in a way that recognises their social needs. A review of evidence and policy published by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (Eades et al., 2007) attempted to provide a more informed overview of knife-related offending. We found that it is difficult to establish an accurate picture of the nature and extent of knife possession and knife use in offending due to limitations of the current official datasets. However, from the data available, there is no indication that knife use in violent crime is increasing or decreasing. The indications from the statistics are that knife use in violent crime remains a stubborn problem but that underlying changes are hard to detect. In 2006–2007, according to British Crime

Survey figures, we estimated that violent incidents involving use of a knife numbered between 148,000 and 198,000 incidents. While alarming and damaging, those continue to be a relatively small proportion of the 2,471,000 violent incidents estimated to occur in that year on the basis of the British Crime Survey. Our review of the available research showed that children, young people, those living in poor areas, and members of black and minority ethnic communities are more likely to be the victims of knife offences. Hence, the problem needs to be given much more specific analysis than is readily possible on the basis of existing information.

Looking at knife possession, the most accurate data are from the Home Office's Offending Crime and Justice

Survey, a self-report survey based on interviews with around 5,000 people aged between 10 and 25 in private households in England and Wales. The most recent 2005 survey found that knife carrying is most common among 16 and 17 year olds, with 7 per cent saying they have carried a knife in the last year (Wilson et

al., 2006). Overall, only 4 per cent of the sample said they had carried a knife, most commonly a penknife (ibid.).

In terms of developing evidence based solutions, it is far from clear what actually works to reduce knife carrying and knife offences. Recent government and police responses have focused on harsher criminal justice sanctions. The Violent Crime Reduction Bill which received royal assent last year increased the penalty for possession of a knife in a public place without a lawful reason to a maximum of four years. Police have also been given the power to carry out random stop and searches in so-called hotspot areas of the country—London, Birmingham Manchester, and Liverpool. There has also been a national knife amnesty which ran for five weeks in summer 2006.

There is little evidence that these approaches have worked or will work. Ministers trumpeted the fact that 90,000 knives were handed in during the amnesty. But there was a more sober assessment from the Metropolitan Police Service which noted that knife enabled offences returned to their pre-amnesty levels less than two months

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after it ended (Metropolitan Police Service, 2006). Longer sentences are favoured by the Home Office, yet the government-commissioned Halliday Review of Sentencing in 2001 found 'no evidence to show what levels of punishment produce what levels of general deterrence' (Halliday et al., 2001). Stop and search also has a limited impact. Home Office research published in 2003 found that only a small proportion (7 per cent) of those stopped and searched in a 12-month period were found to be carrying an offensive or dangerous weapon, and of those only 14 per cent were arrested for possession. The report concluded that 'police actions alone are unlikely to have a huge impact on the carrying of knives' and said they needed to be backed up by educational campaigns (Brookman and Maguire, 2003).

Educational and awareness-raising campaigns targeting, in particular, knife carrying among young people might help to reduce the prevalence of knife carrying and 'knife crime'. Such programmes are being used by both the police and community organisations and can offer alternatives to traditional criminal justice, arrest, convict, and punish responses. More money is due to be pumped into these services. But little is known about the impact, as few of the programmes have been systematically evaluated

The government recognises that prevention strategies need to be developed. Its Tackling Gangs Action Programme includes a prevention strand alongside policing and powers strands that highlights a range of initiatives such as the development of a gangs toolkit for schools, neighbourhood renewal and community cohesion programmes, family intervention projects, and the establishment of a London Youth Crime Prevention Board. Plans have also been unveiled for a network of youth centres aimed at providing activities for young people in every community in England and extra spending to help voluntary organisations provide music, sport, drama, summer camps, and other activities, ranging from Scout troops to rap groups.

Moves towards a more co-ordinated approach that recognises the importance of prevention are to be welcomed. But there needs to be a greater political recognition that knife carrying and knife use is merely one expression of interpersonal violence, and a reduction in the use 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 use will have only a limited impact. Knives—like guns, baseball bats, screwdrivers, and poison—make an expression of violence potentially more damaging or lethal, even if not intended to cause death, but 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. A greater readiness to engage constructively with those most affected would help shape a strategy that could call upon support from those social sectors.

If the national statistics remain as they are, interventions will also lack the robust measures required to assess baselines and progress. Once again, it seems that public debate on knives and crime is likely to be mired in the wider confusion of statistical claim and counter-claim that bedevils Westminster debate. A greater focus on independently audited and localised measures of harm and anxiety would increase the relevance and accountability of the information provided to the public.

More fundamentally, the link between crime and deeper structural causes of inequality, poverty and social disaffection needs to be fully acknowledged and acted upon if the solutions are to be more than cosmetic and short term. At present, the government seems to be acting in response to a problem without fully coming to terms with the nature and extent of that problem and while prevaricating over the fundamental causes. ■

The report, *Knife Crime: A review of evidence and policy* is available to download at http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/opus439/ccjs_knife_report.pdf

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