

CENTRE FOR CRIME
AND JUSTICE STUDIES

'Knife Crime'

A review of evidence and policy

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Roger Grimshaw
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SECOND EDITION

Whose Justice? series

‘Knife Crime’

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SECOND EDITION

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Introduction

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) first published this briefing paper in August 2006. It received widespread media coverage and a great deal of interest from the police, voluntary sector organisations and members of the public. Since publication there have been around 4,000 downloads per month of the report from our website. We have therefore decided to update the report to take account of developments over the last year and to include the most recently published crime data. We have also carried out more detailed statistical analysis to determine what trends, if any, can be established in the use of knives in crime in recent years.

There has continued to be a number of widely reported stabbing incidents, which has kept the nation's attention focused on knives and 'knife crime'. In March 2007 there were five fatal stabbings across the country reported in one week, the highest number in a seven-day period during the past year. In response, the Home Office announced plans to improve the recording of knife use in crime. Yet relatively little detailed information exists on 'knife crime' and knife carrying: who is committing it, who is suffering it, the reasons for it and what might be the best ways of reducing it. This review aims to draw together some of the existing information and research on these issues and makes tentative assessments of the programmes in place to combat knife usage.

The paper begins by providing information from the available sources on the extent of the problem as it pertains to different levels of seriousness: the carrying of knives; the use of knives in crime; and the use of knives in homicides. It then investigates possible reasons for knife carrying before establishing which sections of the population are most likely to suffer knife-related offences. Next, assessments are made of the current strategies being considered or used to reduce levels of knife carrying and knife use. These include the national knife amnesty, police stop and search, increased prison sentences, education and awareness-raising, and prevention strategies.

It is important to note that this report primarily relates to England and Wales, although there is reference to research and knife amnesties in Scotland. There are interesting comparisons to be made between different countries, and some are made with Scotland, but, in general, this report has not sought to provide international comparisons.

The current state of the law

Laws restricting the sale, carrying, use and production of knives are contained in a number of pieces of legislation: the *Prevention of Crime Act 1953*, the *Restriction of Offensive Weapons Act 1959*, the *Criminal Justice Act 1988*, the *Public Order Act 1994*, the *Offensive Weapons Act 1996*, the *Knives Act 1997*, the *Criminal Justice Act 1988* (as amended in 2004) and the more recent *Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006*.

The *Prevention of Crime Act 1953* defines an offensive weapon as 'any article made or adapted for use for causing injury to the person, or intended by the person having it with him for such use by him or by some other person'. As the law now stands, it is an offence to have an article with a blade or point in a school or public place without good reason or lawful excuse, although an exception applies to folding pocket knives with a blade of less than three inches. Certain types of knives, such as flick knives, gravity

knives¹ and replica samurai swords² have been banned outright. An officer of inspector rank or above may, in certain circumstances, authorise police officers within a given area to stop and search for offensive weapons. The carrying of a knife while committing another crime (such as burglary or theft) would be likely to result in a harsher sentence.

Prior to the most recent piece of legislation, an offender could be sentenced to a maximum of two years for carrying a knife in public and four years for carrying a knife in a school. The *Violent Crime Reduction Act*, which received Royal Assent on 8 November 2006, has increased the penalty for possession of a knife in a public place without a lawful reason to a maximum of four years. The Act has also:

- Raised the minimum age at which a young person can buy a knife from 16 to 18 years of age.
- Introduced a power for head teachers and other members of staff in schools to search pupils for knives.
- Reduced the threshold for a police constable to enter a school and search the premises and/or people from 'reasonable grounds for believing' to 'reasonable grounds for suspecting' that weapons are held.
- Created a new offence of using another person to mind a weapon and included an aggravating factor in sentencing if the person involved is a child.

1. A gravity knife is a knife that uses gravity to deploy the blade. It normally consists of a roughly cylindrical handle with a hole in the front from which the blade deploys when a button is pushed. The knife must be held pointed down for the blade to fall into place.

2. Replica samurai swords are to be added to the offensive weapons order from April 2008, meaning that their sale, hire and import is prohibited. The Home Office states that approximately 80 'serious crimes' involving imitation samurai swords have been committed in England and Wales over the last four years. See Home Office (2007), *Banning Offensive Weapons – A Consultation*, London: Home Office, available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/cons-ban-offensive-weapons-0307?view=Binary>

What is the nature and extent of the problem?

'Knife crime' has become an expression commonly used by politicians and the media, but it is not always entirely clear what it actually is or what they actually mean when they use the term. 'Knife crime' potentially encompasses a very broad range of offences and thus causes problems in both the definition and determination of its prevalence. Clearly, the production of a knife in the commission of a crime, such as in a robbery or sexual assault, even if not used to cause injury, is a 'knife crime' under any interpretation. But it is less clear whether the term may also be accurately applied to, for example, a burglary during the course of which the perpetrator is arrested and found to be in possession of a knife which was never produced or used. Whatever the meaning, the public and political debate about 'knife crime' would benefit from both an attempt to define what is actually meant by the term and a more careful, and less sensational, use of it. Disaggregating the offences that can be termed 'knife crime' (for example: offences in which an individual is stabbed; those in which a knife is used in a threatening manner; those in which a knife happens to be in a person's back pocket, etc.) would provide far greater clarity.

Much of the media reporting and political comment has been misleading, in part due to the paucity of reliable information on the problem and in part due to the failure to present known facts accurately. For example, some newspaper articles have cited figures from the Youth Justice Board's annual Youth Survey, conducted by the market research group MORI, on the percentage of young people who have carried a knife in the year before questioning without also stating that such knife carrying may only have occurred once and that most of those school pupils carried nothing more than a penknife, which is usually legal. Such inaccuracies are not confined to the press. The Metropolitan Police Service, in publicising the national knife amnesty in 2006, released a statement that '52 teenagers are victims of knife crime EVERY week in London'.³ What does 'knife crime' mean in that sentence? It is easy to infer from such a statement that each of those 52 incidents of 'knife crime' involves a stabbing. It must, however, be remembered that 'knife crime' will not necessarily result in a physically harmed victim, although it may cause significant distress to the victim. Sensational statements increase public fear of crime beyond the actual risk and might, in the end, hinder rather than help the police.

Measures of crime; measures of 'knife crime'

In attempting to estimate the levels of knife-related offences, this report relies on a number of official documents. But it must do so with a caveat: it is impossible to know with certainty how much knife carrying and how many knife-related offences there are. As CCJS director, Richard Garside, in his analysis of crime statistics, noted:

*'Seeking a definitive figure for crime levels is akin to asking how many headaches there are, or how many beetles. Though in principle, and given perfect knowledge, the question is answerable, in practice no definitive answer is possible.'*⁴

3. http://cms.met.police.uk/met/boroughs/hammersmith/04how_are_we_doing/news/operation_blunt_met_s_knife_amnesty

4. Garside, R. (2004), *Crime, Persistent Offenders and the Justice Gap*, London: Crime and Society Foundation, p.10.

Owing to the lack of specificity or focus on knife-related offences and the amount of other violent offences that go unmeasured and might involve the use of a knife, it is only possible to compare the underestimates from surveys and records.

In order to discern what can be established from the most comprehensive current estimates, this paper relies predominantly on four official measures: the British Crime Survey (BCS); police recorded crime figures; and, for children and young people, the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) and the Youth Surveys commissioned by the Youth Justice Board and carried out by MORI (YJB–YS).

The BCS is an annual rolling survey currently based on a large sample of approximately 47,000 people, having risen from a sample of almost 15,000 in 1997. The BCS asks individuals living in private households in England and Wales and aged 16 and over about their experience of victimisation by certain crimes over the course of the previous 12 months. There are a number of crimes which the BCS has not routinely covered, including drug-dealing, homicide, sexual offences and crimes against children – all of which may or may not involve knife use. Those under 16 years old, homeless or living in institutions, for example, are not respondents, and so crime against them is not counted.

Police recorded crime figures are composed of a list of categories outlined in the Home Office counting rules, known as ‘notifiable offences’. It should be noted that police recorded crime has undergone a number of changes since 1998. In particular, in April 1998, many new offences were added, and the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard in 2002 had the effect of increasing recorded crime by 10 per cent simply through a change in recording practices. These changes notwithstanding, for many reasons, most crimes go unreported to the police and fewer still are recorded. ‘Thus, recorded crime figures and trends are not reliable measures of ‘[real]’ crime rates and trends.’⁵ In particular, it is important to note that it is currently not possible to identify offences involving the use of weapons, other than firearms, from national police recorded crime statistics. This is rather surprising given the public and political attention given to the issue in recent years. The government has made a commitment to address this, and from 2007–2008 onwards figures for attempted murder, serious wounding and robbery involving knives and other sharp instruments will be presented in police crime data. In addition, the Home Office is working with police on a pilot project involving accident and emergency departments sharing anonymised information on knife injuries in order to address the fact that a significant proportion of incidents will not be reported to the police. It is also encouraging the recording and reporting of knife-related incidents by schools and licensed premises.⁶

In 2005, the OCJS interviewed around 5,000 people aged between 10 and 25 living in private households in England and Wales about their involvement in various criminal and delinquent activities. Also in 2005, the YJB–YS surveyed 5,463 pupils in mainstream education aged 11 to 16.

Using all four measures, it is very difficult to make accurate and precise claims about the levels of knife carrying or the use of knives in violence. None include all possible knife-related offences. Although the BCS provides a more complete picture than police recorded crime figures, one Home Office report estimated the real level of total offences to be five to six times that recorded by the BCS.⁷ There may or may not in fact be six times the number of crimes involving a knife than recorded by the BCS. However, there are certainly more because the BCS fails to include certain violent crimes and does not consider victimisation experienced by certain population groups. The BCS can be used as a source of broad estimates of the frequency of knife-related offences across large sections of the population.

5. *ibid*

6. Home Affairs Committee (2007), *Knife Crime: Oral and Written Evidence*, London: Stationery Office; Sivarajasingam, V., Shepherd, J., Walker, R., Walters, L. and Morgan, P. (2005), *Trends in Violence in England and Wales 2000–4. An Accident and Emergency Perspective*, Cardiff: Cardiff University.

7. Brand, S. and Price, R. (2000), *The Economic and Social Costs of Crime*, Home Office Research Study 217, London: Home Office.

Likewise, for similar reasons, the OCJS and YJB–YS do not provide an accurate picture. Furthermore, the smaller (though still large) sample sizes of these surveys compared to the BCS and the lack of sufficient specific questions make precise assessment more difficult. Estimations are all that are available. Moreover, limited trend analysis is possible given the recent introduction of the Youth Surveys.

Bearing these flaws and caveats in mind, it is possible to identify some features of the underlying problems associated with knives, some of the broad patterns of knife use and to assess what further needs to be better measured and understood.

Knife carrying

Knife carrying is the most common form of knife-related offence but creates no specific or harmed victims until the knife is used. Knife carrying can be a precursor to knife use in crime and is thus a matter for concern but knife use and knife carrying rarely result in a stabbing. A number of studies have looked at the prevalence of knife carrying but none provides a complete picture.

A study conducted in Scotland in 2000 found that, among 3,121 children aged between 11 and 16 who completed a confidential questionnaire, 12 per cent claimed to have carried a sharp instrument (referred to as a ‘blade’ and including knives, razors, machetes and swords) as a weapon at some stage in their lives. However, the study says nothing about the frequency of knife carrying, a matter of some importance, and respondents might briefly have carried a knife only once in their lives.

The YJB Youth Surveys, conducted by the market research group MORI, have provided information on knife carrying amongst school children in England and Wales from 1999 to 2005. In the most recent survey, conducted in 2005, 5,463 pupils aged 11 to 16 years old were questioned. It found that 32 per cent of the children said they had carried a knife in the last 12 months.

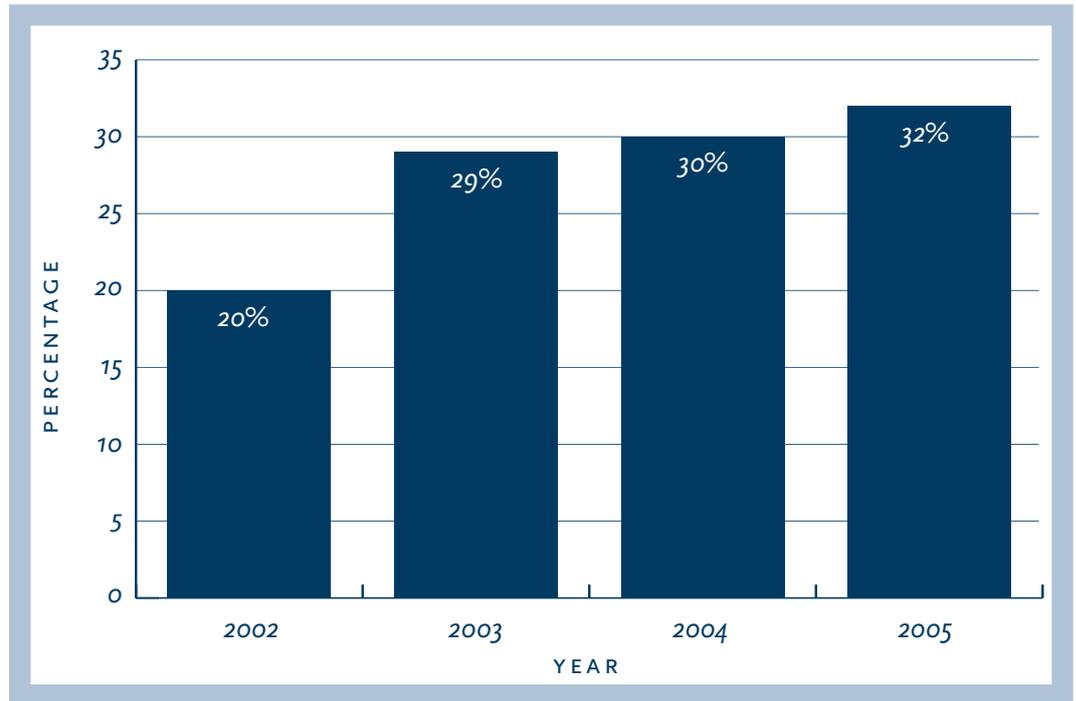
According to an analysis carried out by MORI of trends in the data for the five years to 2005 there has been a notable increase in knife carrying among school children in recent years. It states that for specific violent offences ‘the greatest increase is evidence for the offences of “hurting somebody without the requirement for medical attention”... and “carrying a knife” (plus 12 percentage points since 2002)’.⁸ However, the analysis fails to highlight that the wording of the question related to knife carrying in the survey changed in the 2003 questionnaire and therefore, as explained in the 2004 Youth Survey, the findings are not directly comparable between 2002 and subsequent years. The 2004 Youth Survey states:

‘The wording of this category changed in the 2003 questionnaire, so the findings are not directly comparable year on year. In the 2002 survey, this was worded as “carried a weapon other than a knife (e.g. a stick) to use to defend yourself or to attack other people”.’

The apparent dramatic rise reported in the MORI five-year trend analysis should therefore be treated with considerable caution. As Figure 1 shows, since the questionnaire wording was amended in 2003, the proportion of children who say they have carried a knife has remained stable.

8. MORI (2006), *MORI Five-Year Report: An Analysis of Youth Survey Data*, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.13.

Figure 1: Percentage of school children who say they have carried a knife in the last 12 months, 2002–2005 Source: MORI (2004), *MORI Youth Survey 2004*, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.73; MORI (2006), *MORI Five-Year Report: An Analysis of Youth Survey Data*, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.13.



The results of the 2005 Youth Survey have only been published by the Youth Justice Board in the five-year data analysis, so the full details of the most recent survey are not available. Consequently, it is not possible to establish important information about the frequency of the carrying or the nature of the knife – conceivably, a child answering in the affirmative might have once carried a penknife. To establish these details it is necessary to rely on the published 2004 Youth Survey. It shows that a large proportion of the knives being carried were penknives, which are usually legal and may be carried for entirely innocent reasons. The 2004 Youth Survey found that:

- Nine per cent of children in school and 30 per cent of excluded children said they had carried a flick knife, while 5 per cent of children in school and 16 per cent of excluded children said they had carried a kitchen knife.
- This compares to 25 per cent of school children and 46 per cent of excluded children who said they had carried a penknife.⁹

Of greater use in assessing the scale of knife carrying in England and Wales is the Home Office’s OCJS, which has only recently focused exclusively on young people, in 2004 and 2005. Around 5,000 people aged between 10 and 25 living in private households were interviewed about their involvement in various criminal and potentially disruptive activities. The 2004 OCJS is rather more limited in utility than that for 2005 owing to the nature of the questions it posed. It asked respondents whether they had carried a knife or gun in the last 12 months either ‘for protection, for use in crimes or in case they got into a fight’. The 2004 OCJS found that:

- Four per cent of young people said they had carried a knife of some sort in the last 12 months for those reasons.
- Males were significantly more likely than females to have carried a knife.
- Carrying of knives was, according to the respondents, most common among 14 to 21 year olds (6 per cent).¹⁰

9. MORI (2004), *MORI Youth Survey 2004*, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.33.

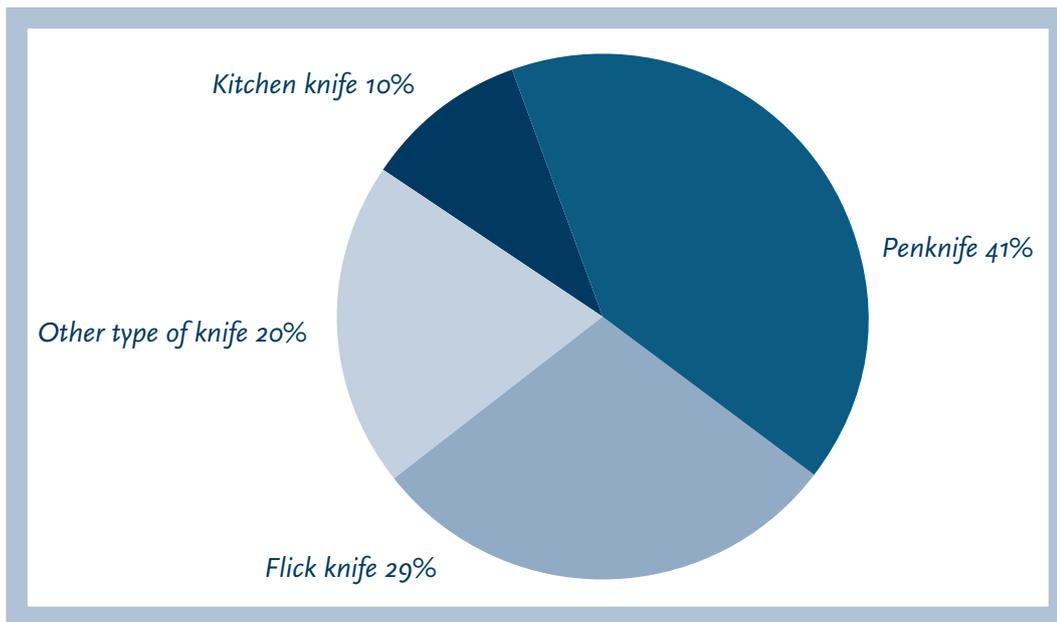
10. Budd, T., Sharp, C., Weir, G., Wilson, D. and Owen, N. (2005), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, pp.27–28.

It is important to note, however, that questions did not specify the type of knife carried and respondents were not asked whether they had used a knife to threaten or harm someone.

The 2005 OCJS sought to rectify these omissions asking, for the first time, for more details about carrying knives. These included the type of knife usually carried, the main reason for carrying a knife, whether it had been used to threaten someone and whether it had been used to injure someone. The survey found that:

- Four per cent of respondents had carried a knife in the previous 12 months.¹¹
- Carrying of knives was most common amongst 16 to 17 year olds (7 per cent).
- Of the 4 per cent who carried a knife, four in ten (41 per cent) had carried a penknife, 29 per cent had carried a flick knife and one in ten (10 per cent) had carried a kitchen knife (see Figure 2).
- In terms of frequency of knife carrying, the majority of those who said they had carried a knife stated that that they did so only rarely. Half (50 per cent) had carried a knife ‘once or twice’ in the preceding 12 months, 23 per cent said they had carried one ‘three or four times’ and only 16 per cent said they had carried a knife ‘ten times or more’.¹²

Figure 2: Type of knife carried by 10 to 25 year olds in the last 12 months among those carrying knives Source: Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, p.27.



When looking at why young people carried a knife the survey found that:

- More than eight out of ten (85 per cent) of those who had carried a knife said the main reason for doing so was for protection.
- Less than one in ten (7 per cent) of those who had carried a knife had used it to threaten someone and 2 per cent had used the knife to injure someone.¹³

A more detailed look at the reasons and intentions behind knife carrying is set out in Chapter 2.

In terms of the scale and extent of knife carrying it is interesting to note that the OCJS provides a contrasting picture to the YJB Youth Survey. The 2005 OCJS found that 4 per cent of young people aged 10 to 25 had carried a knife in the last 12 months. Within this group there were no statistically significant differences between 10 to 17 year olds and 18 to 25 year olds (4 per cent and 3 per cent respectively said they had carried a knife in the last

11. Confidence interval: 0.0403 ± 0.0054 (95 per cent confidence). Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, pp.26, 33.

12. *ibid*, pp.27–33.

13. *ibid*

12 months).¹⁴ This diverges sharply from the 2005 Youth Survey of schoolchildren, which found that 32 per cent had carried a knife in the previous year. However, although they provide a useful comparison, the two surveys are not directly comparable because of the different methodology used and the age groups included in each survey.

In comparison with the YJB Youth Survey and the OCJS, police recorded crime figures shed even less light on the extent and scale of knife carrying. As already noted, the police have only started collecting data on the use of knives in certain offences in recent months and these data have not yet been published. However, police data on weapons possession, which include firearms and various hitting instruments as well as knives, show a year on year decline. There was a 2 per cent drop in offences of possession of a weapon, from 35,590 in 2005–2006 to 34,707 in 2006–2007.¹⁵ It is not possible to know from these figures how these trends correlate with knife carrying. Furthermore, police recorded crime figures are, by definition, only able to shed light on offences that have been recorded by the police; they cannot shed any light on how many crimes went unreported, or even on those that were reported but not recorded. Since proportionately very few incidents of knife carrying are likely to come to the attention of the police, police recorded crime figures are not very useful in assessing with any precision the extent of knife carrying.

A Home Office report noted in 2003 that '[t]here is relatively little evidence as to the extent of knife-carrying, but there are some indications that it is by no means unusual, especially among young men'.¹⁶ The available evidence has increased in volume since that time, but this area still suffers from a lack of useful, specific, reliable, longitudinal research on the nature, extent, cause, motivation, frequency and possible growth of knife carrying. Without such research, designing and implementing programmes to reduce the incidence of knife carrying will be difficult. It is important to note too that most of the published research relies on self-reporting by young people in questionnaires and is thus open to concealed or exaggerated statements of involvement. It is hoped that the quality of these surveys as they pertain to knife carrying will improve with a wider range of, and greater specificity in, questions. More focus on frequency of carrying and motivation would be helpful. Only with improvements will a more accurate picture of the extent of the problem be available.

The use of knives in crime

While the carrying of a knife may well be legal and innocuous, the use of knives in violent crime attracts greater concern. In considering 'violent crime' it is important to remember that, according to the 2006–2007 BCS, just under half of violent offences did not result in an injury to the victim and only 12 per cent of victims of BCS violent incidents received medical attention.¹⁷ Similarly, knife use most commonly involves threats, rather than physical violence. Threats can cause significant distress to the victim, but are generally less serious than a stabbing and are not specifically covered by the BCS.

Table 1 shows the numbers for all violent incidents estimated on the basis of the sample figures in the BCS, for the period 1997 to 2006–2007, with the percentage for knife use derived from that sample. The upper and lower estimates for knife use are then calculated statistically, using the confidence intervals for the percentage in the sample. This means that the true figure lies somewhere between these estimates.¹⁸ As a result, it is possible to draw a limited number of conclusions.

14. *ibid*, p.33.

15. Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office, p.57.

16. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, p.33.

17. Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office, p.62.

18. The confidence interval measures the confidence that can be placed in the sample proportion if that proportion is applied to the population, in this case, of violent incidents estimated by the BCS to occur in the year. It is calculated in such a way that the true figure can be assumed to lie inside the interval with a statistical probability of 95 per cent.

Table 1: Use of a knife by percentage and estimates of knife use in all BCS violence (1997 to 2006–2007)¹⁹ Source: Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office, pp.33, 71; Coleman, K., Hird, C. and Povey, D. (2006), *Violent Crime Overview, Homicide and Gun Crime 2004/2005*, London: Home Office, p.37; Walker, A., Kershaw, C. and Nicholas, S. (2006), *Crime in England and Wales 2005/06*, p.80; *Trends in BCS incidents of crime 1981 to 2006/07, with percentage change and statistical significance of change between 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001/02, 2002/03, 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07, as kindly supplied by the Home Office on 12/11/2007.*

	1997	1999	2001– 2002	2002– 2003	2003– 2004	2004– 2005	2005– 2006	2006– 2007
All BCS violence (000s)	3,593	3,382	2,728	2,714	2,597	2,320	2,349	2,471
Knife use –								
(a) sample percentage ²⁰	5	5	7	8	5	6	7	7
(b) upper estimated percentage	6	6	8	9	6	7	8	8
(c) lower estimated percentage	3	4	6	7	4	5	6	6
Knife use – upper estimate (000s)	216	203	218	244	156	162	188	198
Knife use – lower estimate (000s)	108	135	164	190	104	116	141	148

The upper estimate for knife use in violent incidents over the decade is slightly lower for 2006–2007 than for 1997. However, the lower estimate appears to have increased, from 108,000 in 1997 to 148,000 in 2006–2007. Knife use in recent years has never dropped below 104,000 incidents – the lower estimate for 2003–2004.

It appears that the distance between the estimates has narrowed over time, so we can be slightly clearer about the possible true figures. The increase in BCS sample size over that time should lead to greater certainty about these more recent estimates. It would seem that the growth of the BCS sample over the years has tended to bring to light more of the actual incidents.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to be sure that the true figure has changed over time in one direction or another. For example, the true figure might have been 108,000 in 1997 and 198,000 in 2006–2007 or, just as likely, it might have been 216,000 in 1997 and 148,000 in 2006–2007.

The BCS divides violent crime into four typologies – domestic, acquaintance, stranger and mugging.²¹ However, once violent incidents are broken down into categories, the numbers of incidents in the samples are low and therefore the confidence intervals will increase; the annual change in each category is not likely to be significant.²² For this reason we have focused the analysis on identifying any evidence of significant change in knife use for the main categories of violence between 1997 and 2006–2007, using two years at the beginning of the period as the benchmarks. Thus Table 2 presents the estimated figures in the same way as Table 1, but instead analyses the data for two years at the beginning of the period and two years at the end.

Mugging figures have been ignored in the analysis because of low sample sizes and recent changes in the definition of mugging.

19. From 2006–2007, all BCS violence figures exclude snatch theft.

20. The sample percentage was used as the basis for calculating confidence intervals that could be translated into upper and lower estimates of the actual figures.

21. The Home Office defines mugging as robbery, attempted robbery and snatch theft from the person, although from 2006–2007 snatch theft is no longer included in the overall BCS violence figures. Stranger violence is defined as woundings and assaults where the victim did not know the offender(s) in any way. Domestic violence is defined as violent incidents, excluding mugging, which involve partners, ex-partners, household members or other relatives. Acquaintance violence is defined as wounding and assaults where the victim knew the perpetrators, at least by sight. Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office, p.53.

22. For example, five domestic violence incidents and 19 muggings in the 2003–2004 sample involved knife use compared with just 13 and 45 incidents respectively in the 2006–2007 survey.

Table 2: Use of a knife by percentage and total number of incidents in BCS violence for selected years (1997 to 2006–2007) by typology Source: Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office, pp.33, 71; *Trends in BCS incidents of crime 1981 to 2006/07, with percentage change and statistical significance of change between 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001/02, 2002/03, 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07, as kindly supplied by the Home Office on 12/11/2007.*

	1997	1999	2005– 2006	2006– 2007
Domestic violence (000s)	814	775	357	407
Knife use –				
(a) sample percentage	4	4	6	5*
(b) upper estimated percentage	8	7	10	8
(c) lower estimated percentage	2	2	3	3
Knife use – upper estimates (000s)	65	54	36	33
Knife use – lower estimates (000s)	16	16	11	12
Acquaintance violence (000s)	1,642	1,227	817	845
Knife use –				
(a) sample percentage	3	4	6	7
(b) upper estimated percentage	5	6	8	9
(c) lower estimated percentage	2	2	4	5
Knife use – upper estimates (000s)	82	74	65	76
Knife use – lower estimates (000s)	33	25	33	42
Stranger violence (000s)	784	954	863	894
Knife use –				
(a) sample percentage	4	3	6	5
(b) upper estimated percentage	7	5	8	7
(c) lower estimated percentage	2	2	4	3
Knife use – upper estimates (000s)	55	48	69	63
Knife use – lower estimates (000s)	16	19	35	27

* The base figure in the 2006–2007 sample for knife use in domestic violence incidents is below ten and therefore the calculation of the estimates should be treated with caution.

Table 3 presents a similar analysis for wounding and robbery. The assault categories have been altered recently ('common assault' was replaced with two categories of 'assault with minor injury' and 'assault with no injury' in the 2006–2007 BCS). Accordingly, these have been excluded from the analysis here.

Table 3: Use of a knife by percentage and total number of incidents in BCS wounding and robbery for selected years (1997 to 2006–2007)²³ Source: Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office, pp.33, 7; *Trends in BCS incidents of crime 1981 to 2006/07, with percentage change and statistical significance of change between 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001/02, 2002/03, 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07, as kindly supplied by the Home Office on 12/11/2007.*

	1997	1999	2005– 2006	2006– 2007
Wounding (000s)	804	651	547	578
Knife use –				
(a) sample percentage	5	9	6	7
(b) upper estimated percentage	9	13	9	10
(c) lower estimated percentage	3	6	4	5
Knife use – upper estimates (1,000s)	72	85	49	58
Knife use – lower estimates (1,000s)	24	39	22	29
Robbery (000s)	334	407	311	320
Knife use –				
(a) sample percentage	17	18	13	20
(b) upper estimated percentage	25	27	18	26
(c) lower estimated percentage	11	12	9	15
Knife use – upper estimates (1,000s)	84	110	56	83
Knife use – lower estimates (1,000s)	37	49	28	48

The purpose of the calculations in Tables 2 and 3 was to discover any evidence of change in knife use in the five categories between 1997 and 2006–2007.

Within each category there appears to be no substantial evidence of a significant change in the proportions of knife use if we compare the beginning of the decade with its end. The figures for domestic violence are too low to be altogether reliable. In other categories the only indication of a possible rise is in the proportion of knife use in acquaintance violence (in which the upper confidence interval of 5 per cent in 1997 has become the lower confidence interval in 2006–2007). Even for this category, looking at the range given by the lower and upper estimates, it is not clear that knife use incidents have increased. In three out of the five typologies (acquaintance violence, wounding and robbery) the lower estimate has increased between 1997 and 2006–2007; however, the upper estimate has not. For stranger violence, both estimates have risen but there remains no evidence of a significant increase.

Not surprisingly then, although knife use in robbery in 2006–2007 showed an increase in the band of estimated figures compared with the previous year, there is no evidence of a

23. The sample percentage was used as the basis for calculating confidence intervals that could be translated into upper and lower estimates of the actual figures.

significant increase between these two years or over the previous decade. Moreover, as the confidence intervals are very wide, it is hard to draw any conclusions about a true figure. This applies to all typologies in the years selected.

In reviewing the analysis of the BCS figures we can conclude that an accurate picture showing the extent of any changes over time fails to emerge. What we can say is that the broad estimates provide a guide to the scale, extent and regularity of knife use incidents over recent years. Instead of a series of precise annual measures, we arrive at bands of estimated figures, changing each year, within which more accurate measures are needed.

Turning to look at what is known about the use of knives by children in crime, it is necessary to look at both the MORI Youth Survey for the YJB and the OCJS. For those 11 to 16 year olds questioned in the YJB Youth Survey, the use of knives in crime seems to be relatively rare. The 2004 survey shows that:

- Three per cent of children in school and 14 per cent of excluded children said they had 'used a weapon against another person'.
- Three per cent of children in school and 21 per cent of excluded children said they had 'threatened another person with a weapon'.²⁴

The weapons referred to here are as likely to be blunt instruments as knives and more detailed information is needed.

For young people more broadly, the OCJS provides information for 10 to 25 year olds. As already noted, the 2005 OCJS found that of the 4 per cent of respondents who admitted to having carried a knife in the 12 months prior to questioning, less than one in ten (7 per cent) said they had used the knife to threaten.²⁵

According to the available information, the use of knives by young people to injure also seems rare. The 2005 OCJS found that only 2 per cent of those who said they had carried a knife during the previous 12 months said that they had used that knife to injure.²⁶ The self-report survey also found that, specifically in relation to assaults that resulted in injury, only 1 per cent of respondents said they had 'knifed or stabbed' their victim.²⁷

More details about levels of victimisation of children and young people are set out in Chapter 3.

Deaths caused by the use of knives

According to one Home Office analysis of the Homicide Index (a record of all suspected homicides occurring in England and Wales), 37.9 per cent of victims were killed using a 'sharp instrument' between 1995 and 2000 – by far the single largest category of method of homicide.²⁸ Of course, sharp instruments might include bottles, glass, screwdrivers and the like, but it is thought that knives make up the majority of that figure.²⁹ Figures for homicides caused solely by the use of knives are not available.

The use of sharp instruments in homicides in Scotland is even greater – during the 20-year period from 1979 to 1998 they were used in 40 per cent of all recorded homicides.³⁰ According to a recent study by the Medical Research Council's Social and Public Health Sciences Unit in Glasgow, between 1981 and 2003, the overall murder rate in Scotland increased by 83 per cent and murder with knives increased by 164 per cent. During this time almost half (47 per cent) of all murders involved knives.³¹

The figures for sharp instrument homicides in England and Wales are not quite so bleak. The homicide figures for England and Wales have been rising steadily since the early sixties. Between 1980 and 1984 there were 2,624; between 1995 and 1999 that number had risen to 3,176.³² Although the general trend for the number of homicides has been upward,

24. MORI (2004), *MORI Youth Survey 2004*, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.32.

25. Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, p.27.

26. *ibid*

27. *ibid*, p.91.

28. Francis, B., Barry, J., Bowater, R., Miller, N., Soothill, K. and Ackerley, E. (2004), *Using Homicide Data to Assist Murder Investigations*, Home Office Online Report 26/04, p.12.

29. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, p.36.

30. *ibid*

31. Leyland, A. (2006), 'Homicides involving knives and other sharp objects in Scotland, 1981–2003', *Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp.145–147.

32. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, p.3.

the proportion of those homicides committed using a sharp instrument has been declining. Consequently, the actual number of homicides committed using a sharp instrument has remained relatively stable.

Table 4 shows that in 1995 there were 663 reported homicides, of which 36.65 per cent – 243 homicides – were committed using a sharp instrument. Ten years later, in 2005–2006, the number of reported homicides had risen to 765, of which 27.68 per cent – 212 homicides – were committed using a sharp instrument. This represents a 12.75 per cent drop in the use of sharp instruments to commit homicide.

The most common method of killing in 2005–2006 remained a ‘sharp instrument’. Approximately 28 per cent of all victims were killed by this method: 31 per cent of male victims and 23 per cent of female victims.³³ However, it is important to note that the homicide figures for 2005–2006 saw those killed by a sharp instrument decline both as a proportion and an actual figure. In fact, not since 1999–2000 has the number of people killed in this manner been so few, and the proportion has not been so low since 1994 when data became available (see Table 4).

33. Coleman, K., Jansson, K., Kaiza, P. and Reed, R. (2007), *Homicides, Firearm Offences and Intimate Violence 2005/2006 (Supplementary Volume 1 to Crime in England and Wales 2005/2006)*, London: Home Office, p.8.

Table 4: Homicides: the use of a sharp instrument by percentage and total number (1995 to 2005–2006) Source: Coleman, K., Hird, C. and Povey, D. (2006), *Violent Crime Overview, Homicide and Gun Crime 2004/2005*, London: Home Office, p.56; Coleman, K., Jansson, K., Kaiza, P. and Reed, R. (2007), *Homicides, Firearm Offences and Intimate Violence 2005/2006 (Supplementary Volume 1 to Crime in England and Wales 2005/2006)*, London: Home Office, p.8.

	1995	1996	1997	1997– 1998	1998– 1999	1999– 2000	2000– 2001	2001– 2002	2002– 2003	2003– 2004	2004– 2005	2005– 2006
Homicides	663	585	609	608	646	674	771	804	953	793	820	765
Homicides by sharp instrument	243	197	200	202	201	212	214	261	266	234	236	212
Percentage of homicides by sharp instrument	36.65	33.68	32.84	33.22	31.11	31.45	27.76	32.46	27.91	29.51	28.78	27.68



Why carry or use a knife?

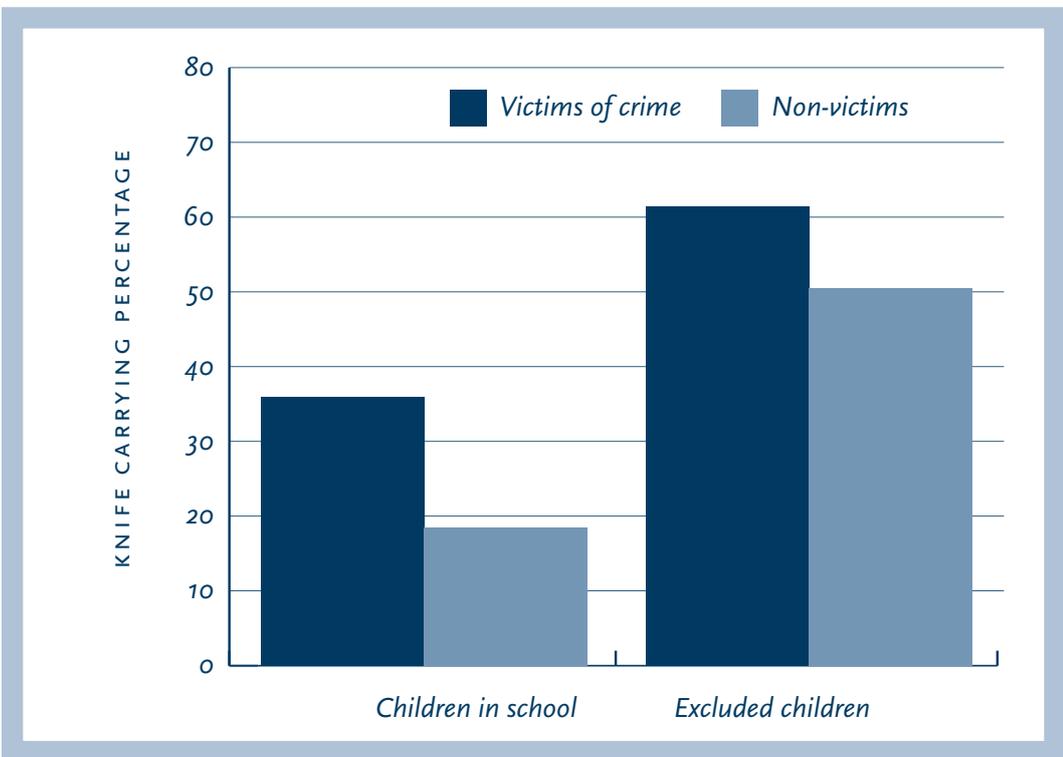
There is little information available on the motivations for knife carrying and, as can be seen from the media reporting, much is anecdotal and provided by youth workers, teachers and other professionals. Without definitive information it is very difficult indeed to make any serious attempt to reduce the practice.

Once again, the YJB Youth Survey and the OCJS provide the best available data. Both surveys show that insecurity and protection are key factors in knife carrying among young people. The 2004 YJB Youth Survey found that 2 per cent of the children in school surveyed and 10 per cent of excluded children had ‘taken a weapon to school to defend [themselves]’.³⁴ 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 per cent compared with 18 per cent (see Figure 3).
- Among excluded children, 62 per cent who had been a victim of a crime carried a knife compared with 51 per cent who had not been a victim³⁵ (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Knife carrying by self-reported victims of crime versus non-victims

Source: MORI (2004), MORI Youth Survey 2004, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales.



34. MORI (2004), MORI Youth Survey 2004, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.32.

35. *ibid*, p.34.

This is of some concern, particularly considering the high levels of victimisation among children and young people.

- Among excluded children, 55 per cent had been the victim of an offence during the previous 12 months.
- Among children in school, 49 per cent had been victims, up 3 per cent from 2003.³⁶

The 2005 OCJS also adds weight to the notion that young people resort to knife carrying as a result of feeling afraid or insecure. As noted in Chapter 2, more than eight in ten (85 per cent) of those who said they had carried a knife in the last 12 months said the main reason for doing so was for protection; 9 per cent said that it was in case they got into a fight; and 6 per cent mentioned another reason.³⁷

Other research has found that knife carrying among young people is also linked to whether they feel safe from crime and victimisation. A report commissioned by the Bridge House Trust, *Fear and Fashion*, 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 an unequal society are the chief motivations for carrying a knife.³⁸ The report stated:

*'Fear and victimisation play the most significant role in a young person's decision to carry a knife or weapon. Practitioners who attended the seminar, unprompted, shared the perception that fear was the main motive for carrying a knife. One youth worker practitioner commented: "Fear outweighs aggression as a motivator. We work with teams of offenders and at the bottom of it is fear ... [it's for] defence".'*³⁹

The report also provided some explanation for the apparently high levels of knife carrying among excluded children and the spread of knife carrying among young people:

*'The possession of a knife or other weapon can also be a means of acquiring status. Children who experience failure at school or other kinds of social exclusion could be looking for status by carrying and brandishing a knife. Harriet Harman, [then] Solicitor-General [now Leader of the House of Commons, Minister for Women and Lord Privy Seal] and MP for Peckham [and Camberwell], makes a link with race: "There is clearly a sense that this is an unequal society where you are blocked by the colour of your skin, and there is a feeling that you achieve status not by getting a degree or by qualifications but by having a knife." The status associated with the possession of a knife has a ripple effect and creates a fashion that other children might want to follow.'*⁴⁰

As well as security and protection being key factors the evidence also suggests that there is a link between 'offending' and knife carrying. The 2004 YJB Youth Survey found that:

- Of those children in mainstream education who said they had committed an offence in the last 12 months, 51 per cent have carried a knife of some kind.
- Among excluded children who have carried a knife, 68 per cent have 'offended'.⁴¹

But these figures do not provide a simple picture either since, as the YJB Youth Survey found, those who self-report offending in the last 12 months are also those more likely to have been victims.⁴² Furthermore, it is important to note again that 'carrying a knife' may only be a penknife with no intention to use it as a weapon. Still, the very obvious correlation between children and young people who are exposed to violence and victimisation and the carrying of a knife indicates that, in light of feelings of threat and insecurity, the carrying of a blade might be considered far more understandable.

More detailed research on the carrying of a knife as a weapon, the motivations for it and the incidences of such weapon carrying by those who have witnessed or experienced violent crime compared to those who have not would be useful.

36. *ibid*, p.51.

37. Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, p.33.

38. Lemos, G. (2004), *Fear and Fashion: The Use of Knives and Other Weapons by Young People*, London: Lemos & Crane, pp.8–11.

39. *ibid*, p.vii.

40. *ibid*, p.8.

41. MORI (2004), *MORI Youth Survey 2004*, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.34.

42. For example, the Youth Survey data show that, in 2005, 65 per cent of those who had committed an offence had been a victim, compared with 44 per cent of those who had not committed any crime. MORI (2006), *MORI Five-Year Report: An Analysis of Youth Survey Data*, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.23.

Who does 'knife crime' affect most?

Knife-related offences, as with most types of crime, appear to affect different groups of the population to greater and lesser degrees. From the research available, it seems that children and young people, those living in poor areas, and members of black and minority ethnic communities are more likely to be the victims of knife use.

Young people

Compared to adults, children and young people experience greater levels of violent crime victimisation. According to the 2006–2007 BCS, the risk of becoming a victim of violent crime is 3.6 per cent for a British adult.⁴³ However, the available figures for children and young people provide a striking and stark contrast. For young men aged 16 to 24 the risk was almost four times greater: 13.8 per cent experienced a violent crime of some sort in the year prior to their BCS interview.⁴⁴ As previously mentioned, almost half of children attending school surveyed in the 2004 YJB Youth Survey had been victims of a crime in the previous year. And according to the 2005 OCJS, just under one-fifth (18 per cent) of young people aged from 10 to 25 years had been a victim of an assault in the last 12 months, with 10 to 15 year olds more likely to have been victims than 16 to 25 year olds (20 per cent and 16 per cent respectively).⁴⁵ The evidence clearly suggests that children and young people suffer much higher rates of victimisation.

Looking more closely at the data from the YJB Youth Surveys, it is clear that children and young people are directly affected by 'knife crime', but incidents that result in a child or young person actually being injured appear to be less common. According to the OCJS 2005,⁴⁶ of the 483 respondents aged between 10 and 25 years who had suffered an assault with injury in the last 12 months (just under 10 per cent of all OCJS respondents in that age group) only 3 per cent (14 respondents) said they were 'knifed or stabbed'.⁴⁷

What these figures mean for an estimation of the proportion of the young population victimised by knife use remains unclear. The base figure of respondents reporting knife use against them is very low and details about the proportion of the population suffering from assault with injury are not readily available.

Of the 91 respondents aged between 10 and 25 who had been the victim of a robbery (just under 2 per cent of all 2005 OCJS respondents in that age group), 1 per cent had been 'knifed or stabbed' during the course of the robbery. Evidently, it is extremely difficult to draw any conclusions about knife use in robbery.

Also of interest is that, of those incidents involving children and young people aged 10 to 25 who had been the victim of a robbery or an assault causing injury, only 28 and 24 per cent of incidents respectively came to the attention of the police.⁴⁸ Consequently, it seems unreasonable to expect successful police interventions to greatly reduce the number of these sorts of incidents when the young are disinclined to involve the police.

It should be noted that these figures, while helpful in providing a picture of stabbings

43. Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office, p.60. In reality this figure is likely to be higher owing to the limited number of crimes measured by the BCS.

44. *ibid.*, p.49.

45. Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, pp.67–69. These are figures for all assaults, whether with or without injury.

46. Figures compiled using: Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, pp.67, 80.

47. Confidence interval: 0.0328 ± 0.0158 (95 per cent confidence)

48. Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, p.83.

among young people, say nothing of those incidents in which young people may be threatened with a knife or by a claim to have a knife – which are both likely to be far more common.

More specifically than young people, all the evidence suggests that it is young males who are most at risk:

- According to the 2005 OCJS, males aged 10 to 25 years were almost twice as likely to have been the victim of an assault without injury than females of the same age.⁴⁹
- The single age group with the highest murder rate is that of boys under the age of one (40 per million per year) and then men aged 21 (38 per million per year).
- One-quarter of all murders are of men aged between 17 and 32 years. A male's chance of being murdered doubles between the age of 10 and 14, doubles again between 14 and 15, 15 and 16, 16 and 19, and then does not halve until the age of 46.
- The murder rate for men aged 20 to 24 doubled in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁰

Since young people are at greater risk of becoming a victim of assault and homicide, it is generally that age group too which is most likely to be stabbed and to die by the knife.⁵¹

Those living in poverty

People living in poor neighbourhoods also stand a far greater chance of finding themselves at the wrong end of a knife. The unemployed have a BCS violence victimisation rate more than double the national average, and those living in 'hard pressed' ACORN⁵² areas are also over twice as likely to be victims of violence than those in wealthier areas.⁵³ For 10 to 25 year olds, the characteristics of those at higher risk of being frequently victimised included being part of households that had difficulties managing on their income and living in areas experiencing disorder problems.⁵⁴ According to the 2006–2007 BCS, adults who noticed a high level of physical disorder in their neighbourhood were nearly twice as likely to experience violent victimisation as those who reported a low level of physical disorder.⁵⁵

A brief look at those reporting being a victim of mugging as part of the 2006–2007 BCS is illustrative of the issue. Men aged 16 to 24 are almost three times more likely to be mugged than any other age group. Whites are less than half as likely to be mugged as non-whites and the economically inactive are four times more likely to be mugged than the employed.⁵⁶

For homicides by any method, '[b]oth offenders and victims tend to come from lower socio-economic groups'.⁵⁷ Despite the rise in the homicide rate that Britain has experienced over the last two and a half decades, the wealthiest 20 per cent of areas have actually witnessed the homicide rate fall. Meanwhile, the homicide rate in the poorest tenth of areas in Britain rose by 39 per cent in the eighties and nineties.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ About 60 per cent die that way, much more than by firearms, which are the method of homicide in only 11 per cent of cases. In the wealthiest areas, cutting with knife or glass accounts for just over 30 per cent of homicides, and firearms account for 29 per cent.⁶⁰

Black and minority ethnic communities

'Afro-Caribbeans and Asians are more at risk of homicide than Whites.'⁶¹ Considering too that black and minority ethnic (BME) communities are disproportionately concentrated in deprived areas, the members of those communities are more likely to experience violent crime, and muggings in particular, which involve a high proportion of knife usage.

49. *ibid*, p.68. The OCJS asks 10 to 25 year olds if they have been the victim of an assault in the last 12 months. It does not ask if the victim is related to or in a relationship with the offender.

50. Dorling, D., 'Prime suspect: murder in Britain', in Hillyard, P., Pantazis, C., Tombs, S., Gordon, D. and Dorling, D. (2005), *Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More than Crime*, London: Crime and Society Foundation, p.27.

51. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, p.4.

52. ACORN is a geodemographic tool that categorises all 1.9 million UK postcodes, which are described using over 125 demographic statistics within England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and 287 lifestyle variables.

53. Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office, pp.67–68.

54. Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, pp.71–73.

55. Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007), *Crime in England and Wales 2006/07*, London: Home Office p.68.

56. *ibid*, p.67.

57. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, p.4.

More work needs to be done to determine whether particular BME groups or communities suffer more knife-related offences or are more likely to carry knives. Limited information is available. Following a recent *Freedom of Information Act* request concerning the ethnicity of those accused of knife-enabled robbery, knife-enabled violence and knife-enabled crime and the ethnicity of the victims of these crimes, the Home Office responded that 'this information is not held centrally'. The only data the Home Office was able to provide were figures on the ethnicity of homicide victims killed by 'sharp instruments'. Those figures for the decade to 2006 reveal that each year, on average, 12 per cent of homicide victims by sharp instrument have been black – around five times over-represented against population estimates. Asians occupy a similar position, accounting for each year, on average, 7 per cent of victims.

As for knife carrying, although the 2004 YJB Youth Survey found little difference in weapon carrying by mainstream school pupils based on ethnicity (38 per cent of white pupils, 41 per cent of black pupils and 33 per cent of Asian pupils reported having carried a weapon of some sort),⁶² there were some differences in knife carrying habits. Of those children in mainstream schools:

- White pupils are more likely to say that they carry a penknife than young people from black or minority ethnic groups (26 per cent compared with 20 per cent).
- On the other hand, young people who are black are more likely to admit to carrying a flick knife – illegal and likely to be more dangerous – than white or Asian young people (15 per cent compared with 9 per cent and 8 per cent respectively).⁶³

The Safer London Youth Survey 2004 found that the rates for knife carrying in the capital are significantly higher for white British and black Caribbean young people than for black African and South Asian young people. Of the respondents who indicated they had carried a knife in the past 12 months, 12 per cent were white British, 12 per cent black Caribbean, 6 per cent black African and 6 per cent South Asian.⁶⁴

58. Dorling, D., 'Prime suspect: murder in Britain', in Hillyard, P., Pantazis, C., Tombs, S., Gordon, D. and Dorling, D. (2005), *Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More than Crime*, London: Crime and Society Foundation, p.31.

59. *ibid*, p.33.

60. *ibid*, pp.32–33

61. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, p.4.

62. MORI (2004), *MORI Youth Survey 2004*, London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, p.26.

63. *ibid*, p.33.

64. Communities that Care (2005), *Findings from the Safer London Youth Survey*, p.6.



Amnesties, prison sentences, education and prevention: what works for 'knife crime'?

The government has adopted a range of different approaches to tackling 'knife crime'. The most publicised have included a national knife amnesty and harsher sentences. Yet it is far from clear what actually works to reduce knife carrying and knife offences.

The national knife amnesty

With much fanfare, a national knife amnesty was declared and began in May 2006, running for five weeks until the end of June. Although a national knife amnesty is a relatively rare event, there is often a knife amnesty running somewhere in a local authority area in Britain. Recently, within London, Croydon ran an amnesty from 20 February to 31 March 2006, Southwark ran one from September 2004 to January 2005 (185 knives collected)⁶⁵ and Hillingdon ran one from January to April 2005 (378 'frightening weapons' collected).⁶⁶ Little research has followed these and other knife amnesties to assess their impact on knife carrying and knife offences.

According to the Home Office, a total of 89,864 knives were handed in during the national amnesty.⁶⁷ Home Office minister Vernon Coaker stated that this means 'fewer knives on our streets' and greater security for everyone. Assuming that there are approximately 22 million households in England and Wales, each possessing a single kitchen knife, the amnesty has been successful in removing 0.0041 per cent 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. Indeed, work carried out by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) on the effect of the amnesty concluded: 'Reductions in MPS Knife-Enabled offences started 5-weeks into the operation, and then continued for approximately 8-weeks (which is 6 weeks beyond the end of the operation) before returning to pre-operation levels.'⁶⁸

Evidence from other knife amnesties also shows that they have a very limited impact on crime levels. One retrospective records-based study in Strathclyde found that a knife amnesty ('Operation Blade', which ran for four weeks in 1993) did not have a long-term beneficial effect. The campaign in Strathclyde was followed by a reduction in the number of serious stabbings for ten months during and after the intervention but the rate for subsequent months exceeded the rates prior to the intervention.⁶⁹

Essentially, knife amnesties address but one tool of expression of interpersonal violence and do nothing to address the underlying causes of such violence. Thus they do not affect either those who retain their knives believing it might be necessary to use them or those who pick up a knife on the spur of the moment in anger or fear.

Little is known about who is likely to hand in a knife during the amnesty or why. It is likely, however, that those people who routinely carry a knife for protection or intend to use a

65. The Job, Vol. 37, Issue 946, 1 February 2005, http://www.met.police.uk/job/job946/live_files/index.htm

66. *ibid.*, Vol. 38, Issue 953, 13 May 2005, http://www.met.police.uk/job/job953/live_files/8.htm

67. 'Knives off the streets makes our communities safer', Home Office Press Release 097/2006, 13 July 2006.

68. Metropolitan Police Service (2006), *Knife Amnesty Impact on Knife-Enabled Offences*, London: Metropolitan Police Service, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/06_12_06_knife_amnesty.pdf

69. Bleetman, A., Perry, C., Crawford, R. and Swann I. (1997), 'Effect of Strathclyde police initiative 'Operation Blade' on accident and emergency attendances due to assault', *Journal of Accident Emergency Medicine*, 14, pp.153-156.

knife in crime will not be safely disposing of their knives in the bins provided at police stations. Moreover, unlike guns, once a knife has been disposed of it merely takes a trip to the kitchen drawer to get another. As long as there is unsliced bread, opportunities for 'knife crime' will exist. Removing offensive weapons is to be welcomed, as is raising awareness of the issue, but it does not address the underlying causes of the problem.

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 noted that out of a total of 18,900 people stopped and searched in 2001–2002 under s60 of the *Public Order Act 1994* (i.e. in 'anticipation of violence'), 1,367 (7 per cent) were found to be carrying an offensive or dangerous instrument, and of these, 203 (14 per cent) were arrested for possession. The report concluded:

*'Considering that the search powers in question should be used only where a specific threat of violence is present, these '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 and perhaps periodic 'crackdowns' when there is evidence of weapons being carried in a particular area.'*⁷⁰

It should be noted too that police stop and search powers are disproportionately used against black and minority ethnic young males and have huge potential to create resentment.⁷¹

Under the *Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006* teachers in schools and further education institutions now have the power to search pupils and students in order to look for a knife or other weapon. Previously teachers who had suspected someone to be carrying a weapon would have had to call the police to effect a search, unless the child agreed to be searched, which would give the 'suspect' time to get rid of the weapon. The government says these measures are intended to increase the safety of staff and children, but teaching unions have expressed concern that teachers are not best placed or equipped to undertake these kind of searches. Moreover, obtrusive searches of children by powerful adults are likely to have some impact on a child's sense of well-being and personal integrity, and may decrease the degree of trust between students and teachers. It is therefore possible that schools will resort to other, less personally intrusive, preventative measures and that searches will be considered as a last resort.

When police activity results in the seizure of a firearm, the prospect that this might have a beneficial impact on crime is greater than when a knife is discovered, simply because it is much harder to get hold of guns than knives. The number of knives available to those inclined to use them is almost infinite. Young people and children can simply take a knife from their home. School teachers using their new search powers or the police making greater use of stop and search are unlikely to impact significantly on the number of children and young people carrying and using knives.

Increased prison sentences

The government has increased the maximum available sentence for carrying a knife in public without lawful reason from two to four years through the *Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006*. It hopes that the doubling of the sentence for possession will send a clear message about the severity of the offence of knife carrying and will deter would-be offenders.

70. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, pp.33–34.

71. See, for example, Wilson, D. and Rees, G. (eds.) (2006), *Just Justice: A Study into Black Young People's Experiences of the Youth Justice System*, London: The Children's Society.

But it is unclear 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’.⁷² It further noted:

‘The evidence shows the importance of certainty of punishment, so that deterrent effects are unlikely to be achieved if the prospects of avoiding detection and conviction are high. It is the prospect of getting caught that has deterrence value, rather than alterations to the ‘going rate’ for severity of sentences. The lack of correlation between punishment levels and crime levels is in line with the current literature which analyses these trends in other jurisdictions ... There appears to be no statistical correlation between types of sentence and likelihood of desistance, according to Home Office analysis of the Offenders’ Index.’⁷³

Knife carrying, as already noted, is hard to detect. Consequently, the tougher sentences will have a very uncertain deterrent effect. However, given that knife carrying is most common among those aged 16 to 17, this new sentence may well result in children and young people going to prison for longer.

Relying on the implausible view that increased sentence length will have a deterrent effect, it seems unlikely that the government’s chosen policy will have an impact on knife carrying in public. This is particularly the case because such behaviour is most common among children and young people who are less likely to foresee the consequences of their actions, less likely to appreciate cause and effect and are most likely to be the victims of violent crime.

Education and awareness-raising

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.

The *Fear and Fashion* report on the use of knives by young people listed key priorities for action that made no mention of enforcement and sanctions. It recommended:

1. Developing local demonstration programmes and activities
2. Developing good practice materials for schools, youth clubs, youth offending teams and the police
3. Promoting and disseminating good practice materials and examples.⁷⁴

Similarly, a Home Office report that considered possible approaches to reducing homicide rates concluded that first among ‘the most promising weapons-related strategies’ was ‘[e]ducational campaigns regarding the dangers and penalties in relation to the illegal carrying of knives and other weapons’.⁷⁵ Only then did it mention ‘crackdowns’ and weapon searches.

While 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. The Be Safe Project,⁷⁶ which ‘goes into schools to educate young people on the harsh realities of what can happen when they carry a knife’, states that it has been evaluated by Newham Youth Offending Team and claims some impressive results.⁷⁷ However, more systematic assessment and evaluation of educational projects is needed.

72. Halliday, J., French, C. and Goodwin, C. (2001), *Making Punishments Work: Report of a Review of the Sentencing Framework for England and Wales*, London: Home Office, p.8.

73. *ibid*, pp.8–9.

74. Lemos, G. (2004), *Fear and Fashion: The Use of Knives and Other Weapons by Young People*, London: Lemos & Crane, p.viii.

75. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, p.36.

76. See <http://www.besafeproject.org.uk/index.html>

77. *ibid*

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. Given that, according to the 2005 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 'do not trust local police', community groups might have more of an impact than police officers.⁷⁸

Prevention and the causes of crime

Although the emphasis has been on extending powers to search young people and children for knives, harsher sentences and knife amnesties, the government acknowledges that prevention has an important role to play. The Home Office minister, Vernon Coaker, recently told the Home Affairs Committee: 'It is about law enforcement ... and about legislation ... but it is also about prevention and working with schools and communities and listening to what they have to say ...'⁷⁹

The government's draft *Guns, Gangs and Knives Action Plan* includes a prevention strand alongside policing and powers strands.⁸⁰ It 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. The government has also recently set out plans 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.⁸¹

After many years of neglect, investment in youth services is to be welcomed. But the government's overall prevention approach to tackling youth crime lacks a coherent framework and is made up of a range of piecemeal initiatives. Most recently, in response to a number of high profile stabbings, government ministers have resorted primarily to criminal justice responses – in particular the various measures in the *Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006* – rather than developing prevention strategies. This is despite the fact that evidence suggests that a more concerted focus is needed to address the underlying social and economic factors.

A study for the Youth Justice Board into the reasons for the increase in young people's involvement in street crime, which is closely related to knife possession and knife use, identified the issue of relative poverty among young people, especially in areas where their paths crossed with wealthier people, as being a key factor.⁸² It found that the latter had increasingly begun to possess portable objects of desire such as MP3 players and mobile phones, which ten years ago would only have been accessible in their homes. The status attached to possessing these objects made them not only desirable in their own right but also a valuable commodity in an expanding juvenile market for stolen goods.

There is clearly a need to recognise that trends in any form of violence, particularly 'knife crime', are not determined by criminal justice responses but are related to underlying social and economic developments, which cannot be ignored in any strategy that seeks to prevent increasing numbers of people being both the victims and perpetrators of knife-related violence.

78. Wilson, D., Sharp, C. and Patterson, A. (2006), *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, London: Home Office, pp.40, 42.

79. Home Affairs Committee (2007), *Knife Crime: Oral and Written Evidence*, Tuesday, 27 March 2007, London: Stationery Office.

80. 'Draft Guns, Gangs and Knives Action Plan', in House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2007), *Knife Crime: Oral and Written Evidence*, Ev 40–41, London: The Stationery Office.

81. HM Treasury (2007), *Aiming High for Young People: A Ten-Year Strategy for Positive Activities*, London: Stationery Office.

82. Fitzgerald M., Stockdale J. and Hale C. (2003), *Young People and Street Crime*, London: Youth Justice Board.

Conclusion

A lack of a considered, clear strategy based on high quality, specific research characterises the government and police approach to the problem of knife-related offences. For example, in the summer of 2006, following a number of stabbings, the government's quick decision was to call for an increase in the maximum penalty for knife carrying. Two weeks later, a Home Office report detailed calls by senior police officers for knife possession to be added to the list of offences for which police officers can issue an £80 Penalty Notice for Disorder.⁸³ Politicians and some police officers clearly hold very different views on the seriousness of carrying knives and how best to respond to knife carrying.

This is, in part, explained by the lack of proper research. Yet it should be remembered that concern about 'knife crime' is not a recent development but one that resurfaces intermittently, usually following news of the use of a knife in a murder. Consequently, the lack of research and co-ordinated, evidence-based policies to deal with the problem is hard to justify – particularly to the victims of these offences.

This lack of research has also led to some rather unhelpful media reporting and political comment. David Cameron's comment that rap music encourages the carrying of knives shows a lack of understanding of the reality of the problem. Hip hop reflects the lived experience of many young people, and suggestions that the music is a causal factor for knife carrying risks accusations of cultural bias.⁸⁴

Gaps in the research should be addressed by commissioning new research on the motivations for carrying knives and through clarifying the nature and extent of the problems in specific local areas by pooling data from different sources such as domestic violence projects, care homes, schools, accident and emergency departments, public surveys and the police.

There are limitations to the current data, so it is difficult to establish an accurate picture of the nature and extent of knife possession and knife use in offending. Knife use continues to be only a small proportion of all violence as measured by the British Crime Survey. However, it is clearly a significant problem. Knife carrying may be increasing, especially among children and the young. 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.

Enforcement and punitive action on knife carrying and knife use fails to take account of the fact that it 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 usage 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. As research commissioned by the Home Office has stated:

83. Doward, J. (2006), 'Instant fines urged for knife crime', 11 June 2006, *The Observer*.

84. See 'Cameron attacks Radio 1's hip-hop', BBC, 07.06.06, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5055724.stm.

*'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.'*⁸⁵

Moves towards a more co-ordinated approach that recognises the importance of prevention are to be welcomed. 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 knowing the full nature and extent of that problem and while overlooking the fundamental causes.

85. Brookman, F. and Maguire, M. (2003), *Reducing Homicide: A Review of the Possibilities*, Home Office Online Report 01/03, p.4.





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