

# Knife crime

## **Evidence briefing**

Abigail McNeill and Levin Wheller



# Contents

<b>What is the purpose of this briefing?</b>	<b>1</b>
Key findings	1
<b>Understanding the causes of knife crime</b>	<b>1</b>
Motivations for carrying weapons	1
Risk factors associated with knife crime	1
Is there a link between gangs and knife crime?	2
<b>Developing interventions to reduce knife crime</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>General violence or weapon-related interventions with greatest potential to reduce crime</b>	<b>3</b>
Pulling levers	3
Early intervention and prevention programmes	3
Restorative justice	4
<b>Specific knife crime interventions with limited crime reduction evidence</b>	<b>4</b>
Knife amnesties	4
Community and educational interventions	4
<b>Enforcement interventions where evidence suggests careful use</b>	<b>5</b>
Stop and search	5
Sentencing	5
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>7</b>

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College of Policing Limited  
Leamington Road  
Ryton-on-Dunsmore  
Coventry  
CV8 3EN



## What is the purpose of this briefing?

This briefing may usefully inform decisions about approaches to tackling knife crime following the increasing number of these types of offences over the last few months. The paper provides police and crime reduction partners with a summary of the evidence on factors associated with, and strategies and interventions to tackle, knife crime. Evidence has been identified through a non-systematic search of the literature, taking reliable sources and government strategy and research reports as a base, and consulting with subject matter experts to ensure the synthesis presents a rounded picture. It is not intended to review all of the available research evidence, nor present a formal assessment of its quality.

### Key findings

- The motivations for and factors associated with an individual's involvement in knife crime are varied, meaning tailored approaches are most likely to be effective in tackling specific problems.
- Approaches such as problem-oriented policing, focused deterrence strategies, targeting high risk offenders and early preventative work aimed at supporting potentially 'at-risk' individuals are most likely to be effective.
- Evidence suggests the most effective approaches tend to be multi-agency and multi-faceted, requiring collaboration from different fields in 'diagnosing the problem, analysing underlying causes, examining what works and developing solutions'.

## Understanding the causes of knife crime

### Motivations for carrying weapons

Evidence suggests there are three broad explanations as to why people carry knives<sup>1</sup>:

- Self protection and fear ('defensive weapon carrying'), particularly for individuals who have previously been a victim of crime.<sup>2</sup>
- Self-presentation, particularly for individuals who want 'street credibility' and 'respect'.<sup>3</sup>
- Utility (offensive weapon carrying), particularly for individuals who use weapons to facilitate other behaviours<sup>4</sup> such as theft, sexual assault, injury and serious harm.

Evidence also suggests a lack of trust in the police can potentially lead victims to becoming perpetrators, as they may use violence to seek revenge instead of relying on police procedures.<sup>5</sup>

### Risk factors associated with knife crime

There is some evidence that the following factors may be associated with increased risk of violence and/or weapon carrying:

- Gender – males are more likely to commit serious violence and carry weapons.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brennan, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Lemos, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Silvestri et al., 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Brennan, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Silvestri et al., 2009; Bradford, 2015; Brennan, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Home Office, 2018a; Brennan, 2018.



- Age – self-reported weapon carrying peaks around the age of 15.<sup>7</sup>
- Adverse childhood experiences – including abuse, neglect, parental criminality and/or substance abuse, being taken into care.<sup>8</sup>
- Educational attainment – school exclusion and low attainment.<sup>9</sup>
- Ethnicity – recent analysis of data collected in the UK indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between ethnicity and weapon carrying.<sup>10</sup>

### Is there a link between gangs and knife crime?

Evidence suggests that gang related knife crime, although more likely to result in injury or fatality, makes up only a small proportion of total knife crime with injury (only five per cent in 2016).<sup>11</sup> Some subtle differences have been identified between individuals who carry a knife and those who become involved in gang crime.<sup>12</sup> Analysis suggests a stronger link in London between gangs and knife crime since 2016.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Home Office, 2018a; Brennan, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Dobash et al., 2007; Hales et al., 2006; Home Office, 2018a

<sup>9</sup> Hales et al., 2006; Home Office, 2018a; Ministry of Justice, 2018a.

<sup>10</sup> Brennan, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> MOPAC, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> McVie, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Kirchmaier & Villa Llera, 2018.

### Understanding patterns of knife crime

Analysis of data including homicide statistics and the Metropolitan Police Service's Public Attitudes Survey found murder locations were positively correlated with the percentage of the previous years' young black respondents (aged 24-35) who believed knife crime was a major concern in that area.<sup>14</sup> Effective engagement with young black respondents may provide intelligence to help reduce knife-related murders.

### Developing interventions to reduce knife crime

The range of risk factors and motivations outlined above indicate that knife crime and weapon carrying cannot be solved by criminal justice measures alone. Strong conclusions about 'what works' to reduce knife crime are difficult to draw due to the lack of robust evaluations of programmes and interventions.<sup>15</sup> However, the best available evidence suggests the most effective approaches tend to be multi-faceted and involve prevention at the earliest opportunity and multi-agency collaborative working.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the value of public health approaches to addressing violence,<sup>16</sup> for example in Scotland. Public health approaches require collaboration from different fields and multi-agency involvement in 'diagnosing the problem, analysing underlying causes, examining what

<sup>14</sup> Kirchmaier & Villa Llera, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Silvestri, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Bellis et al., 2012.



works and developing solutions'. In Scotland, the development of an approach involving the police, social services, youth and community services, offending and probation teams, the NHS and local voluntary organisations, seems to be achieving results, with violent crime reaching a 41 year low in 2017.<sup>17</sup> The Scottish Violence Reduction Unit has developed a range of interventions focusing on preventing the onset and progression of violence, rehabilitating offenders, developing criminal justice approaches to reduce offending, and changing attitudes and behaviours on a societal, community and personal level.

## General violence or weapon-related interventions with greatest potential to reduce crime

### **Pulling levers**

Well-implemented problem-solving and focused deterrence strategies such as the US-based 'pulling levers' approach can have a positive impact on reducing violence.<sup>18</sup> These strategies target prolific or repeat offenders, combining improved access to support with strict enforcement (sometimes called a 'carrot and stick' approach). There is evidence from the US through Operation Ceasefire, and encouraging evidence from Scotland through the Violence Reduction Unit, of a positive effect of

these types of approaches on violence and homicide (US) and knife carrying (Scotland).<sup>19</sup> Successful implementation of these approaches involves:

- multi-agency working involving a range of partners, including law enforcement, social services and community-based practitioners
- analytical work to identify key offenders, groups and behaviour patterns
- developing a response to offenders that uses a variety of interventions, both access to services and support and criminal justice processes
- directly and repeatedly communicating with offenders to make them understand why they are receiving this special attention.

A similar focused deterrence approach has been piloted in three London boroughs. No effect was found on violent offending, but there were implementation weaknesses which highlighted the need to have mutual understanding, cooperation and support from all agencies.<sup>20</sup>

### **Early intervention and prevention programmes**

Programmes aimed at changing norms and values towards violence at a young age have shown some promising effects.<sup>21</sup> In the UK, these programmes are typically aimed at children aged 13 and over, however there are calls for programmes to work with children as

<sup>17</sup> Linden, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Braga et al., 2018; Braga & Weisburd, 2012; Braga et al., 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Williams et al., 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Davies et al., 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Ross et al., 2011.



young as eight<sup>22</sup>, due to the increasing number of children carrying knives.<sup>23</sup> Early intervention programmes that have shown promising effects include:

- child skills training<sup>24</sup> – teaching social and emotional skills, problem solving and anger management
- behavioural parent training – supporting parents to reinforce good behaviour
- mentoring<sup>25</sup> – with an emphasis on emotional support and role modelling
- after school recreational activities<sup>26</sup> – teaching skills in a structured and supervised environment.

### Restorative justice

Restorative justice<sup>27</sup> conferences – meetings between victims, offenders and sometimes family or community members – can reduce reoffending. Evidence suggests these approaches have a particularly significant effect on violent crimes, and that victims are significantly less likely to seek revenge against the offender.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Kinsella, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> See more about social skills training on the [Crime Reduction Toolkit entry](#)

<sup>25</sup> See more about mentoring on the [Crime Reduction Toolkit entry](#).

<sup>26</sup> See more about after school clubs on the [Crime Reduction Toolkit entry](#).

<sup>27</sup> See more about RJ interventions on the [Crime Reduction Toolkit entry](#).

<sup>28</sup> Strang et al., 2012; Livingstone et al., 2013.

## Specific knife crime interventions with limited crime reduction evidence

### Knife amnesties

Little research has accompanied the often large scale knife amnesties across the UK. Police data shows their impact is often limited or short term,<sup>29</sup> indicating that removing a proportion of knives from the streets does not address issues of availability, or the motivations underlying an individual's decision to carry knives.<sup>30</sup> Schemes such as **Bin a Blade** and **Word 4 Weapons** provide knife amnesty or surrender bins while helping to raise awareness of the dangers of knife carrying, though little is understood about who surrenders knives and their motivations for doing so, meaning our knowledge around the effectiveness of amnesties is currently limited.

### Community and educational interventions

There are several programmes across the country aiming to tackle knife crime, which are not necessarily early interventions, because they can be applied at various ages or stages of entry to the criminal justice system. Primarily centred on changing attitudes and behaviours towards knives,<sup>31</sup> they provide people with conflict resolution and emotional communication skills, diversionary activities such as sport, and other educational support.<sup>32</sup> Many projects that aim to divert young people away

<sup>29</sup> Metropolitan Police Service, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Eades, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Silvestri et al., 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Barry et al., 2018.



from knife crime and violence are often run by small charities at a local level, and are rarely evaluated.

## Enforcement interventions where evidence suggests careful use

### Stop and search

Stop and search is a police power which has the potential to reduce crime through immediate detection or confiscation of a weapon, or deterrence by raising the perceived risk of detection. Previous research has estimated that over 80 per cent of all arrests for offensive weapons in the Metropolitan Police Service resulted from a stop and search.<sup>33</sup> Such offences often only come to light as a result of officers searching people they suspect to be in possession of weapons. While the number of searches has declined nationally in recent years, the proportion that result in an arrest has increased to its highest ever level (17 per cent).<sup>34</sup> In 2017/18, of all those searches that led to an arrest, 14 per cent were for offensive weapons.

In terms of deterrence, there is consistent evidence to suggest that an everyday level of police activity, including stop and search, reduces crime.<sup>35</sup> Beyond this level, there is limited evidence to show increases in activity reduce crime. Analysis over a ten year period suggests stop and search has a marginal deterrent effect on violent

crime rates overall,<sup>36</sup> while an evaluation of a stop and search initiative aimed specifically at knife crime found no statistically significant crime reduction effects,<sup>37</sup> although the authors were not able to consider local targeting. Focused police patrol activity, including stops and stop and search, has been found to reduce crime in targeted violence hotspots in the US.<sup>38</sup>

While intelligence helps the targeting of stop and search, people's willingness to provide information is likely to be affected by how fair they perceive the police to be in their use of this power.<sup>39</sup> Young people, the economically disadvantaged, and people from some minority ethnic groups are significantly more likely to be stopped, and to be dissatisfied with police treatment during a stop.<sup>40</sup> If contact with officers is felt to be unfair, analysis also suggests it can undermine young people's perception that the police are 'on their side', reducing their willingness to comply with the law, and is associated with increased risk that they consider violence to be an option in achieving certain goals.<sup>41</sup>

### Sentencing

Despite recent changes to sentencing guidelines for knife offences aimed at deterring would-be offenders through increasing the severity of sentences, 72 per cent of those

<sup>36</sup> Tiratelli et al., 2018.

<sup>37</sup> McCandless et al., 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Weisburd et al., 2015; MacDonald et al., 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Bradford, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Bradford, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson et al., 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Fitzgerald, 1999.

<sup>34</sup> Home Office, 2018b.

<sup>35</sup> Boydston, 1975; Bradford, 2011.



convicted for knife and offensive weapons offences in the year ending March 2018 were first-time knife and weapons offenders.<sup>42</sup> It is very difficult to measure ‘what levels of punishment produce what levels of general deterrence’,<sup>43</sup> and the impact of custodial sentences on knife crime will need longer term evaluation.

For juveniles (10–18 years), prison alone has been found to significantly increase reoffending, compared to non-custodial sanctions such as community supervision with victim reparation, and community surveillance and aftercare.<sup>44</sup> Evidence also shows that educational attainment is lower for children with knife possession offences, which has been shown to be a risk marker for serious violence later in life.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

Knife crime perpetrators and victims are most likely to be males in late adolescence. Risk factors for serious violence and weapon carrying include adverse childhood experiences and poor educational attainment. Ethnicity has been found to have no significant effect on weapon carrying in the UK.

The most successful approaches to reducing violence include well-implemented problem-solving and focused deterrence strategies, such as the US-based ‘pulling levers’, which aim to

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<sup>42</sup> Ministry of Justice, 2018b.

<sup>43</sup> Halliday et al., 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Marsh et al., 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Justice, 2018a.

address the root causes of violence. Public health approaches, involving multiple agencies to develop a range of interventions, including prevention work for at-risk groups, as well as law enforcement activity directed at offenders, have been shown to have a positive impact.

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