KNIFE CRIME:
The Reality and Its Implications

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Introduction

In recent years, ‘knife crime’ has become a highly politicized ‘signal crime’ (Innes, 2004), with some even suggesting that the media fervor has primed us for a new ‘moral panic’ (see discussions in Squires, 2009; Squires and Kennison, 2010). While a series of high-profile stabbings have necessitated a governmental response\(^1\), the problem, as noted by Eades et. al., remains that

“‘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...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” (2007: 9)

This report is intended to address the concerns. Its purpose is to inform the public and political debate on this topic by providing a synthesis of statistical data, pertinent legislation and relevant academic scholarship in order to define the nature, extent, motivations for and causes of knife crime in the United Kingdom. Building off this foundation, it will then engage in a critical examination of current and potential strategies, concluding that the solution lies in developing a multi-faceted, strategic, proactive approach that addresses the systemic causes of youth violence rather than a reactive, enforcement approach.

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\(^1\) On February 2, 2011, Home Secretary Theresa May announced a funding package of £18,000,000 for anti-knife crime initiatives, stating 'Even in these tough economic times, there are some things that are too important not to do' (Home Office, 2011)
Defining the Problem

While there is no formal definition of ‘knife crime’ (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2009), it has nonetheless become shorthand in the media and political discourse for the much larger issue of youth violence (Eades et. al., 2007). Given its highly politicized nature, it is imperative to arrive at a working definition in order to generate an informed analysis of its extent and causes.

The London Metropolitan Police proffer one definition: the use of a knife or sharp implement to cause or threaten bodily harm (ICPR, 2009). While this definition is arguably the most pragmatic, it is somewhat narrow and does not account for the breadth of knife-related offences in UK statutes. For example, the Prevention of Crime Act 1953; the Restriction of Offensive Weapons Act, 1959 (as amended 1961); the Offensive Weapons Act, 1996; the Knives Act, 1997; the Criminal Justice Act, 1988 (as amended 2004; 2008); and the Violent Crime Reduction Act, 2006, all contain statutes dealing with knife-related offences (Eades et. al., 2007). According to the Crown Prosecution Service (2010), ‘knife crime’ can constitute any of the following:

- Possession of a knife without reasonable or lawful grounds, such as for work, national or religious purposes;
- The use of a knife or other sharp instrument in the commission of an offense;
- The possession, production or sale of flick knives, gravity knives, and replica samurai swords;
- The sale of a bladed implement (safety razors excluded) to an individual under the age of 18; and
- Using another individual to transport, harbour or hide this type of weapon

The uncomfortable reality, it seems, is that ‘knife crime’ is a much more complex issue (and encompasses a broader range of offences) than the media or political discourse would lead one to believe. Recognizing the broader scope of this issue is crucial, as it highlights not only the need for more extensive and comprehensive research on the subject (Eades et. al., 2007), but, most importantly, that it is not a simple problem with a simple solution. In truth, these delineations reveal the need to develop multi-faceted,
strategic responses that address the underlying socioeconomic factors that fuel and perpetuate youth violence and weapon carrying (Brohi, as quoted in ICPR, 2009). Therefore, the next section will attempt to utilize this comprehensive definition to critically analyze a series of relevant statistics in order to clarify the extent of the problem and provide a context for the subsequent evaluation of strategies.
Extent of the Problem

While statistics on knife crime may appear to be objective, they are influenced by several institutional factors, such as the amount of unreported or undiscovered instances of crime; changes in definitions; new legislation; and enforcement practices (Haggerty, 2001). Statistics, at best, help to construct a subjective ‘reality’ of crime based on selective interpretations of events (Berman, 2010). Caution should therefore be taken when attempting to make robust conclusions using recorded crime data. However, this should not preclude one from utilizing the data available from the British Crime Survey, Hospital Episode Statistics, Knife Crime Sentencing Quarterly Briefs, and the Youth Justice Board Survey to generate an approximation of the nature and extent of the problem.

The British Crime Survey

An important source of criminal justice data is the British Crime Survey (BCS), an annual report published by the Home Office documenting the level of crime experienced by individuals over the age of sixteen. The BCS divides violent crime into a variety of categories – homicide, attempted murder, threats, robbery, rape, and sexual assault (Berman, 2010), allowing for a more critical analysis of the nature of violent crime in the UK. It also surveys personal experiences, thus providing for a more comprehensive account of violent incidents not captured by official police statistics.

Provisional data for 2010 - 2011 indicates that 20% of all violent offences involved weapons and that 6% (32,714) involved a knife (Chaplin et. al., 2011). While this figure may seem relatively low, it should be noted that the BCS has separate categories for ‘stabbing implements’ and ‘glass/bottles’ when used as weapons. Therefore, aggregating the data from these categories suggests that the proportion of violent incidents involving knives or like instrument is more appropriately eleven percent. When compared to the number of violent incidents involving weapons, it is reasonable to deduce that knives were used in roughly fifty-five percent of all violent incidents.

Chaplin et. al. (2011) also found that:

- The number of incidents of knife possession decreased by 4% (from 10,888 to 10,450) in 2010-11 compared to 2009-10;
• Knife offences causing or threatening bodily harm decreased by 3% (from 14,306 to 12,978) in 2010-11 compared to 2009-10 and 10% compared to 2008-09;

• Firearms offences also decreased over this period, but were 20% (7,006 compared to 32,714) the level of knife offenses2;

• Knives were used in 36% percent of all homicides in 2010-11, an increase of 2% compared to 2009-10 (34%), but a 4% decline compared to 2008-09 (40%);

• Robberies involving a knife increased by roughly 4% (from 14,038 to 14,553) in 2010-11 compared to 2009-10, but decreased by 2% compared to 2008-09 (14,837);

• Knife-related homicides increased by 6% (from 201 to 214) in 2010-11 compared to 2009-10;

• Attempted murders involving a knife decreased by 10% (from 240 to 217) in 2010-11 compared to 2009-10 and 15% (from 254 to 217) compared to 2008-09;

• Threats with a knife decreased by 5% (from 1,469 to 1,395) in 2010-11 compared to 2009/10 and 7% (from 1,503 to 1,395) compared to 2008-09;

• Sexual assaults involving a knife seem to have experienced no change compared to 2009/10, but decreased by 26% (from 127 to 94) compared to 2008-09;

• Rapes involving the use of a knife increased by 8% (from 85 to 92) in 2010-11 compared to 2009-10, but decreased by 33% (from 127 to 85) when compared to 2008/09

While this data may point to certain trends, there is a need to exercise caution given its parameters. Not only are the figures for 2010-11 provisional, but the statistics also largely ignore the potential for variations across social groups and discount entirely youth under the age of sixteen. Given that the peak age of assault-related offending is

2 This figure has much to do with the accessibility of knives and the inaccessibility of guns in the United Kingdom (Eades et. al, 2007)
twelve to seventeen (Sehti. et. al., 2010), it is important to analyze the data within this context. To this end, it is necessary to triangulate this data with other sources in the hopes of increasing the reliability of the data and the validity of the analysis.

**Hospital Episode Statistics**

The Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) is a monthly NHS publication detailing all the hospital admissions in England and Wales, providing another potentially valuable source of information about the number of unreported incidents of knife-related assaults. From April 2010 to March 2011, there were 4,643 individuals admitted for assault by a sharp object, which represents a slight decrease from the same period in 2009-10 (4,689) and 2008-09 (4,914) (Hospital Episode Statistics, 2011). The London region had the highest admission rate per 100,000 at 62.7; almost double the next highest comparable – the Northwest at 35.4 (Ibid). The data seems to suggest that knife crime is particularly problematic for the London region. This data coincides with previous research conducted by Eades et. al. (2007), which concluded that incidents of knife crime are highest in and around large urban centres. While population densities may be one influencing factor, it undoubtedly is not the only one. Therefore a deeper examination is warranted to determine additional characteristics of large urban centres that contribute to this culture.

Again, we need to acknowledge the limitations of these figures. HES data only accounts for individuals admitted to hospital. Consequently, the data does not include those individuals who attended an Accident & Emergency department but were not subsequently admitted to hospital (Berman, 2010). More importantly, since it only accounts for injuries caused by the use of knives (e.g. assaults), it ignores the broader scope of crimes listed under our definition, such as the possession of a knife as an offensive weapon. So while it may provide a useful benchmark, it is important to consult other sources of data that account for such dimensions.

**Knife Crime Sentencing Quarterly Briefs**

Beginning in 2009, the Ministry of Justice began publishing a series of quarterly reports detailing the trends in sentencing for knife-related offenses (Berman, 2010). Similar to the MPS data, it was possible to identify aggregated figures for 2010 and 2009. According to the report, 21,450 people were tried for knife-related offenses in 2010; a
decrease of 15% from 25,216 in 2009. Controlling for age, the number of juveniles sentenced for knife-related offenses decreased by 35% (from 5002 to 3272) over this same period (Ministry of Justice, 2011). Yet, while these statistics might suggest a decline in the prevalence of knife crime, it might conversely indicate that our levels of detection have waned. In order to test this, it is necessary to consult one final source of data, the Youth Justice Board Survey.

Youth Justice Board Survey

Ipsos MORI produces an annual report for the Youth Justice Board of England and Wales analyzing trends in offending for youth between eleven and sixteen. The YJB also differentiates between students in ‘mainstream’ schooling and PRUs (Pupil Referral Units), thus allowing for an analysis of another possible mitigating factor influencing knife crime – differential educational opportunities. Analysis of the 2009 statistics revealed that seven percent of students reported to having been threatened with a knife; while three percent reported to having been stabbed (Anderson et al, 2010). These findings are consistent with the 2008 survey results and the 2006 Offending Crime and Justice Survey data.

Approximately one quarter (23%) of students in ‘mainstream’ schooling and more than half (54%) of students in PRUs had carried a knife within the past twelve months (Anderson et. al, 2010). These figures are almost identical to the previous year. The most common weapon was a penknife (15% in ‘mainstream’ vs. 31% in PRUs), while other students reported to have carried either a flick knife (5% in ‘mainstream’ vs. 22% in PRUs) or kitchen knife (4% in ‘mainstream’ vs. 15% in PRUs) (Anderson et. al., 2010). While these figures represent declines in relation to both 2008 and 2005, they still support the conclusion that “knife carrying is by no means unusual” (Brookman and Maguire, as quoted in ICPR, 2009: 6).

Anderson et. al. (2010) also found that:

- Knife-carrying amongst youth was higher than gun-carrying (23% vs. 21% in ‘mainstream’; 54% vs. 47% in PRUs);

- Only a small percentage of students carried knives on their person everyday (4% in ‘mainstream’ vs. 8% in PRUs); a figure consistent with previous years;
• Roughly 50% of students in ‘mainstream’ schooling had not carried a weapon at some point, an increase of 3% from 2008;

• Conversely, only 24% of students attending PRUs had not carried a weapon of any kind, an increase of 2% over 2008;

• Boys were much more likely to carry knives than girls (45% vs. 15% in ‘mainstream’; 71% vs. 43% in PRUs); and

• Mixed race youth were more likely to carry knives than other students (34% vs. 23% of White students, 15% of Black students, and 17% of Asian students, respectively)

These findings are significant in that they confirm that “knife-carrying is the most common form of knife-related offence” (Eades et. al., 2007: 11). Additionally, unlike the other sets of statistics presented, it demonstrates an increasing cultural prevalence for carrying knives amongst youth, which may suggest a predisposition to their use in the commission of a violent criminal offense.

Triangulating the data from these sources suggests that ‘knife crime’ is not increasing. The best indications are that it is either stable or on the decline. However, the statistics also indicate that not only do knives pose a significant problem in terms of weapon usage (Brookman and Maguire, 2003), but that knife crime is still a significant problem facing youth and in particular minority youth (Bowling and Philips, 2006; Eades et. al, 2007). Consequently, it also implies the need for a comprehensive understanding of its underlying causes in order to develop effective prevention strategies (ICPR, 2009).
Understanding the underlying causes of knife crime is unquestionably a critical step in developing an appropriate and strategic response. However, as an individual’s personal, social, psychological and cultural context is unique, combined with the complexity of the issue itself, it is unlikely that generating a unifying theory on the cause of youth delinquency is possible.

For example, explanations have ranged from what Alexander (2008) characterized as ‘stop-the-presses’ – violent video games, rap music, and media glorification of violence – to more grounded explanations of socioeconomic (Bowling and Philips, 2006), environmental (Marfleet, 2008; Zurawan, 2002; Firmin et. al, 2008) and psychological influences (Fagan and Wilkinson, 2000). For their part, Squires and Kennison (2010: 120) provide an overview of pertinent factors that contribute to an emerging ‘weapon culture’:

- the disintegration of communities and families;
- the failure of public services to combat increasing deprivation;
- the difficulties young men experience in finding a fulfilling job;
- racism – leading to discrimination – in schools, public services, and the workplace;
- the failure of schools to give their students the necessary tools to be successful – such as lessons in life skills or conflict resolution – or to promote values and self-esteem;
- the lack of positive role models within the family or wider society; and
- the absence of positive values, self-discipline, and respect for others

Another pertinent theory is given by Fagan and Wilkinson, who suggest that youth violence, in part, can be attributed to a ‘developmental ecology of violence’, whereby exposure to and acceptance of violence creates a predisposition to aggressive behaviour:
“beliefs about [weapons] and the dangers of everyday life are internalized in early childhood and shape the cognitive framework for interpreting events and actions. In turn, this context of danger, built in part around a dominating cognitive schema of violence creates, shapes and highly values the central role of [weapons] in achieving the instrumental goals of aggressive actions or defensive violence in specific social contexts” (2000: 177)

This ‘developmental ecology’ is often linked to one’s involvement in a ‘gang’; a common framing device for the issue of youth violence as a whole (Alexander, 2008; Squires, 2009). To be fair, research has demonstrated that “the social setting for the offenses of adolescents is the presence of delinquent peers... no fact of adolescent criminality is more important than what sociologists call its group context” (Zimring, 1998: 79-80).

Nevertheless, such activity is more appropriately understood as a symptom of a much larger and complex set of issues (Alexander, 2008). Core predictors such as poor parental ties (Marfleet, 2008), feelings of exclusion, and a lack of opportunities and education (Firmin et. al, 2008) must also be taken into consideration. A ‘gang’ is, first and foremost, a “social entity meeting the needs of its members rather than as a priori criminal or pathological” (Squires and Kennison, 2010: 126). Any criminal activity undertaken by such groups must be juxtaposed against the social, political, economic or cultural contexts that account for their formation (Alexander, 2008; Marfleet, 2008; Firmin et. al, 2008). As such, any approach that seeks to address ‘gang’ activity should not approach it as a ‘problem’, but instead seek methods of empowering such groups (Laureus, 2009) and encouraging them towards pro-social choices.

It is in this context that the commentary of Hales, Lewis and Silverstone (2006) is helpful. They suggest that the key to understanding the driving forces behind knife carrying is to acknowledge the existence of two distinct cultures. Firstly, an instrumental culture that involves the carrying of knives for their use in the commission of offenses. However, as only a small percentage of young people carry for this reason (Anderson et. al, 2010), it is pertinent to reflect upon the second, a complex criminal culture, which involves the use of knives to serve a protective or symbolic function.
**Status / Respect**

“Children who experience failure at school or other kinds of social exclusion could be looking for status by carrying a knife... ‘There is clearly a sense that this is an unequal society where you are blocked by the colour of your skin, that you achieve status not by getting a degree but by having a knife’” (Lemos, 2004: 8)

Approximately 4% of students in ‘mainstream’ schooling and 11% of students in PRUs carry knives for ‘street cred’ (Anderson et. al., 2010). Prior research has indicated that weapon carrying is especially prevalent among youth who have been socioeconomically deprived, excluded, or expelled from school (60% vs. 29% in ‘mainstream’ schooling; 70% vs. 54% in PRUs) (Ibid; Squires and Kennison, 2010). Blocked from more traditional forms of social and economic capital – such as education and employment – excluded youth may instead seek out the cultural capital (i.e. ‘respect’) that accompanies weapon possession and the social acceptance/sense of belonging/protection that accompanies gang membership (Anderson, 1999).

However, this street level culture has also created a “hostile, almost ‘hair-trigger’ culture of competitive masculinity... [where, given the presence of weapons,] real or imagined grudges rapidly turn into ‘shoot or be shot’ scenarios” (Squires and Kennison, 2010: 131). This assertion is supported by Short, who suggests that “out of concern for being disrespected, respect is often violated... people – especially young people – exaggerate the importance of symbols, often with life-threatening consequences” (1997: 65). Short is correct. Knives are symbols; mechanisms for those who experience socioeconomic deprivation or social marginalization to seize a small semblance of power wherever possible. As such, addressing this fact should be the focal point of an effective prevention strategy.

**Protection**

Anderson et. al (2010) found that almost a quarter (24%) of students in ‘mainstream’ schooling and forty-three percent of students in PRUs had carried a knife ‘for protection’, while 10% and 22%, respectively, suggested they carried a knife ‘in case I got into a fight’. Furthermore, the 2006 OCJS found that 85% of respondents said that ‘protection’ was the reason for carrying a knife (Berman, 2010). The data, then, appears to suggest that fear and the desire for self-preservation, rather than aggression, is a
key contributor to the problem of knife carrying: “The bottom line is fear… [it’s for] defense” (Lemos, 2004: 8; see also Marfleet, 2008).

Marfleet suggests that such feelings lead to a form of ‘replicative externality’ (2008: 84), whereby young people begin to carry weapons to offset feelings of insecurity brought on by the potential for victimization, a lack of confidence in the police (Bowling, 2008), or living in high crime neighbourhoods (Squires and Kennison, 2010). For their part, Anderson et. al. (2010) found that students who had been victims in the past were significantly more likely to carry a knife than those who had not (38% vs. 20% in ‘mainstream’ schooling; 70% vs. 51% in PRUs). While the carrying of a knife in this instance might be understandable, it may actually serve to escalate the problem. There are claims that “the dynamics of street youth culture are such that their presence may serve to escalate and perpetuate conflicts and increase the likelihood of serious injuries” (Squires and Kennison, 2010: 129). Consequently, counteracting this ‘fear’ factor (Kinsella, 2011) must be an integral part of any effective solution.

A review of the relevant literature suggests that a complex network of factors (on both the individual and collective level) contribute to this emerging ‘weapon culture’. Specifically concerning knife crime, it seems as though socioeconomic explanations are crucial to understanding the motivations for knife carrying and usage. This is most significant, as it sets the foundation for the central argument of this piece: that an enforcement approach to knife crime is both naïve and shortsighted. As Klockars suggests,

“the ‘war on crime’ is a war the police not only cannot win, but cannot in any real sense fight. They cannot win it because it is simply not within their power to change those things – such as unemployment, moral education, freedom, civil liberties, ambition, and the social and economic opportunities to realize them – that influence the amount of crime in any society” (2005: 446)
Solutions to the Problem

‘Knife crime’, by its very label, implies the need for a criminal justice response. However, Garland suggests that:

“a whole new infrastructure has been assembled at the local level... oriented towards a set of objectives and priorities – prevention, security, harm-reduction, loss-reduction, fear-reduction – that are quite different from the traditional goals of prosecution, punishment and ‘criminal justice’” (2001: 16-17)

Therefore, the solutions must go beyond simply crime and punishment (Eades et. al, 2007). It must encompass a multi-faceted approach that is primarily proactive and uses reactive enforcement as a last resort. Accordingly, it can be broken down according to the typology originally developed by Brantingham and Faust (1976):

• **Primary Preventions** – aimed to prevent violence – such as parenting programs; social development programs (such as sport and the arts); environmental conditions; educational programs; creating safe school environments; education;

• **Secondary Preventions** - aimed to reduce violence - such as legislation; police enforcement; working with at-risk youth; and gang intervention strategies; and

• **Tertiary Preventions** – aimed to reduce re-offending – such as mentoring programs; counseling; and restorative justice (ASGBI, 2011)

However, as previously identified by Klockars and Brohi, underlying these strategies must also be a concerted effort to address the deeper social, economic and cultural pressures that fuel such conflicts (Eades et. al, 2007; ICPR, 2009) if such a program is to be truly effective. In what follows, this framework will be used as a foundation to present some recommendations that could potentially improve on the government’s current approach and develop a more comprehensive response to the problem of knife crime.
On February 2, 2011, Home Secretary Theresa May announced a new funding package (and a renewed commitment) to address the problem of ‘knife crime’ in the United Kingdom (Home Office, 2011) following the publication of ‘Tackling Knife Crime Together: A Review of Local Anti-Knife Crime Projects’ by Brooke Kinsella. Building off the insights and conclusions of this report and other pieces of reputable scholarship, a series of recommendations focused on the idea of proactive intervention are presented in an effort to potentially develop a typology of best practices. Not surprisingly, many of these recommendations are not new, but align with those previously identified by other researchers, which, until most recently, have all too often been ignored.

Knife Crime As A Public Health Issue

Knife crime’ is an issue of public health. According to the World Health Organization, public health is defined as: “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 2011). Given the short and long-term physical, psychological and social effects of knife crime (Sehti et. al, 2010; ASGBI, 2011), including its fiscal toll on the health care industry – the NHS currently spends approximately £675,000,000 on treatment for injuries caused by violence, while a murder costs Londoners approximately £1,450,000 (ASGBI, 2011) – this characterization is most apt.

Understanding ‘knife crime’ through a public health lens would challenge society to address not only its symptoms, but also its root causes and negate the potential of knife carrying becoming a normalized part of British society. Most importantly, it recognizes that this issue is in fact a complex, multi-faceted set of problems that requires the attention of more than just law enforcement. It demands a coalition of stakeholders - “public health, accident and emergency and mental health services; primary care; the police; and other components of the criminal justice system” (Shepherd, as quoted in ICPR, 2009: 41) - collaborating on a long-term, strategic approach. Strategies must engage all community partners, particularly youth; counteract socioeconomic deprivation; utilize both police and medical practitioners in educational capacities; and include a system of data collection and sharing, monitoring and review to ensure that our responses stay current, proportional, organic and effective.
A Shift in Policing Focus

The need for law enforcement is axiomatic – legislation against knife crime allows the government to act and simultaneously provide a ‘safety guarantee’ upon which their public trust is built. Enforcement also establishes the moral parameters and norms that govern proper civil conduct. However, the current enforcement strategies appear to be less than effective (see Eades et. al, 2007) and may even be counter-productive. Under the government’s Tackling Knives and Serious Youth Violence Action Programme, more than 250,000 stop and search procedures resulted in the seizure of 5000 weapons. While this figure might seem high, it represents a success rate of only 2% (Sehti et. al., 2010). Hence, while stop and search is intended to provide a ‘safety guarantee’, it may have iatrogenic effects, compounding the problem by generating feelings of discrimination, victimization and resentment among the other 98% towards the police. While there is an obvious need for “periodic ‘crackdowns’ when there is evidence of weapons being carried in a particular area” (Brookman and Maguire, 2003: 34), this should be undertaken only after the development of a collaborative data-sharing network and appropriate technologies to ensure a real-time, data-driven, proportional and effective response (of last resort) to threats to public health and safety.

As opposed to focusing on reactive enforcement measures, there should be a premium placed upon the development of police-community and police-youth partnerships that engage community partners in public safety programs; police and youth forums for sharing grievances, discussing solutions and building trust; and a consistent level of police presence in schools to connect with and mentor at-risk youth. The goal of the police should be first and foremost to counteract the ‘fear factor’ (Kinsella, 2011) and mistrust that motivates youths to carry and use weapons. These collaborative partnerships could also lead to educational programs delivered by police officers in conjunction with school personnel to raise awareness about the dangers and consequences of youth violence and the alternatives available to them; an integral part of any viable solution according the Brookman and Maguire (2003).

Increasing the Use of Restorative Justice Initiatives

While the government has focused on imprisonment as a strategic response and one cannot dispute the need for this approach in certain instances, given its questionable effectiveness, it cannot be the primary response of the justice system. Research has
demonstrated that youth are less likely to consider the consequences of their actions, so the prospect of imprisonment may not act as a deterrent for them (Eades et. al, 2007). Furthermore, prisons have been found to be criminogenic (Bowling, 2011) – engraining the label of ‘deviant’ through shared experience and increasing the likelihood of becoming criminally affluent (Morgan, 2002) – as evidenced by a recidivism rate among young offenders of roughly seventy percent (Natale, 2010).

Thusly, restorative justice should occupy a more central role in our justice system, particularly in relation to cases involving youth offenders. Restorative justice entails involving all affected parties (feeding back into the previous multi-agency approach) and working towards repairing the social harm done by an offense and the re-integration of both victim and offender (Zehr, 1999). Sherman et. al (2000) found that youth who participated in these initiatives were less likely to re-offend compared to those who attended court; while Daly (2003) showed that offenders had a higher respect for the police and the law and the victims a higher level of recovery. Therefore, it seems that restorative justice provides a certain level of catharsis that may have a polarizing effect upon attitudes and behaviours (Braithwaite, 2003).

Moreover, restorative justice acknowledges and actively attempts to counteract the relationship between social exclusion, victimization, crime and imprisonment through the use of diversionary programs, access to medical treatment, and community sentences (Morgan and Newburn, 2007). As such, it has the potential to both punish youth offenders for their transgressions, but also mitigate the “recruitment of delinquents into disciplinary careers” (Foucault, 1977: 300).

**Changing Environmental Conditions**

In 1992, Davis recounted the restructuring of the City of Los Angeles in order to ‘design out’ opportunities for crime and vagrancy, which also has relevance here. Not only has the manipulation of the physical environment (through increased surveillance and metal detectors on school premises) been suggested following several high-profile violent incidents on North American school campuses (see Commonwealth of Virginia, 2007; School Community Safety Advisory Panel, 2008), but it also has other applications outside architecture. For example, there is research that suggests reducing the sale of alcohol can have an effect on the level of violent crime, which has shown effectiveness in dealing with soccer hooliganism (Sehti et. al., 2010). Additionally, John Cornock’s ‘anti-stab knife’ effectively designs out its capacity to inflict a fatal stab wound (BBC,
2009). If it were to become the common kitchen knife in London homes, it could lead to a potentially marked decrease in fatal stab wounds, similar to the detoxification of gas and the reduction in suicides (Crawford, 2007). While the feasibility of the latter is a matter of debate, this should not detract from the potential gains that could result from a concerted attempt to ‘design out’ opportunities for crime.

**Investment in Diversionary Activities**

Currently, the Youth Justice Board commits a mere 5% of its budget to preventative activities (Laureus, 2009). However, the government has recently pledged a funding package of £10,000,000 precisely for this purpose. This is fortunate, as these activities, such as sports or the arts, also serve as social development programs, which have been shown to have a positive effect on anti-social, aggressive and violent behaviour, feelings of exclusion and weapon carrying (Sehti et. al., 2010). For example, Morgan and Newburn (2007) found that youth involved in Youth Inclusion Panels (YIPs) and Youth Inclusion and Support Panels (YISPs), which incorporated such activities, showed fewer arrests and a decrease in the severity of offenses committed by those involved. While the proceeding discussion will focus primarily on the benefits of sport, this should not detract from the fact that investment in other such programmes, like the arts, should also be considered.

Investment in sport promotes health, physical fitness, and fosters social relationships between youth, community partners and their communities as a whole. Athletic activities are ideal for “developing discipline and working towards a goal; learning to work with and better understand peers; understand concepts of fairness and justice; developing the ability to deal with setbacks” (Laureus, 2009: 7). Through sports and the arts, youth can develop learning and work habits that are transferable to all aspects of life. Diversionary activities like sports provide positive alternatives to ‘gang’ membership; alternative forms of cultural capital; positive role models (such as police officers, sports figures, and surrogate adults) to act as mentors; peers to emulate and promote social inclusion; the development of relationships which may lead to their integration in the community and future employment prospects; and, most pragmatically, they get them off the streets.
Furthermore, involvement in contact/combat sports, such as boxing and rugby, appeal to youth (particularly young men) and offer them a healthy outlet for aggression, and rich learning about self-discipline, anger management, personal and social boundaries, and self-regulation. Most importantly, it may provide the same level of excitement, competitiveness, and cultural capital as its hostile street-level counterpart, with the caveat that it does not entail putting their life in jeopardy (Ibid). In this way, sport actively works to counteract the ‘weapons culture’ by providing not only a diversionary activity, but also a social, cultural and educational milieu to gain respect, acceptance and empowerment.

**Developing Healthy School Environments**

Schools must become active participants in the fight against knife crime and strong advocates for youth. Youth spend roughly a third of their day in a school setting. As such, it is a prime location for the learning of behaviours and the developing of social relationships. This educational opportunity is missed when students are excluded or engaged in programs that do not meet their needs or circumstances. As such, a premium should be placed on creating school environments that addresses the diversity that exists in society, which begins with providing youth with a sense of social inclusion and providing them with the tools and programs to succeed.

Statistics show that approximately 89% of male prisoners and 84% of female prisoners left school before the age of 16, while a further 52 and 71 percent possess no formal qualifications (Player, 2011). Formal education opens doors and breaks down social barriers that might facilitate youth involvement in criminality (Lemos, 2004). Therefore, keeping children in school, particularly in PRUs, needs to be a key component of any comprehensive strategy.

Educational programs are also vitally important. For example, the Be Safe Project – which goes into schools and addresses topics such as Self Defense; The Law; and Implications of Knife Use – has been found to significantly reduce the incidence of offending and weapon carrying amongst those students that have taken part (“Be Safe for Schools”). This point supports Brookman and Maguire’s (2003) conclusion that educational programs represent the best first defense against knife carrying. Schools, social agencies, businesses and anti-knife crime charities should be encouraged to extend these types of programs to work together to create mutually beneficial working relationships and provide opportunities to promote community engagement, personal
safety, and personal empowerment. Schools need to explore alternative programs to reduce school drop out rates; develop ‘last chance’ programs designed for youth who have left school without qualifications; and practical school to work programs that allow youth to learn practical skills required for graduation and employment.
The problem of knife crime is not a simple one with a simple solution. This report has highlighted the fact that knife crime is a much more complex issue than the media or political discourse would lead one to believe. As a corollary, it has put forth the position that our focus should rest with proactive intervention, with enforcement used only as a strategy of last resort. As Eades et. al. note:

“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... while knives make an expression of violence potentially more damaging or lethal, 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” (2007: 31)

Adopting a primarily reactive model of crime prevention is both naive and short-sighted. Knife crime should be addressed through the adoption of a proactive prevention model which seeks to ameliorate the social, economic and cultural pressures that fuel and perpetuate youth violence. Otherwise, this issue will continue to be a cause of concern, both in the halls of Parliament and, most importantly, on our streets.


“Be Safe for Schools” http://www.knifecrimes.org/school-info.html


Hospital Episode Statistics (2011) http://www.hesonline.nhs.uk/


Player, E. (2011) “Prisons” King’s College London March 8, 2011


Sherman, L. et. al. (2000) “Recidivism Patterns in the Canberra Reintegrative Shaming Experiments” Centre for Restorative Justice, Australian National University


