

Knife crime

Why study knife crime?

Knife crime seems like a major problem in Scotland. As critical thinkers however we must not take this at face value. Instead we must:



- Assess the evidence and decide for ourselves if it constitutes a ‘problem’.
- Examine the interests of different stakeholders – politicians and the media, among others – in representing the ‘problem’.
- Analyse the social and cultural processes involved in the ‘problem’.

What do we mean by ‘knife crime’?

‘Knife crime’ is an umbrella term. It includes offences where knives are used to inflict injury on another person, such as assault or homicide, or crimes involving the possession of a weapon. There are offences that are specifically related to knife crime. These include:

- the carrying of a knife in a public place without reasonable excuse or lawful authority (section 49 Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 1995)
- the selling of knives to young people under 16 years old, and the sale of knives to people under 18 years old which are not designed for a domestic purpose (section 141A Criminal Justice Act 1988).

Is knife crime a problem in Scotland?

The Scottish Government produces various sources of statistical information about crime which can help us answer this question focussed on knife crime.

Source: [Scottish Crime and Justice Survey \(Main Findings\)](#)

- is conducted every two years across the whole of Scotland
- is a large-scale social survey (12,000 face-to-face interviews with adults over 16 living in private households)
- asks people in Scotland about their experiences and perceptions of crime

What does this survey tell us?

- This survey estimates that weapons (including knives) were used in about 23% of violent crimes.
- Where the victim reported that the offender had a weapon in any crime (the victim does not always know since he/she might not see the offender), a knife was the most commonly used weapon (39%).

But: we need to bear in mind that these estimates are based on quite small sample sizes: violent crime in Scotland is falling, so the number of victims of violent crime that could even be asked in the survey is getting smaller every year.

Source: [Scottish Government, Statistical Bulletin, Homicide 2013-2014](#)

This source presents statistics on recorded homicides by Police Scotland in year 2013-2014:

- Sharp objects were the most commonly used instruments in homicide, used in 46% of such crimes in Scotland.

Homicide: an umbrella term for any unlawful killing, and includes murder and culpable homicide (in other countries, culpable homicide is called 'manslaughter')

But, although 'sharp objects' includes knives, it also includes *other* sharp objects (such as screwdrivers, broken bottles etc). So we do not know exactly how commonly used knives were in homicide.

Source: [Scottish Government, Statistical Bulletin Recorded Crime in Scotland 2013-2014](#)

This source presents statistics on recorded crimes and offences by Police Scotland in year 2013-2014:

- Crimes of handling an offensive weapon *decreased* by 5% from 2012-2013 to 2013-2014.

But, recorded crime can be affected by changes in police priorities. A decrease can therefore reflect a decrease in police activity rather than a 'real' decrease'.

Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that knife crime still constitutes only a small proportion of all crime in Scotland, and that gun-crime is comparatively low compared to other countries (e.g. England, United States).

Which groups are most likely to commit knife crime?

Research highlights that knife carrying is a particular problem among young people.

[The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime \(ESYTC\)](#) – The ‘Edinburgh Study’, as it is referred to – is a major **longitudinal study** of around 4,300 young people who started secondary school in Edinburgh in 1998.

- Data from this survey reveal that 38% of 12- to 17-year-olds (males and females) report carrying a knife at some point.
- Research has also shown that knife (and other weapon) carrying and use can be linked to territorialism and youth ‘gang’ issues ([Bannister et al 2010](#)).

Longitudinal study: a study that involves repeated observations of the same variables over a long period of time, often decades

*See [SCCJR ‘Theories and Causes of crime’](#) section on youth crime for more information about the Edinburgh Study, including its key findings.

Why do people carry knives in the first place?

Research suggests two motivators influencing young people to carry a knife:

- The acquisition of **respect**. This is the perception that carrying a knife can inspire fear in others.
- Fear of being **victimised**. This fear might exist because a person has been victimised in the past, but it might also be because a lot of people fear crime anyway. This fear is coupled with the belief that carrying a knife offers protection against any potential victimisation.

Respect: Social status or ‘street cred’.

Victimisation: becoming a victim of crime.

What role do the media play?

Research demonstrates that the media often focus disproportionately on more ‘spectacular’ and ‘topical’ areas, leading to a perception that certain crimes are more of a problem than they are in reality.

- In criminology researchers use the term **moral panic** to describe media responses to crime that are sensationalist and out of proportion to the risk posed.

Moral panic: a disproportionate response from the media, public or politicians to a crime.

- Often this results in the involvement of politicians and other social groups to argue for ‘something to be done’.

NB. While it is important to investigate the **causes of crime** it is also important to recognise the broader forces at work in shaping our **perceptions of crime**.

Preventing or reducing knife carrying: what does the research tell us?

The research suggests that in order to reduce knife crime, various responses are needed and these are often used in conjunction with others:

- criminal justice measures
- diversionary activities
- education and awareness-raising approaches.

Criminal Justice Measures

Custodial sentences

The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill 2013 amends the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1995 to increase the maximum custodial sentence for the unlawful possession of a knife from four years to five years.

The rationale is that this increase will have a deterrent effect.

- ✓ Lengthier custodial sentences may deter some people who, in light of knowing about this lengthy custodial sentence, weigh up the decision that any ‘street cred’ they may gain from carrying a knife is simply not worth the consequences.
- ✗ However, it is unlikely to deter those who are very fearful: for these people, their fear overtakes any knowledge and understanding of the consequences of knife carrying. These people might carry a knife irrespective of the consequences.
- ✗ In addition, other research on deterrence suggests that it is the risk of getting caught that deters people from offending in general, not the severity of punishment. This suggests that just by increasing custodial sentences, we are not likely to see a reduction in knife crime ([Scottish Government 2014](#)).

Stop and search

Police Scotland can stop and search a person if they suspect (and have reasonable grounds to suspect) that the person is carrying something prohibited, such as an offensive weapon (e.g. a knife) or drugs.

- ✓ It may deter some young people from carrying a knife, who weigh up the decision that any ‘street cred’ they may gain from carrying a knife is simply not worth the other consequences.

- × Some researchers have expressed concern that the over-use of stop and search might either create or worsen existing tensions between young people and the police, and create or worsen feelings of mistrust.

Knife amnesties

“Knife amnesties are defined periods where people are encouraged to give up their knives to the police, without being prosecuted for carrying a knife” ([Scottish Government 2014](#))

- ✓ Knife amnesties may have an important awareness-raising function ([Eades et al 2007](#)).
- × However, their effectiveness has been questioned. Even if a sizeable number of knives are seized, this tends to represent a marginal proportion of the total number of knives available.

e.g. in the 2006 knife amnesty in England and Wales 89,864 knives were collected, but this represents only 0.0041 knives in homes, assuming that each of the 22 million households in England and Wales had only a single knife ([Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research \(SCCJR\) 2013](#)).

Diversionsary Activities

Sport

- Engagement in sport can help keep young people busy with a positive distraction.
- Sport can give young people a greater sense of control, direction and respect.

Diversionsary activities: activities that move young people away from aimless or anti-social activities into ‘pro-social’ or more positive ones.

Mentoring programmes

- These are often between a young person and a positive adult role model, and this is a protective factor against violence.
- These can also be between peers, which might build self-confidence and self-esteem, which are also identified as being **protective factors** against violence.

Protective factor: factor that reduces the risk of something: in this case, protective factors are those which reduce the risk of a (young) person becoming involved in violence.

*[See SCCJR report ‘What works to reduce knife crime?’](#)

Education-Based Interventions

Generally, these aim to ensure that young people have a greater awareness of both the dangers and consequences of carrying a knife.

These include:

- Awareness of the potential impact of knife crime on all parties involved: the physical, emotional and legal consequences.
- Awareness of the possible or likely punishments if caught with a knife.
- Awareness that carrying a knife actually increases rather than decreases one's risk of victimisation: therefore carrying a knife does not protect you, it gives you less protection.

However, since many young people who carry a knife do so out of fear, it makes sense that this fear is addressed. How can interventions do this?

- Reduce young people's perceived vulnerability to victimisation: Give young people the facts about crime and risk of victimisation, to counter media messages which might suggest otherwise.
- Reassure young people that the police and other agencies are working hard to keep them safe, even if 'tough' criminal justice measures might appear to present them as working in opposition to young people, so there is no need for 'self-protection'. Emphasise that carrying a knife increases risk of victimisation, rather than decreasing it ([all SCCJR 2013](#)).

Case Study: [No Knives, Better Lives](#)

No Knives, Better Lives (NKBL) is a **Scottish example of an education-based initiative**, which was launched in 2009 by the Scottish Government. It works with a range of local partners throughout Scotland, educating young people about the dangers and consequences of carrying knives, and instead aims to promote positive choices.



The bigger picture?

This worksheet focuses on knife crime. However, we should be careful about isolating weapons (including knives) from the wider issue of violence. Over-emphasising the problem of 'knife crime' might distract us from the broader context in which weapon-related violence, and violence in general take place ([Silvestri et al 2009](#)). Therefore, in understanding how we go about preventing or reducing knife crime, we need to think about how *violence in general* can be prevented or reduced (See [SCCJR 'Theories and causes of crime'](#)).

Further Reading

Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (Silvestri, A., Oldfield, M., Squires, P. and Grimshaw, R.) (2009) *Young People, Knives and Guns*. Available from: <http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Gunandknife.pdf>

Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (Eades, C., Grimshaw, R., Silvestri, A., Soloman, E. (2007) '*Knife Crime*': *A review of the evidence and policy*. Available from: http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/ccjs_knife_report.pdf

Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime. Available from: <http://www.esytc.ed.ac.uk/>

No Knives Better Lives (NKBL) website. Available at <http://noknivesbetterlives.com/>