

Knife Crime: Time to Blunt Knives

Barely a day passes without another fatal stabbing or knife attack causing serious injury.

In my last three months, sitting as a circuit judge at Luton Crown Court, I heard three separate trials involving stabbings of young teenagers. One fifteen year-old was chased onto a railway bridge by five boys, kicked and punched and then stabbed in the back with a kitchen knife. The defendants who were convicted of wounding with intent were aged between thirteen and fifteen. In another trial, seven youths, some wearing ski masks and balaclavas, ambushed a fifteen year-old boy walking home from school. He suffered five deep, life-threatening incisional wounds, including a punctured lung, and only survived after being air-lifted to the Royal London Hospital. One eye witness described him bleeding “like a watering can”. The four boys arrested were aged between twelve and fourteen. In the other case, a student near a college received kitchen knife wounds to his head, chest, hand, leg and foot. It was only chance and excellent medical care that meant these young defendants were charged with wounding with intent and not murder – had the knives entered an inch to one side, vital organs would have been punctured or arteries would have been severed with fatal results. These offences often seem motiveless. One boy was stabbed because he had an argument with another boy several years previously at junior school.

There is no doubt that there has been a surge in serious knife attacks, especially by teenagers on teenagers. The latest national crime statistics for England and Wales show an alarming increase in knife crime. In 2017 – 2018, police recorded 40,147 offences involving knives or sharp instruments, a 16% increase and the highest number since 2011. The previous year’s total was itself a 22% increase. In 2017 - 2018, the number of homicides where a knife or sharp instrument was used increased by 26% (from 209 to 264 offences). In the year ending March 2018, there were 21,044 disposals (police cautions, court convictions or guilty pleas) for possession of a knife or offensive weapon. Juveniles (aged 10-17) were the offenders in 21% of cases.¹

The Met Police statistics for 2017 show knife crime offences in London are up by 21% (12,115 to 14,680 offences) and knife crime with injury offences are up by almost 6% (4,446 to 4,700 offences). In one week in February 2018, Met police officers seized 265 knives. In 2018, there were 139 murders in London. That total included over 73 stabbings and 14 shootings.² In Bedfordshire, where I sat as a circuit judge, in one two-month period in 2018, there were seventy-seven knife related offences. Forty-four of those resulted in injury. In 2018, tragically three stabbing victims in Luton have died. Many of these offences are committed by teenage boys on other teenage boys.

There has been an even more significant increase in hospital admissions resulting from knife crime. In England, between April 2017 and March 2018 there were 12,412 finished consultant episodes (FCEs) due to ‘Contact with knife, sword or dagger’. The comparable figure for the period between April 2016 and March 2017 was 11,144 and between April 2015 and March 2016, 6,115. In other words, over a three-year period, the number of hospital admissions doubled. In addition, during 2017/18, 5,053, FCEs were recorded in English hospitals due to assault by a sharp object.³ The

¹ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number SN4304, Knife crime in England and Wales, 9 November 2018.

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-46540182> It is the highest figure since 2008.

³ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/hospital-admitted-patient-care-activity/2017-18>

number of admissions for firearms related injuries over the same period was small in comparison and has not increased significantly (570 in 2015/16, 498 in 2016/17 and 588 in 2017/18). A study of victims treated in the major trauma centre at the Royal London Hospital shows that 25% of knife injury victims were of school age. The average age was eighteen. It was common place for victims to have between five and nine stab wounds. The number of stab wounds treated in the unit has doubled since 2012.⁴

Ten years ago, Sir Igor Judge, shortly before becoming Lord Chief Justice, said, "Every weapon carried about the streets, even if concealed from sight, even if not ... intended to be used ... represents a threat to public safety and public order. That is because even if concealed, even if carried only for bravado, or from some misguided sense that its use in possible self-defence might arise, it takes but a moment of irritation, drunkenness, anger, perceived insult or something utterly trivial, like a look, for the weapon to be produced. Then we have mayhem and offences of the greatest possible seriousness follow, including murder, manslaughter, grievous bodily harm, wounding and assault. All those offences have victims."

The effect on the lives of victims who survive such attacks and their families is obvious, but there is also a financial cost. There are no accurate estimates of the cost to the NHS of treating victims of knife attacks but it must be large. A Home Office Report states that the average cost of a murder is over £3 million in social, economic and direct costs to the NHS, police and criminal justice agencies.⁵ In 2015, the average annual cost of keeping an offender in a secure children's home was £204,000. The average cost of keeping a youth in a young offender institution was £75,000.

The reasons for the increase in violent crime are complex. There are many causes. The police say that cuts in the number of officers have led to an increase in crime. Among teenage boys, lack of positive male role models is often significant. Younger male defendants are often accompanied to court by their mothers or grandmothers. The support of male relatives is rare. The false camaraderie of gangs may provide a substitute for a lack of love at home. There are often issues of status and kudos. "Respect" and "ratings". Boredom and a herd instinct are other factors. Drill music posted on YouTube and social media undoubtedly heightens tensions. Many boys say they carry knives out of fear. "I needed it for my own protection" or "I was frightened going out of my own area." Yet carrying a knife dramatically increases the risk of injury. About one half of all stab victims seen at the Royal London Hospital were injured by knives taken by them themselves to the scene.

In 2017, the appalling tragedy of Grenfell Tower needlessly cost 71 lives. Too late, and too slowly, the causes of that fire are being investigated and, hopefully, addressed. Yet every year, even more young Londoners die or are seriously injured in knife attacks. That is a public health emergency. If a single disease killed that many people, the best minds in medical research would be looking for a cure.

Much has been done to combat knife crime. It is already illegal to sell knives, axes or swords to anyone aged under eighteen. Possession in a public place of an article with a blade or which is sharply pointed, without a good reason, has long been a criminal offence which carries a maximum sentence of four years imprisonment. Possession of blades or pointed items on school premises is a separate offence. Anyone convicted of a second knife offence faces a mandatory minimum custodial

⁴ The Guardian, 7 November 2018.

⁵ The Times, 25 July 2018. It appears that the hospital admission of a victim of knife crime may be recorded in either category and that the totals should be added to arrive at the true total.

sentence. In June 2018, the Sentencing Council issued a new Definitive Guideline with tougher sentences for knife crime. The police are taking further steps to prevent internet sales to young people. In Bedfordshire, many local shops put such knives on shelves which are out of reach of customers. The police have made available metal detecting arches for any schools which want them. Despite reduced resources, the police, the youth offending service, schools and others are doing excellent educational and awareness work about the dangers of knife crime. The Metropolitan Police are piloting a deferred prosecution scheme for less serious offences as it searches for new ways to stop violence. In June 2017, Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, published a Knife Crime Strategy for London and has since given his support for a “public health approach”, like that which the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit successfully pioneered in Glasgow. However, these measures have had almost no effect on the availability of knives to youths.

Although the underlying causes may be complex, the reason for the increase in stabbings is simple. Far more young teenagers are carrying knives. Often, they do so without thinking about or appreciating the consequences. Among some groups, it is almost routine. In the past, boys who fought punched or kicked their foes. Now it is common to use long pointed kitchen knives which penetrate deep into the body. A few of the blades carried are “Rambo” knives, “Zombie” knives or samurai swords. My experience though is that they are a small minority. The vast majority are ordinary kitchen knives. Every kitchen contains long pointed knives which are potential murder weapons. Any boy can remove a lethal knife from a drawer in his mother’s kitchen or that of a friend’s mother and take it out onto the street.

So, although there is no single, simple solution to knife crime, there are basic steps which could be taken. First, we should change the design of kitchen knives. Why do we need 8 or 10-inch kitchen knives with points? Butchers and fishmongers do, but how often, if at all, does a domestic chef use the point of an 8 or 10-inch knife? Rarely. Yes, we need short pointed knives to fillet fish or pierce meat, but they are less likely to be lethal. Any knife can cause an injury, but slash wounds from blades are rarely fatal. It is the points of long knives which cause life threatening and fatal injuries.

Further legislation is always a last resort, but why can’t all those with any role – manufacturers, shops, police, local authorities, the government – act together to reduce the sale of long pointed knives and provide an alternative of knives with rounded ends? The discount shop Poundland has stopped selling kitchen knives. It might be that an agreed pricing differential – say increasing the price of long pointed knives by £5, in comparison with rounded knives, would reduce the number of lethal knives sold. After all, a 5p charge for single-use plastic shopping bags reduced their use in the seven main retailers from 7.6 billion to 1 billion (a reduction of 86%) in four years. In 1998, when paracetamol overdoses were one of the major methods of suicide, legislation made manufacturers and shops reduce the pack sizes of paracetamol. That measure was followed by significant reductions in deaths due to paracetamol overdose. Changes in the design of kitchen knives sold would have a similar effect.

In conjunction with that proposal, the government or police could organise programmes for owners of kitchen knives which are legally owned to have them modified, with points being ground down into rounded ends. Arrangements with high street key-cutters, combined with a publicity campaign and small financial incentives, would undoubtedly reduce the number of lethal knives in circulation. It might be that payments of £5 to retailers and £5 for each knife which is blunted would be effective. Financial incentives would lead to parents and youths de-commissioning weapons, rather than them being used on the streets. The costs would be minimal when compared with the cost of investigating any major crime.

There have always been stabbings. There will always be stabbings, but too many young lives are being lost needlessly. Those who survive knife attacks carry physical and psychological scars. The lives of families, communities, and not forgetting the young offenders who receive lengthy sentences on conviction, are blighted by the ready availability of such knives. Urgent, radical, steps must be taken to reduce the number of knives being carried.

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