

## A Way of Reducing Knife Crime?

Barely a day passes without another fatal stabbing or knife attack causing serious injury. In Wolverhampton, fifteen-year old Keelan Wilson died from multiple stab wounds. In Northampton, seventeen-year old Louis-Ryan Menezes was stabbed to death in broad daylight in a crowded street. In separate incidents in Sheffield, a fifteen year-old, a nineteen year-old and an older man were all found dying from stab wounds. In Ipswich, seventeen year-old Tavis Spencer Aitkens was ambushed and stabbed to death. In London, so far this week, a man has been stabbed to death near Turnpike Lane on June 9<sup>th</sup>, a 14 year-old boy has been charged with the murder of a man knifed in Chelsea and on Sunday evening, there were three London stabbings within two hours. Forty-three boys or young men have already lost their lives in knife attacks in London this year. In Bedfordshire, where I sat as a circuit judge, in the last two months, there have been seventy-seven knife related offences. Forty-four of those resulted in injury. This year, tragically three stabbing victims in Luton have died.

In my last three months, 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 his bleeding as being “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 could have been punctured or arteries could 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.

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.”

There is no doubt that since then there has been a surge in knife crime. In 2017, the police recorded 39,598 violent and sexual offences involving a knife or sharp instrument, a 22% increase compared with the previous year. That was the highest total since 2011, the earliest year for which comparable data are available. The past three years have each seen a rise in the number of recorded offences involving knives or sharp instruments.

In some circles, the carrying of knives by youths is almost routine. The reasons are undoubtedly complex. Offenders often say, "I needed it for my own protection" or "I was frightened going out of my own area." There are often issues of status and kudos. There is perhaps a herd mentality. Many argue that the absence of positive male role models for young boys is an important factor. Younger male defendants are often accompanied to court by their mothers or grandmothers. The support of male relatives is rare.

Much has been done to combat knife crime. 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 sentence. Last week a new Sentencing Council Definitive Guideline with tougher sentences for knife crime came into force. It is illegal to sell knives, axes or swords to anyone aged under eighteen. 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.

However, these measures have almost no effect on the availability of knives to youths. A few of the blades carried are "Rambo" knives, "Zombie" knives or Samurai Swords. They though are a very small minority. The vast majority of knives carried by youths are ordinary kitchen knives. Every kitchen contains lethal knives which are potential murder weapons. So, it is very easy for any youth who wants to obtain a knife to take it from the kitchen drawer in his home or that of one of his friends.

But why we do need eight or ten inch kitchen knives with points? Butchers and fishmongers do, but how often, if at all, does a domestic chef use the point of an eight or ten inch knife? Rarely. Yes, we need short knives with points to fillet fish or pierce meat, but they are less likely to be lethal. Any blade 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.

I would urge all those with any role in relation to knives – manufacturers, shops, the police, local authorities, the government – to consider further regulating the sale of long pointed knives and replacing them with rounded ends. At the very least, shops should sell alternatives with rounded ends. Perhaps, the police could organise programmes whereby owners of kitchen knives, which have been lawfully bought for culinary purposes, could be modified, with the points being ground down into rounded ends. If such measures were taken, in time, the number of fatal and life-threatening injuries caused by knife crime would reduce substantially.

There have always been stabbings. There will always be stabbings. It is impossible to prevent them. There will always be fights among youths, but it is the carrying and ready use

of large pointed knives which has led to the increase in death and serious injury. Punches, kicks, attacks with blunt wood or concrete objects injure victims, but the results are less likely to be severe or fatal.

Young lives are needlessly being cut short. 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. Has the time come to do something?

Nic Madge is a retired Circuit Judge