Blade Britain and Broken Britain: 
Knife crime among young people in Great Britain today

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The summer of 2008 in Great Britain was marked by a much mediatized spate of knife crimes that occurred in the capital and elsewhere. The right-wing tabloid, the Daily Mail, used the headline “Blade Britain’s knife epidemic spirals out of control”.1 By the end of the year, there had been 42 fatal stabbings of teenagers in Great Britain, of which 22 in London. At the same time, the expressions “Broken Britain” and “Broken society” were used more and more by the media and certain politicians to sum up the social ills of the country and, in particular, dysfunctional families and poverty. The purpose of this paper is to go behind the “Blade Britain” and “Broken Britain” headlines of the popular press to examine the link between knife crime committed by young people and societal issues in Great Britain today.

We shall first define knife crime and discuss the difficulties of obtaining precise empirical evidence on the subject, before giving the current official statistics. Then we shall examine the profiles of the victims and the perpetrators of knife crime. This will allow us to ascertain whether there are any demographic, ethnic, geographic, socio-economic or family-structure trends. Next, we shall look at the self-declared motivations of young people who carry knives. Lastly, we shall study recent policy and legislation as regards knife crime before coming to some conclusions.

Different degrees of knife crime

What legally constitutes knife crime in Great Britain? Over the past half-century, various pieces of legislation have dealt with offensive weapons in general and more recently there have been laws dealing with knives in particular. First, the Prevention of Crime Act, 1953,2 made it an offence to be in possession of an offensive weapon of any type in a public place. This includes “any article made or adapted for use for causing injury to the person, or intended by the person having it with him for such use by him or by some other person [...] without lawful authority or reasonable excuse”. The Restriction of Offensive Weapons Act, 1959 (March),

2 1953, May, “An Act to prohibit the carrying of offensive weapons in public places without lawful authority or reasonable excuse”.
banned the carrying, manufacture, importation, sale, hire, lending or purchase of flick knives and "gravity knives". Those found guilty of an offence were liable to three months imprisonment or a fine. The next significant law came three decades later: the Criminal Justice Act, 1988 (July), that contained a list of prohibited martial arts-style weapons and made it an offence to carry in a public place an article with a blade or sharp point (not necessarily a knife per se). The first law to deal specifically with knife crime came with the Offensive Weapons Act, 1996 (July), which made it illegal to sell knives to children under 16. A fifth successive law on weapons under a Conservative government came in the form of the Knives Act, 1997 (March), which prohibited the marketing and sale of combat knives. The first and only law to date on knife crime under a Labour government is the Violent Crime Reduction Act, 2006 (November). In brief, it banned the sale of knives to anyone under 18 and stiffened penalties for possession of a knife.

According to these various pieces of legislation, there are different degrees of knife crime. As the law now stands today, it is a criminal offence for a shop to sell a knife of any kind (including cutlery and kitchen knives) to anyone under 18. There is a complete ban on the sale of certain types of knives categorised as offensive weapons, whatever their use, including flick knives, butterfly knives and disguised knives. It is also illegal to carry a knife, to threaten someone with a knife and, needless to say, to injure someone with a knife. It is an offence to be in possession of an object with a blade or point in a school or public place without good reason or lawful excuse (e.g. a chef carrying kitchen knives to work). An exception applies to folding pocket knives with a blade of less than three inches (7.6 cm) like a Swiss knife. Anyone found carrying an illegal knife, and thus in breach of the law, is liable to a maximum prison sentence of 4 years (compared to 2 years prior to 2006) and a fine of £5,000.5

It should be noted that whilst the age at which one obtains the right to vote in a general election is 18 years in Great Britain, the age of criminal responsibility is 10 years in England and Wales and 8 years in Scotland (compared to 14 in France).

**Fallacious figures**

Four main sources are used by the British government to calculate the amount of knife crime that has taken place in the country over a year. The main basis is the now annual British Crime Survey (BCS), which is an official regular study, based on interviews with a representative sample of residents of England and Wales living in

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3 1996, July, "An Act to make provision about persons having knives, other articles which have a blade or are sharply pointed or offensive weapons; and about selling knives or such articles to persons under the age of sixteen years".

4 1997, March, "An Act to create new criminal offences in relation to the possession or marketing of, and publications relating to, knives; to confer powers on the police to stop and search people or vehicles for knives and other offensive weapons and to seize items found; and for connected purposes".

private households. Thus, around 50,000 adults are questioned each year about their experiences of crime over the past 12 months. Second, the government uses the very similar, but smaller, Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) that is also produced by the Home Office. Another source of statistics on knife crime is the Youth Survey commissioned by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales. Again approximately 5,000 young people are involved in the survey which aims “to examine the experience of crime by both offenders and victims, among 11-16-year-old young people in mainstream education”. Finally, there are the 'Police Recorded Crime Statistics' (PRCS) that are published by the Home Office. They constitute the number of each type of crime reported to one of the 50+ police forces in the United Kingdom. Hospitals also collate and publish statistics on admissions (numbers and causes). These figures are not however taken into account by the government when compiling official statistics on crime.

Various problems are associated with all four of these official sources of statistics on knife crime used by the government. This is true as regards crime rates in general, but for knife crime involving young people especially. Most strikingly, in the British Crime Survey (BCS), under-16s are not included in the statistics, neither as victims nor as perpetrators of crime, because this age group is simply not interviewed. But, as we shall see, according to other statistics, this age bracket is very much affected by knife crime. The homeless, people living in institutions, and those not living in private accommodation are not interviewed either in the BCS. What is more, the size of the sample interviewed in the BCS as a whole is relatively small. In 2008, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), there were nearly 50 million adults (over 18s) living in the United Kingdom. This means that less than 1% of the population is interviewed and thus extrapolated statistics are particularly prone to error. The sample size for the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey is even smaller: 5,000 10 to 25 year-olds for a population cohort that is currently around 13 million. The last OCJS was carried out in 2006; similarly, the last Youth Survey was carried out in 2004 and so statistics available today are not that up to date.

As regards the Police Recorded Crime Statistics (PRCS), they must be treated with caution too. This is because many incidents are not included in them since they are often simply not reported to the police, or the police decide not to record them. This is one of the reasons why Police Recorded Crime Statistics are usually lower

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6 The BCS is produced by BMRB Limited for the Home Office. The latter states that the survey “collects information about the victims of crime, the circumstances in which incidents occur and the behaviour of offenders in committing crimes.”
www.homeoffice.gov.uk/tds/bsc1.html (retrieved January 2009)

7 There have been four surveys, 2003, 2004, 2005 and the last one took place in 2006.

8 The YJB is an executive non-departmental public body managed by the Ministry of Justice. The surveys were produced annually by the market research company MORI for the YJB from 1999 to 2005 and a five-year report was published in 2006.

9 In May 2008, the Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, announced that this anomaly would be changed in the future.

10 According to the ONS, mid-2006, there were approximately 11.5m under 16 year-olds and 7.2m 16 to 24 year-olds in the UK.
than the *British Crime Survey* (BCS) figures. Moreover, only the Metropolitan Police in London classifies and analyses knife crime separately; in other police forces knife crime comes within a general category of "violence against the person". Furthermore, some police forces were found in October 2008 to have "downgraded" or "undercounted" a certain number of serious and violent crimes to lesser crimes, thus calling into question the veracity of police statistics. Lastly, in December 2008, the government was found to have prematurely released knife crime statistics showing a sharp decrease in incidents which were subsequently found to be inaccurate. This led to strong condemnation of Downing Street by Sir Michael Scholzer, the statistics chief at the UK Statistics Authority, who accused the government of releasing "unchecked" and "selective" statistics for political purposes.

In this way, knife crime statistics from all four official sources are not wholly satisfactory. Moreover, since merely carrying a knife constitutes a crime and it is not possible to know how many young people carry knives, or with what frequency, official figures of knife crime are not viable. All statistics on knife crime and bar deaths are thus likely to be underestimates. Bearing in mind one must treat figures on knife crime carefully, let us now look at some official statistics on the subject, and notably, those involving death that have featured so much in the media.

Current *British Crime Survey* (BCS) findings suggest that the number of violent incidents involving knives and the use of knives in wounding, common assaults and robberies fell significantly from 1995 to 2003, but have subsequently been increasing. According to Department of Health hospital admissions data there has been a rise in the number of incidents of knife injuries and the victims are getting younger. 14,000 people were treated in hospital for stab wounds in 2008 in the UK. 446 of them were aged 14 and under, an increase of 20% in 5 years. During the same period there were 72 reported "violent killings" of teenagers. The most common cause of death by far was stabbing. 42 of the 72 violent deaths of 10 to 19 year-olds were due to stabbings (see table 1). This means that 58% of violent killings of young people were due to a stabbing that year (2008), compared to 38% of violent killings for the British population as a whole in 2008.

**Table 1: Reported "violent killings" of teenagers, the UK and London, 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>London</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stabbings (knife or sharp instrument)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from UK police forces, Recorded Crime Statistics, the Home Office.

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11 There are 9 categories of crime in the *British Crime Survey*: 1) criminal damage, 2) domestic burglary, 3) other burglary, 4) offences against vehicles, 5) other theft, 6) robbery, 7) violence against the person, 8) sexual offences and 9) drug offences.

12 Some crimes classed as "grievous bodily harm with intent" were recorded as less serious, leading to calls for crime statistics to be managed by the ONS rather than the Home Office.
Clear profiles of at risk groups

There are three particular incidents of knife crime prior to the summer of 2008 that remain in the collective memory of Britons. The first was when 19-year-old Stephen Lawrence, of Jamaican parents, was stabbed to death at a bus-stop in South-East London in April 1993. The second occurred in December 1995, when white headmaster Philip Lawrence (no relation to Stephen Lawrence) died of stab wounds inflicted by a 15-year-old as he intervened between a pupil and youths outside his school in North-West London. The third was when, in 2000, Damilola Taylor, who was born in Nigeria and had not long been living in South London, was stabbed by a small group of 12 and 13-year-olds and left to die in the stairwell of a block of flats; he was 11 years old. These three cases raised the awareness of knife crime in Britain at the end of the twentieth century. What is notable about them is not only the particular violence of the crimes, but the fact that all three victims were completely innocent. One was a black boy, one was a male black teenager, and one was a white middle-aged man. The alleged perpetrators were all non-whites under 16. To what extent can these three striking cases be considered representative?

An analysis of the 42 teenage deaths due to a stabbing, in Great Britain, in 2008, reveals some striking trends as regards the gender, age, ethnicity and geographical location of the place of residence of the victims. For all types of crime, especially violent crime, it is young men who are by far the most vulnerable members of the population. Males aged 10 to 25 years are almost twice as likely to have been the victim of an assault without injury as females of the same age. In 2008, an overwhelming majority of the victims of fatal knife crime were boys; of the 42 deaths due to stabbings only 5 of the victims were girls (11%). Over the past decade the average age of homicide victims has been going down. The group most at risk group from knife crime is young males between the ages of 14 and 24. 17 is clearly the most common age of victims of a fatal stabbing, accounting for over a quarter of all deaths (see table 2).\(^\text{13}\)

Table 2: Age of teenage victims of fatal stabbings, UK, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age in years</th>
<th>Number of fatal stabbings</th>
<th>% of fatal stabbings according to age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>07.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>07.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from UK police force statistics, the Home Office.

\(^{13}\) The current official school leaving age is 16, but will be increased to 17 in 2013 and then 18 in 2015, following an initiative by Gordon Brown to reduce the number of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) teenagers.
In 2008, exactly half of the 42 teenage victims who died of a stabbing were white (see table 3). However, when we take into account the proportion of young white people in the population, it becomes clear that the victims of knife crime murders are proportionally more likely to occur to non-white youths. In particular, young people who are members of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities are proportionally much more at risk of fatal knife crime homicide than young white men. 39% of teenage deaths by stabbing were black (of West Indian or black African origin), whereas only 2% of the British population is black according to the national census.

Table 3: Ethnic origin of teenage victims of fatal stabbings, UK, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Number of deaths</th>
<th>% of deaths</th>
<th>% of ethnic group in population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>92.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian (Indian Sub-continent)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


An overwhelming majority of knife crime offences, of all kinds, recorded by the police occur in a handful of urban locations. In 2007-2008, over half of all knife crime offences took place in just three cities, namely, London, Birmingham, and Manchester (see table 4). Similarly, most deaths of young people due to knife crime are concentrated in only a few locations. Indeed, of the 42 deaths of young people in Great Britain due to stabbing in 2008, 22 were in London (52%), two were in Manchester (4.7%), two were in Birmingham and two were in Liverpool. Conversely, the vast majority of police forces did not in fact have to deal with the fatal stabbing of a 10-19 year-old in 2008. Deprived and disadvantaged urban areas with high rates of poverty, social exclusion, family breakdown, low educational achievement and lack of social amenities⁴ are the scene of the greatest amount of serious knife crime. Young people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities (non-whites) dwell disproportionately in such areas. 50% of all black families living in Great Britain reside in London and most live in poorer neighbourhoods. They are thus more likely to experience violent crime and muggings in particular, which tend to involve a high proportion of knife usage.

Table 4: Number of knife crime offences recorded by selected police forces in England and Wales, 2007-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police force</th>
<th>Number of recorded knife crimes</th>
<th>% of total number of recorded knife crimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Police (London)</td>
<td>7,409</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands (Birmingham)</td>
<td>2,303</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Manchester</td>
<td>2,294</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merseyside (Liverpool)</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nottinghamshire</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avon and Somerset</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thames Valley</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England and Wales (total)</td>
<td>22,151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In brief, 17 year-old males from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities (non-whites) living in deprived urban areas are the most at risk of knife crime. They are also the most likely to be the perpetrators of knife crime.

As already mentioned, it is impossible to know how many young people carry knives. According to all surveys, boys are far more prone to carrying knives than girls. Knife carrying also seems most common among 14 to 21 year-olds and 16 to 17 year-olds, in particular according to the respondents of the The Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) for 2004. The 2005 Youth Survey of pupils aged 11 to 16 revealed that 32% said that they had carried a knife of some sort in the previous 12 months. It found that there had been a notable increase in knife carrying among school children in recent years. Children excluded from school are far more likely to be involved in knife crime than children who are in school. According to the 2004 Youth Survey, 25% of school children and 46% of excluded children said they had carried a penknife during the past year at some point (which is not illegal). However, 9% of children in school, compared to 30% of children excluded from school, said they had illegally carried a flick knife during the previous year. 5% of children in school, compared to 16% of children excluded from school,¹⁶ said they carried a kitchen knife and were thus committing an offence (see table 5). Black boys have by far the highest rates of exclusion from school.

Table 5: Proportion of young people carrying knives in the past year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of knife</th>
<th>Legal status</th>
<th>Pupils in school</th>
<th>Excluded pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Penknife</td>
<td>legal</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flick knife</td>
<td>illegal</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen knife</td>
<td>illegal</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from MORI, Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, Youth Survey, 2005.

¹⁵ The geographical area covered by each police force varies in surface area and population size.
¹⁶ A pupil can be ‘temporarily excluded’ from school by the head teacher for up to a total of 45 schools days in an academic year. After that they become ‘permanently excluded’.
From victims to victimizers/offenders

Consistently the most common reason stated in official surveys of young people as to why they carry knives (but not necessarily brandish them) is because they are scared of being attacked by other young people who carry knives. So possessing a knife is considered to be a way to protect oneself, to defend oneself, to feel safer on the streets. This fear is very often linked to territorial turf wars among different street gangs. The Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) for 2004 found that 4% of all respondents (10 to 24 year-olds) stated they had carried a knife in the last 12 months “for protection”, whereas 85% of all those who carried a knife stated that they had done so “for protection”.

Next, some young people carry knives due to bravado or in an attempt to look macho, to feel big, in order to gain status and esteem from the very people of whom they are afraid. This can be summed up as looking for “respect”, a term frequently used by young people who own a knife. In these circumstances, knife carrying is once again a form of self protection. In some cases, carrying a knife also seems to be used as a way to compensate for doing badly or failing at school and/or social deprivation; brandishing a knife can thus enhance one’s status within a peer group. A minority of youths state in the official surveys they carry knives to give themselves a sense of power because they otherwise feel powerless in their community or in the world at large. Other young people say that owning a knife simply adds to their sense of excitement and glamour in an otherwise dull life, where there is a lack of social activities for them.

There appears to be a clear link between having been a victim of knife crime and the propensity to carry a knife. The Youth Survey, 2004, found that among children in school, double the number who claimed to have been a victim of crime carried a knife (36%), compared to those who had claimed not to have experienced victimisation (18%). Among excluded children, 62% who had been a victim of a crime carried a knife, compared with 51% who had not been a victim. In this way, knife crime victims become victimizers, thus offenders; there is a very definite causal link.

Hence, the fear of other young people, as well as the quest for their approbation and/or respect, is very often associated with knife carrying urban street gangs. The desire to be accepted into a gang, and/or to avoid being the victim of knife crime due to gang turf wars is nothing new in Great Britain; gang culture has existed for decades in urban areas, but it seems to have grown over the past few years. Why? There are two main explanations with several contributing factors in common that feed into each other.

The first reason is centred on the breakdown of traditional family structures. Today, 25% of families in Great Britain are one parent families and 10% are recomposed, reconstituted or step families (compared to approximately 8% and 3% respectively 30 years ago). In both cases, a vast majority of the children live with

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their mother. Families with black West Indian origins have by far the highest rates of separation and divorce -- over 50% were single parent families in 2008, more than double the national average.18 More then 50% of black families in Great Britain live in London, so there is a concentration of social deprivation and family breakdown in the capital and in other urban areas where knife crime is most frequent.

In this context, due to absent fathers, an increasing number of children, in particular black youngsters, are brought up in a “broken family” within which they may experience less parental guidance and less parental authority than other children and may be subject to a lack of positive male role models around the home. This may make it more likely for them to misbehave at school and to get into trouble. Once excluded from school due to bad behaviour, there is not much from them to do but hang about on the streets where there are fewer social amenities than before.19 In this way, street gangs can act as an alternative unit to school and the family, acting as a replacement, substitute, surrogate family, in terms of support as well as protection from other armed young people; peer socialisation thus plays a role. These gangs are highly territorial, controlling a specific neighbourhood, for example, as regards who goes onto their “turf” to socialize and to deal in drugs.20

As we have seen, most knife crime takes place in deprived inner city areas where there is a higher degree of family breakdown, but also where there is more poverty. Indeed, single parent families tend to have lower incomes than two-parent families and so be poorer. Most single parent families residing in poor urban areas live below the poverty line (60% of the median British salary). Furthermore, over the past decades, British society has become ever more polarised. Undisputedly, the gap between the rich and poor grew during the Conservative Thatcher and Major years (1979-1997). However, under Tony Blair’s New Labour governments the divide between socio-economic groups grew ever wider, resulting in less social mobility today than a generation ago. Consequently, among young people from poorer backgrounds and especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds, a sense of lack of opportunity and aspirations can set in, combined with a feeling of not being valued by the wider population. For some young people, knives can bring a sense of power to this seemingly hopeless context.

The second main theory to explain the increase of knife crime linked to gang membership is closely linked to the media. With clear echoes of Stanley Cohen’s work from nearly four decades ago, we are witnessing, via the scaremongering dramatic headlines and alarming pictures of the popular press, a “moral panic” where the new “folk devils” are the knife-wielding gang members.21 In this way, the media has played a pivotal role in knife crime, since by giving the oxygen of publicity to violent acts, it gives kudos to the violence, especially among certain

19 Sarah PICKARD, ‘Young people and urban renaissance in Great Britain’, op. cit., p. 53.
youngsters for whom knife crime is a badge of honour. The glorification of knife crime can turn the perpetrators into heroes among their community and encourage certain other young people to carry knives to resemble them or to protect themselves against them.

At the same time, certain politicians have entered into a symbiotic relation with the media hype on knife crime, seemingly for political gain. On a number of occasions, former Conservative party leader Iain Duncan Smith has written on the subject, in the popular press, in rather inflammatory language. For example, in August 2007, he proclaimed in the Daily Mail, "A sense of deepening anarchy hangs over Britain. [...] An underclass now exists and at its heart, gang culture prevails. This social decline has come about because of the breakdown of the family, rampant drug and alcohol abuse, and the collapse of any political will to uphold the law."

The emphasis is placed on the roles played in knife crime by the end of traditional conservative family values and the family in general, along with social deprivation. As chair of the right-wing think tank, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), Iain Duncan Smith was at the origin of the publication of a set of policy reports entitled Breakdown Britain, in December 2006, which led to the term "broken society," from which stemmed the expression "Broken Britain", much touted by David Cameron from 2007 onwards. This expression, along with the Daily Mail's term "Blade Britain", or The Sun's vivid description of a "new orgy of violence" (July 2007), have clearly fed the "moral panic" as regards young people in general and youth knife crime in particular. Subsequently Iain Duncan Smith has written on the subject in more measured terms and is at the origin of an extensive policy document on gangs and knife gangs entitled Dying to Belong.

More and more the Conservative Party has been emphasising that knife crime is on the increase due to New Labour policies that have led to "Broken Britain". The Tory party has emphasized three strands in its policy on reducing knife crime. To start with, it has talked about the importance of "effective prevention" by identifying and targeting children in the first year of primary school to avoid them turning to knife crime. Second, it has mentioned its desire to cut down on red tape, thus allowing beat officers more time to patrol. According to Chris Grayling MP, Shadow Home Secretary, on the Conservative Party website: "We cannot tackle crime unless we also address the causes of crime, such as family breakdown, drug abuse and binge drinking. But the fight back starts with getting more police officers back on to the streets. Only then can we begin to rebuild the safer communities we all want." The Conservative Party's third solution lies in "tougher enforcement and sentencing"; it has written in a new Knife Crime Action Plan that it will legislate to create a presumption that anyone convicted of knife crime will receive a prison sentence.

Tough on knife crime, tough on the causes of knife crime?

The New Labour governments adopted a number of strategies as regards the reduction of knife crime, from the mid-2000s onwards. First, the Violent Crime Reduction Act, 2006 banned the sale of knives to anyone under 18. It also introduced tougher, longer sentencing to those found to be carrying a knife (not necessarily brandishing one) as possession of a knife was made to carry a maximum jail term of four years. On several occasions before becoming party leader, Gordon Brown emphasized the importance of stiffer sentencing for knife crime. Once prime minister, he addressed the ‘People’s March against knife crime’ held in London, in September 2008, with the families of victims of knife crime under the slogan: “Stop the Knives, Save Lives”. Gordon Brown declared that stronger penalties sent “a clear message to every young person carrying a knife that there will be no excuses and no exceptions”. Thus, anyone caught with a knife is now subject to a prison sentence and a strong “community payback” that forces them to give service to the community.

But according to surveys, for a variety of reasons, stiffer sentences do not represent much of a deterrent. For some young people going to prison is not a problem and may even be a relief from the stress and fear they experience on the streets due to gang culture. Many knife-carrying teenagers do not believe they would receive a harsh punishment and would actually go to prison if they were caught. A large majority are convinced that new stiffer penalties are just scare-tactics acting as a deterrent to frighten them and that in reality they would just be electronically tagged. Moreover, it is suggested that the particularly young just do not think about the legal consequences of their acts at all and believe that violent self-defence is neither a crime, nor unacceptable. Many are inaccurately of the opinion that producing a knife in “self-defence”, or as a dissuasive measure, can dissipate any danger from an assailant, rather than encourage it.

With the Violent Crime Reduction Act, 2006, the government allowed schools to set up metal detectors at their entrances to spot pupils carrying knives or other weapons on the premises. Headteachers and other members of staff can now search pupils for knives (sometimes using an electronic wand), in school or on an educational visit, without consent. The law also reduced the threshold for a police constable to enter a school and search premises and/or people from “reasonable grounds for believing” to “reasonable grounds for suspecting” that weapons are held. Schools are not required by the law to inform a parent before performing a search or get parental consent.

More generally, the government has organised knife amnesties – including a substantial one in May 2006 – via local police forces, during which people can hand in knives anonymously at a police station. The aim is to reduce the number of knives on the streets. Whilst a certain number of weapons are always turned in during such amnesties, it is doubtful whether the target groups (non law-abiding citizens) are

26 Home Secretary Charles Clarke, 2006: “Tackling knife culture, especially among young people, is paramount to the safety of our communities, and I am determined to reduce the devastation caused by knife crime.”
tempted to surrender their knives. Besides, the number of weapons handed in is a drop in the ocean compared to the number in circulation, knives are readily available in every kitchen anyway and penknives are not illegal. Following the attacks of the summer of 2008, a new knife amnesty was held from July to December 2008.

Similarly, the government increased the stop-and-search powers of the police and opted for a strategy of more visible policing.\textsuperscript{27} Police officers have the right to search any person or vehicle if they suspect someone of an offence – including carrying an offensive weapon. 2,200 knives were seized between July and December 2008 according to the Home Office.

Gordon Brown also announced in July 2008 “\textit{tough parenting programmes}” in which 110,000 “\textit{problem families}” with disruptive youngsters were to be targeted as part of a crackdown on knife crime. These are families with dependent children who have been excluded from school, who had been in trouble with the law or identified as likely to be in trouble later on. He declared that they will get parenting supervision, with the “\textit{worst 20,000}” families facing evictions from their homes if they do not respond. The government thus emphasised the importance of making families more responsible – and underlining the importance of getting the family unit involved in the education of their children and discussions on the dangers of carrying a knife, violence and gangs. It was announced that parents will be put on intensive courses to help them supervise their children.

Controversially, in July 2008, Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary originally declared in July 2008 some “\textit{shock tactics}”: youngsters caught with knives would be obliged to visit stab victims in accident and emergency wards in hospitals in order to see the consequences of stabbings, meet victim’s families and make prison visits to people convicted of knife offences. This idea was very hastily withdrawn after its impracticalities were rapidly pointed out by opponents.

There are also to be more education programmes run by the police and community organisations – such as the \textit{Be Safe Project} in schools. More street-based teams of youth-workers have been promised to deter young people from becoming involved in crime in an extension of Operation Staysafe which uses existing child protection legislation to remove young people from the street late at night for their own and the community’s safety. The government has also been discussing the importance of providing things to do (music, sport, drama) for young people, especially in targeted deprived inner city areas. This should be achieved via the Youth Service that has been given more funds for youth activities in a network of youth centres in targeted areas with the worst knife crime problems. Lastly, a £3 million, three-year shock tactics advertising campaign was launched in 2006 to

\textsuperscript{27} Stop-and-search is an extremely delicate policy in Great Britain, as it harks back to stop-and-search tactics dubbed “\textit{Operation Swamp}” in London, under Margaret Thatcher, at the start of the 1980s. It led to hostilities and tensions between the local black and Asian communities and the police who were accused of racism because they tended to stop more black youths than white youths.
challenge the “glamour”, fear and peer pressure that motivate young people to carry knives.28

Broken promises

The true scale of knife crime is unclear due to the poor quality of official statistics and research. Nonetheless, it is clear that young males from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, living in one of the main inner city areas of Great Britain, are by far the most likely section of the population to be a victim, or a perpetrator, of knife violence. Knife crime is endemic in poor urban areas where there are sink estates, failing schools with weak school attendance records, high pupil exclusion rates and low exam success rates. It is also rife where there are higher rates of family breakdown, absent fathers, poverty, social deprivation, social exclusion and a lack of social mobility and aspirations. Knife-carrying street gangs and gang-related turf wars thrive in such environments where “fear” and “respect” are the watchwords.

Most solutions to knife crime put forward by the two main political parties do not tackle the underlying causes. At the end of 2008, the Labour Home Secretary Jacqui Smith said the government was using a combination of deterrence and education to tackle the problem of knife violence. In reality, the Labour Government’s (populist?) policy on knife crime is centred on restricting the carrying of weapons through increasingly punitive measures for offenders. In practice, “tougher sentencing” and stiffer penalties feature in an uncoordinated approach to knife crime that does not seem to have an impact on curbing such violence, whilst contributing to an unhealthy climate of fear fuelled by the popular press, which can encourage certain young people to find carrying a knife all the more attractive.

The approach of the Conservative Party is largely driven by ex-leader Iain Duncan-Smith, now director of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ). He too has a tendency to feed the melodramatic media attention with headline grabbing soundbites. Nevertheless, the Conservative Party’s embryonic policies on knife crime are more orientated towards the origins of the problem than those of the Labour Party. They feature more of an emphasis on the importance of solving what he and David Cameron call Great Britain’s “broken society”. In this way, there is a reversal of the traditional values and policies held by the two major political parties on law and order.

Young people in Great Britain are living in a country where there is less social mobility, a greater income gap and more family breakdown than a generation ago. Knife crime among young people is just one problematic social phenomenon within the much wider backdrop of beleaguered British youth today where the future looks bleak.

Selected bibliography


