

Young people, knives and guns

A comprehensive review, analysis and critique of gun and knife crime strategies

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The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) at King's College London is an independent charity that informs and educates about all aspects of crime and criminal justice. We provide information, produce research and carry out policy analysis to encourage and facilitate an understanding of the complex nature of issues concerning crimes and related harms.

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Introduction

A spate of killings of teenagers and children in London and other inner cities in the last few of years have sparked off significant public anxiety and media attention. Such highly publicised tragic events have also raised concerns that violent crime among young people is rising. However, official wounding figures show that 'knife crime' is nothing new. Stabbings have always been the primary means by which young men have killed one another in peacetime in England, Wales and Scotland. Although guns are far less common, and far less easily accessible, than knives, the overall long-term trends of gun-related offences follows a similar pattern to knife-related offences. Moreover, knife and gun crimes are not a uniform problem around the UK, but tend to be concentrated in certain, especially urban, locations.

With young people's involvement in 'gun' or 'knife crime' at the forefront of public attention, many practitioners are being asked to work on interventions in this field. But what is the evidence base as to 'what works' in 'anti-knives' and 'anti-guns' strategies targeted at young people? What does research tell us about their impact on young people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviour?

'*Young People, Knives and Guns*' examines rigorous and independent international evidence over the period 1998-2008 in order to assess critically the effectiveness of anti-weapons interventions and policies.

KEY FINDINGS

- Although a large number of initiatives are being undertaken in the UK that aim to affect young people's carrying or using of weapons, there is a pronounced lack of evidence as to their effectiveness. Independent evaluations are necessary to establish the validity of new strategies and to assess their impact on gun or knife crime.
- Research from the US on guns and young people shows that no strategy has been proven to be effective in the long-term. Some approaches are more successful than others in reducing violence in the short term: multi-agency, multi-focus strategies which concentrate on high risk youths and areas are more successful than single-focus interventions. However, problems reappear once the intervention is over.
- It is not clear whether we need to tailor interventions specifically to the issue of guns and knives. Using weapons is but one form of problematic behaviour which cannot be understood in isolation from the social, psychological and economic conditions affecting young people's attitudes and experiences.
- Policies to disarm weapon carriers are restricting themselves to symptoms, unless they also tackle the fears and insecurities experienced by young people. The concentrations of violence in particular areas and the reasons behind some young people's perceived need for weapons and their willingness to use them ought to be the policy focus. Addressing the violence, victimisation and risk that affect their lives would seem an essential starting point.
- Public health work that takes into account early family and environment influences, and that seeks to minimise damaging conditions in children's lives, has shown promise in preventing violence in later life.

Being exposed to violence makes it more likely that someone may commit violence and carry weapons, out of fear and a sense they can protect themselves that way. However, those who carry weapons are likely to become victims themselves.

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SHOW?

Short hospital-based, nurse counselling sessions, carried out in Wales and Scotland, have proven successful in changing the behaviour of trauma victims who had been involved in violent, alcohol-fuelled incidents.

A large number of initiatives are being undertaken in the UK that aim to affect young people's carrying or using of weapons. However, there is very little research on their impact and very few interventions are independently assessed. Some initiatives are recent and evaluations may therefore be premature; in others, the lack of assessment of efficacy is due to a shortage of funding.

The only evaluations so far which have been carried out at a scientific level show the success of hospital-based nurse counselling programmes for victims of facial trauma, often caused by knives. These measure reductions in alcohol abuse (admittedly one of the causes behind violence) rather than in injuries caused by knives and other weapons.

Guns

Unsurprisingly in view of the widespread presence of guns in the United States, most research about such weapons originates there. Even so, the majority of firearms programmes studied in the US have not been subjected to the most rigorous validity tests (experimental, controlled trials with comparison groups).

Evidence from the US shows that multi-agency, multi-focus strategies are more successful than single-focus interventions in combating gun violence among young people. Approaches by a variety of agencies working in co-operation, which are locally based and engage the local community, are more effective than single interventions by agencies working in isolation.

In Boston, community centres' street workers worked alongside probation and parole officers, sought out at risk youth and offered them support and training, 'as the best way to change some offenders' behavior may be to offer them substance abuse counseling, job skills training, recreational [and educational] opportunities'.

No strategy has however been proven to be effective in the long-term. The 'hot spot', multi-pronged strategies mentioned above appear to have reduced gun violence among young people in the short term. However, typically the problems reinstate themselves once the intervention is over. 'Hot spot' approaches may also suffer from problems in sustaining acceptance among local communities and from crime displacement.

What does not work in reducing gun violence?

- **Purely suppressive approaches (like untargeted crackdowns, street sweeps)**
- **Tougher sentencing**
- **Supply side strategies which attempt to disrupt illegal supply**
- **Gun buy-back/exchange programmes**
- **Guns searches and seizures**
- **Gun bans, restrictions on acquisition and on licensing**
- **Security systems, metal detectors and 'zero tolerance' in schools**
- **Prison tour programmes – 'Scared Straight'**

RISK AND PROTECTION

Professionals designing interventions for young people are likely to take into account the variety of influences and exposure to 'risk' and 'protective' factors - to do with family, school, peers and the community/ locality - that shape children's behaviour. However, trying to predict violent or very specific behaviours – such as carrying a weapon – is inherently difficult. Moreover, predictive methods are

not infallible. They should be treated with caution because they can be over deterministic and lead to labelling children and young people as potentially criminal, which can of itself have a negative impact on their lives.

NEIGHBOURHOODS AND DISADVANTAGE

Research consistently shows links between deprived neighbourhoods, high levels of violence and weapon use. Poverty and inequality have become entrenched in areas where, in the absence of employment or meaningful material assistance, involvement in various forms of crime may be one of the few ways to actually make a living.

In poor neighbourhoods reduced opportunities (especially exacerbated where the consequences of racial discrimination and social exclusion have accumulated over the years) and existing levels of violence can contribute to shaping young people's behaviour in a variety of ways, e.g.:

- The lack of economic opportunities for young people stimulates illegal economies around drugs, stolen goods and protection.
- Where neighbourhoods are threatening, weapon carrying may make young people feel safe. Weapon carrying can become relatively 'normalised' in certain groups and contexts.
- Being exposed to violence predicts weapon carrying and violence by those who are victims or who witness violence.

If the long-term future of areas and neighbourhoods is to continue to create the conditions for the repetitive social exclusion of successive youth cohorts, a core responsibility lies squarely on the shoulders of policymakers.

Status and identity

Notions of 'street credibility' and 'respect' can become very significant to young people who may lack legitimate access to other forms of status achievement. Acting to maintain one's local reputation and the 'respect' of others can provoke conflict and violence.

Yet this 'street social capital', while it bonds young people closer to their peer groups, can also serve to distance them from the wider community and societal values.

While young people say they carry weapons to protect themselves in areas they perceive to be unsafe, it is the presumption that others are armed that helps (re)produce fear and insecurity.

Policies to disarm weapon carriers are restricting themselves to symptoms, unless they also tackle the fears and insecurities articulated by young people and the concentrations of violence in particular areas.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE OR PUBLIC HEALTH?

There is no evidence that interventions by criminal justice agencies alone have a positive impact upon young people. Indeed, studies show that early contact with the criminal justice system can be

actively counterproductive. 'Zero tolerance' and deterrent approaches (e.g. prison tours) have proven to be ineffective in reducing violence among young people and can also increase it.

A public health approach underpins some of the most promising youth violence prevention strategies. It is characterised by early identification of problems, aiming to address multiple risk factors and introduce protective factors.

Some interventions that target family-related risk factors (e.g. nurse visitation programmes) in early childhood seem to be having a long term positive impact on reducing delinquent and violent behaviour. Strategies that seek to influence knowledge, attitudes and behaviour (such as therapeutic foster care) also seem promising.

We must move from looking at individual children to looking at the toxic environment.
(Deborah Prothrow-Smith, Harvard Public School of Health)

This research was originally commissioned by 11 Million, the organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England.

To download the full copy of 'Young People, Knives and Guns' please go to: www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/opus1638/Young_people_knives_and_guns.pdf

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