

Written evidence submitted by Dr Iain Brennan, University of Hull (BYC006)

1. I am a Reader in Criminology at University of Hull and, from August 2019, will assume the position of Professor of Criminology at University of Hull. I have been researching the causes of, consequences of and solutions to violence since 2004 and I specialise in understanding weapon-carrying and weapon use.

2. This written evidence to the Youth Select Committee summarises the relevant research literature on serious violence in England and Wales, including a description of the risk factors for carrying a weapon and the risk factors for being a victim of violence with a weapon.

3. Emphasised below are:

1. The influence of peers and local environment in the decision to carry a weapon
2. Findings that there are no clear socio-demographic risk factors for victimisation with a weapon, but there is a strong relationship between deprivation and exposure to any violence and that, in general, belonging to an ethnic minority and being female are protective factors against violence.
3. Some situational factors, including location type and number of assailants that make the use of a weapon in a violent incident more likely
4. Evidence that stop and search has limited impact on the reduction of serious violence

4. I have not answered all questions posed by the Select Committee, preferring to focus on those within my range of expertise.

Predictors of weapon-carrying

5. Some of my recent research (Brennan, 2018) describes individual, interpersonal and community factors that are statistically associated with carrying a weapon in the past year. The research is based on surveys that were conducted between 2003 and 2006, but remain our best information on the characteristics of young people (aged 10-25 years) who have carried a weapon. The characteristics that were associated with weapon-carrying in the past year were being male, having committed violence and having been a victim of violence in the past year, having low levels of trust in the police, having more peers who have been in trouble with the police and living in an area with higher levels of disorder. Although certainly not an exhaustive list of the common characteristics of weapon-carrying young people, this relatively small number of predictors were common across a large proportion of young people who reported carrying a weapon in the year before completing the survey.

6. New, as yet unpublished, research using more recent data collected from young people in London (aged 11 to 16 years) reveals similar patterns, suggesting that, despite the length of time since the aforementioned surveys were conducted, the drivers of weapon-carrying are consistent over time.

7. In summary of this research, it is clear that the complex decision to carry a weapon is influenced by a wide range of factors. Although there are individual factors that elevate risk, such as experience of victimisation, that are common to young people who have carried a weapon, using preventive efforts that only focus on the individual (such as individual mentoring) would be a mistake. Adolescents are more responsive to the influence of their peers than at any other time in the life course (Knoll, Magis-Weinberg, Speekenbrink & Blakemore, 2015) and having criminal peers appears to be a major driver of weapon-carrying (Brennan, 2018). US research has shown that young people

who carry weapons overestimate how much their friends carry weapons and believing that peers carry weapons reinforces one's own weapon-carrying, creating a feedback loop that is likely to perpetuate weapon-carrying (see Brennan, 2018 for a summary of this research). Therefore, peer groups are a valuable point of intervention. Although there has not been enough research to specifically test the effectiveness of targeting peer groups to reduce weapon-carrying, several successful violence reduction programmes in the US (Operation Ceasefire) and Scotland (Violence Reduction Unit) have targeted peer groups as well as individuals and this is a potentially fruitful way to reduce weapon-carrying.

8. The safety of a young person's neighbourhood is also an essential factor in the decision to carry a weapon. We can be confident that the decision to carry a weapon is driven by anticipation of needing to have or to use one. Therefore, reducing that anticipation, by creating a feeling of safety and predictability in a person's local environment is essential to reduce weapon-carrying. At present our understanding of how young people generate their perceptions of safety are somewhat limited, but it is likely that this perception is formed from a combination of what they witness personally and what they learn from peers. Other factors, such as parents, social media and news media may also play a part, but this influence is probably muted compared to that of personal observation and peer influence.

Predictors of serious violent victimisation

9. Research I will soon publish in collaboration with the College of Policing shows that, in a survey of 18,000 children (10 to 15 year olds) and 220,000 adults (16 years and older) between 2011 and 2017, broad socio-demographic characteristics are poor at predicting who will or will not be a victim of knife crime or other serious violence. In general, males and the more economically-deprived are at elevated risk of being victims of all violence compared to females and the less economically-deprived. Belonging to an ethnic minority is a protective factor against any violence.

10. Violent victimisation and more serious violence were rare for adults, affecting less than 3% of the population with fewer than one in three hundred adults experiencing serious violence. For children, violence was more common – affecting around 16% of 10 to 15 year olds, but was, on average, less serious, than violence against adults. Approximately 0.8% of children and 0.4% of adults were victims of violence that involved a weapon in the year before they were surveyed.

11. In children (aged 10 to 15 years old), risk of a weapon being used in an assault was not related to sex, age, ethnicity or area-level income deprivation. In adults (aged 16 years or over), males were at greater risk of a weapon being used against them and, but there were no other socio-demographic risk factors. Situational factors of violent incidents, such as the number of assailants and location type were better able to predict weapon use in violence. For children, compared to violence that took place in or near a school, violent incidents that happened in a home or in the street were much more likely to involve weapons.

12. The risk factors identified in the research demonstrate economic inequalities in risk of violence and serve to emphasise the importance of the reduction of weapon-carrying and use in order to reduce the overall burden of violence. They also highlight that the severity of violence is largely predicted by situational factors and socio-demographic factors are weak predictors of which victims will and will not be seriously injured.

What motivates young people to carry knives?

13. Weapon-carrying is a complex behaviour driven by many overlapping and often contradictory factors. The perceived need to use a weapon – for offensive and/or defensive purposes is a major driver of this behaviour, but other factors such as the presentation of self and shaping of identity and experiencing a collective group identity through a common deviant behaviour are also likely to be important for young weapon-carriers. Some of the reasons for carrying a weapon are described in a review of the world literature on weapon-carrying (Brennan, 2017), but compared to the harm done by weapons, the volume of research literature is small and a great deal more needs to be done to understand and limit this behaviour.

14. Are there any examples of intervention schemes that have successfully rehabilitated young people who have been cautioned, reprimanded or sentenced due to knife crime, back into the community, education and/or employment?

15. Our review of 19 schemes of police-led diversion for young people who have committed crime showed that diversion out of the criminal justice system at the earliest opportunity is better than prosecution at reducing reoffending (Wilson et al., 2018). However, these interventions, which took place across North America, Australia and the UK between the 1970s and 2010's were delivered to less serious young offenders. It is unclear if diversion from prosecution would have similar success with weapon-carrying young people, but this is a promising approach as long as the right support is provided to the young person by an organisation independent of the criminal justice system.

16. Are the police's stop and search powers effective in promoting safety and/or putting young people off carrying knives?

17. The best available evidence indicates that stop and search is ineffective at reducing violence and weapon-carrying (Tiratelli, Quinton & Bradford, 2018). The relatively high rate of false positive stop and searches (i.e. searches where the searched individual is not carrying a weapon) may be counter-productive as it undermines local trust in the police, which is a protective factor against weapon-carrying. However, the evidence to support this perspective is limited and should be taken with caution.

References

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