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Introduction

1. As outlined by the Youth Select Committee Inquiry, over 1.1 million young people declared knife crime their biggest concern in a UK-wide ballot of young people aged 11 to 18. Research published by the House of Commons Library in November 2018, stated knife crime, particularly where it affects young people, has been a 'persistent and growing concern' for successive governments. I am a Professor of Criminology at the University of South Wales and have been invited to provide evidence to the Committee. Using predominantly qualitative research methods, my research focuses on the dynamics and causes of homicide and violence, violence reduction and the police investigation of homicide. The responses that I provide below draw upon my own research, other academic research in this field as well as a review of recent government, police and youth justice documents.

Q 1. Are there any prominent trends in the statistics on a) who commits knife crime b) who are the victims of knife crime?

2. Before I consider prominent knife crime trends, it is important to make the point that the data that are published on violent crime in England and Wales, including on homicide and knife crime, are limited in a number of ways. For example, it is not possible to discern, from the published homicide statistics, details of victim-offender relationships and knife crime the gender 'mix' of victims and offenders involved in knife homicides, or where offences take place. The age range categories adopted in the homicide statistics are also problematic (for example, younger victims are separated into those aged 16-24, a coverage of nine years, and 25 to 34, covering ten years and there is no information provided on sharp instrument homicide and victims aged less than 16 years). These weaknesses in the ways that some of the data are currently compiled and, most importantly, presented and shared, make it difficult for anyone to gain meaningful insights into the nature of lethal knife crime now, or indeed, changing and emerging patterns.

Knife Crime

3. The available evidence suggests that knife crime as a whole has increased since 2015 from below 25,000 offences in 2015 to almost 40,000 in the 12 months ending September 2018 (ONS, 2019a). Some of this increase may be due to increased reporting and recording of knife crime due to sensational media reporting and, some commentators argue, the emergence of a moral panic around youth knife crime (Pitts, 2008; Kinsey, 2019). However, hospital data, which are unaffected by changes to police recording practices, also indicate an increase in knife crime over the same timeframe, after periods of decline. For example, looking specifically at knife-related violence, hospital admissions data for injury by a sharp instrument show a rise of 22% since 2014/15 (YJB/MoJ, 2018). However these data provide no breakdown by weapon type or perpetrator age (Kinsey, 2019).

4. Looking specifically at children and young people, in the year ending March 2018, there were just under 4,500 knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children (aged 10-17) resulting in a caution or conviction[1]. This represents an increase of 64% compared with five years ago, and there have been year-on-year increases since the year ending March 2014 (with an increase of 7% in the most recent year). However, the number of these offences remains lower than in the years ending March 2009 and 2010 (YJB/MoJ 2019, p.23-24). In fact, taking a longer term picture, the number of weapons offences committed by children in 2018 was 34% lower than 10 years previously (Kinsey, 2019: 3). The vast majority of these offences (96%) were for possession of a knife or offensive weapon, the remaining 4% for threatening with a knife or offensive weapon. Proven offences (i.e. conviction data) are amongst the least reliable forms of official crime data to draw upon when determining trends as they are especially prone to fluctuation due to proactive policing and changes in criminal justice practices.

5. Children's self-reporting within the Crime Survey of England and Wales (for the four year period ending March 2016) suggests no increase in personal knife carrying amongst children aged 10-15 or 16-19, though interestingly, and illustrative of the complexity of this issue, the number of children reporting that they 'know someone personally who carries a knife' has increased (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018: 5; ONS, 2017). In the year ending March 2018, 0.5% of 10-15 year olds surveyed reported that they had carried a knife for their own personal protection in the past 12 months. Whilst the longer-term trend shows slight falls, the latest year is broadly similar to the previous year and the year ending March 2013 (YJB/MoJ 2019, p.24).

Homicide Rates

6. Homicide rates started to increase in England and Wales in the mid 1990s, then went into decline in the early 2000s. Rates began to increase in 2015 (ONS, 2019b) (and the rise seems set to continue this year). Specifically, there was an 11% increase in homicide between 2016 and 2017, an 8% increase in homicide in England and Wales between 2016 and 2017 and a 15% rise in homicides between 2017 and 2018 (taking the homicide rate from 9 offences per million population in 2015 to 12 per million population in year ending March 2018[2]

7. The rise in homicide in recent years has been most pronounced in male victims with an increase of 54% since March 2015. However, in 2017-2018 the number of female homicide victims also increased (by 28%).

Sharp Instrument Homicides: Characteristics of Victims and Offenders

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[1] The definition of 'knife or offensive weapon offences' includes possession offences of having an article with a blade or point in a public place or on school premises, possession of offensive weapon without lawful authority or reasonable excuse in a public place or on school premises, offences involving threatening with a knife or offensive weapon in a public place or on school premises (MoJ, 2019, p.3).

[2] Excluding victims of terrorist attacks and the recording of the Hillsborough deaths in the 2017 statistics.

8. The police recorded 285 knife and sharp instrument homicides in the year ending March 2018, the highest number since the Home Office Homicide Index began in 1946. Sharp instrument homicides rose by 38% for male victims and 24% for female victims. Male victims aged 16-24 and 25-34 experienced the biggest increases.

9. It is not clear whether the increase in knife crime homicide experienced by females in the past year is connected to the general upward turn in knife crime/homicide as the homicide statistics do not match method of homicide to victim-offender relationship. We know that female victims of homicide are predominantly killed in or around a house or dwelling (80%) and by a partner or ex-partner (33%) and so it is possible that much of the knife-homicide increase amongst female victims is of a different order (i.e. domestic in nature) to that being experienced/perpetrated by males.

10. Just under two-thirds of sharp instrument homicide victims were White (63%) and a quarter (25%) were Black. Black men aged 16-24 experienced the largest increase in sharp instrument homicide in the year ending March 2018 (a 78% increase). White men in the same age group experienced a 58% increase and White men aged 25-34 experienced a 57% increase.

11. In conclusion, whilst there is no doubt that knife crime and some of the most serious offences connected to knives/sharp instruments (i.e. homicide) have increased since 2015, our knowledge of offenders and victims and the connections between them, from national data sets, is limited and undoubtedly masks important information about different kinds of knife offences (threats, assaults, homicide, carrying or using knives etc) and critically, information about the circumstances that lead young people to become involved in knife crime (as offenders, victims or both).

<u>Considerations</u>

12. **More refined and comprehensive quantitative data are required** in order to map more carefully the age, gender and socio-economic characteristics of offenders and victims, victim-offender relationships, the range of motives and circumstances of fatal and non-fatal events involving knives, as well as where knife crime occurs and local situational contexts. At the moment we simply do not know enough about the diverse nature of the 'youth knife crime problem' and blunt statistics mask the overlap and connections between victims and offenders of violence. Databases such as the Home Office Homicide Index could be useful starting points for unravelling patterns and trends if they were refined. The Scottish Homicide database is considerably more comprehensive and so perhaps there is scope to map across some of the fields from that database to the English and Welsh Homicide Index.

13. In order to compliment these date, **more detailed qualitative research *with* young people is needed** in order to improve our understanding of the constellation of factors that impact upon their experiences (as offenders, victims or both) of knife crime and other forms of violence. In short, understating the nature of the so-called 'youth knife crime problem' requires engaging with young people and unravelling the diverse

nature of 'youth' violence (the different motives and circumstances for example, and the extent to which younger people are involved with/influenced by older offenders) so that bespoke preventative efforts can be developed.

14. An examination of whether (and how) knife crime is distinct from other forms of violence amongst young people is needed. What, if anything, is unique about knife crime as compared to gun crime, for example? What about serious violence without the use of weapons? Should we even be focussing upon the weapon in this way?

Q 3. Does the Government's Serious Violence Strategy strike the right balance between preventative and punitive action?

15. The short answer to this is that, in my opinion, it does not. The Government's (2018) Serious Violence Strategy fails to deal with some of the most fundamental drivers of serious violence (i.e. structural disadvantage), oversimplifies the complexities and realities of youth violence, fails to embrace the voice of young people and retains a deterrent and punitive discourse that many youth experts recognise as unhelpful. I deal with the first three of these issues in more detail below. Other evidence submitted has dealt comprehensively with the last issue.

Structural Disadvantage and Youth Violence

16. The Government's (2018) Serious Violence Strategy fails to deal with some of the proven fundamental drivers of serious violence i.e. structural disadvantage including poverty, unemployment and 'exclusion' from 'mainstream' society.

17. There is a good deal of evidence from international research that social and economic inequality is strongly linked to violence among young people (WHO, 2010). For example, street gangs emerge and flourish where inequality and marginality prevail. As Vigil (2006, p.22) puts it: "the street gang is an outcome of marginalization ... the relegation of certain persons or groups to the fringes of society where social and economic conditions result in powerlessness". Gang-violence aside, confrontational and spontaneous violence amongst young men has also been shown to be linked to disadvantage and the emergence of cultural codes that support violence. This has been known for some time. For example, Brookman (2003; 2014) found that many of the men in her study of homicide in England and Wales killed in defence of **masculine honour** (whether during spontaneous confrontations or planned revenge killings). In keeping with Polk's (1994) Australian based research, she observed that these men tended to be young and relatively powerless (i.e., working class and often unemployed) and that their displays of masculine power in defence of honour seemed to be related to their marginalized status. As Lindegaard (2017) discovered in South Africa, men who killed other men who had challenged them in public gained **street capital and status** among peers involved in street culture. In the United States, Wilkinson (2001) found that among young people involved in street culture, excessive forms of violence such as homicides were found to provide more street capital than less excessive forms

such as assaults and robberies (see also Sandberg, 2008 for discussions of street capital amongst young males in Oslo). Reid (2017) in her ethnographic study of 29 young and adult men in London confirms this picture some twenty years on in a very particular socio-economic context. Of course, violent subcultures come in various forms, some being closely tied to specific activities such as drug taking or distribution, or the consumption of alcohol. New manifestations of violent masculinity, criminality and victimisation emerge in response to inequality and opportunities to offset it (e.g. County Lines).

18. Clearly, tackling the structural roots of youth violence requires much more sustained investment to address inequality and poverty as opposed to short-term 'fixes' that are often more attractive to Government (Brookman 2010, Pitts 2008).

Toxic Neighbourhoods.

19. Case and Haines (2019) argue that any strategy tackling youth violence should include addressing the underlying problem of 'toxic neighbourhoods' -"Environments become toxic and can cause crime when children's relationships and experiences fail to meet their basic needs, in particular, their right to be protected, nurtured and enabled to achieve positive outcomes". For Case and Haines, it is not a coincidence that the vast majority of knife crime takes place in neighbourhoods suffering from huge social disadvantage and disinvestment. Research from leading children's charities illustrates that funding for children and young people's services has reduced by £3 billion since 2010-11 (Children's Society, 2019). As Case and Haines (2019) put it "local council estates have been hollowed out by a decade of austerity which has ripped away funding for basic services for young people". They conclude: "knife crime is a social problem – its causes, not its symptoms, must be treated, and austerity is one of its causes. The UK needs to refill local communities with positive services and activities for young people" (Case & Haines, 2019).

Diverse and Complex Motivations

20. The Government's Strategy considers the following drivers of serious violence: drugs/drugs markets, Criminal Justice System effectiveness, the 'character' of offenders (focussing only on the age of offenders and, very briefly, the vulnerability of victims), alcohol and opportunities. They talk about 'high-risk markers', 'risk-factors' and, most worryingly, the use of algorithmic approaches to predict future offending (and victimisation). They fail to engage with any qualitative research that has been conducted with young people – as perpetrators of violence, victims or both, preferring to draw upon quantitative research from the United Sates. Yet there are decades' worth of insights from criminologists, other social scientists, youth workers and young people themselves about some of the motivators for involvement in violence. Structural disadvantage, inequality and the development of toxic neighbourhoods (discussed above) sets the stage for violence to emerge and flourish. However, there are a host of micro-situational factors that are important to consider also.

Factors at play in the micro-situational moment

21. My own research in the UK and Polk's in Australia clearly illustrate the power of trying to save face in confrontational homicides – especially amongst young males. Whether and how victims and offenders respond to one another depends upon a complex cocktail of situational factors.

22. To illustrate, Brookman and Wright (2017) present a number of detailed case studies of violence that demonstrate the importance of understanding both the positive and negative emotions that can emerge before, during and after violence, the role of adversaries, weapons effects and of the audience, and the often ignored distinction between planned attacks of violence (e.g. revenge) versus unplanned, spontaneous encounters.

23. **Adversary effects** refers to "the threat posed by the person or persons with whom an individual is in conflict" (Felson & Painter-Davis, 2012, p.1241). It has been suggested that would-be-offenders take into account adversary effects when deciding whether and how to attack or counter attack a protagonist. For example, Felson and Messner (1996) argue that offenders are more likely to have lethal intent when they expect their victims to be armed and willing to retaliate. This 'kill or be killed' approach is arguably more prevalent in communities where people are quick to retaliate and prone to carrying and using weapons (Felson & Painter-Davis, 2012). Stretesky and Progrebin (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with inmates convicted of gang-related gun violence and discovered that all 22 viewed their world on the street as fraught with danger. This fear, combined with a desire to display power, ensured that they armed themselves and were willing to use their weapons.

24. Those caught up in violent confrontations do not simply focus upon their adversary in deciding whether and how to respond; their 'decisions' can also be influenced by the effects of audience members. Whilst not all violence involve onlookers, those that do, it seems, evolve in ways that are dependent upon what the audience does or does not do, the relationship between combatants and the audience, as well as how the combatants perceive the audience. Collins (2008, p.203) analyzed the role of the audience in 89 first-hand observations of 'violence-threatening confrontations' and found strong parallels between the degree of encouragement or opposition by the audience and the amount of violence that occurred. For example, of those cases in which the audience encouraged the fight, 88% resulted in a serious fight, compared to 32% of the incidents where the audience remained neutral. Collins claimed that the influence of the audience was all the more powerful when at least one of the combatants was well known to the audience as this gives the actor a stake in maintaining or losing his reputation.

25. Finally there is some useful research on the role of emotion in the aetiology of violence (see Brookman & Wright, 2017; Brookman et al., 2017). In addition to the primary emotion of anger, moral emotions such as shame and humiliation have been identified as predominant features in violent offenders' accounts of their behaviour (Katz 1988; Walker & Bright 2009). For example, Gilligan (1996) found that homicide and violent offenders identified being "disrespected" or "ridiculed" as a key trigger for their violence because it engendered feelings of shame and humiliation. Gilligan, like Luckenbill (1977) and Athens (1997), explains how violence often stems from violent offenders' motivation to "save face". In short, the identification by criminologists and through ethnographic studies of the role played by excitement (the 'buzz') in the commission of some kinds of violence, or of the importance of ideas and feelings about 'reputation' and 'honour' or 'shame' in others, set challenges for the formulation of strategies which directly address these factors (Maguire et al., 2017).

26. A common theme that emerges from these studies (old and new) is that perpetrators of violence are influenced, *in the moment*, by a potentially vast array of incoming situational stimuli. Furthermore, the roles of victim and offender are sometimes reversed during violent episodes, with initial aggressors becoming victims. What this body of research starkly illustrates is that young people can be 'pushed' or 'pulled' into violence in numerous ways but that as well as attending to the underlying structural causes of violence it might be possible to tackle some of the micro-situational factors. **Understanding the 'lived reality' of young people in diverse communities is vital in any attempts to tackle violence (knife related or otherwise).**

27. In summary, some of the factors at play in the moments immediately before and during the (often fast paced) moments when violence occurs are:

- Saving 'face' / feeling 'disrespected'
- Adversary effect
- Weapons effects
- Bystander effects
- Emotions (actual and anticipated)

28. Finally, some researchers have carefully analyzed the accounts of violent offenders, focusing upon the interpretations they made of situations in which they *almost* committed violent acts (e.g. Athens, 1980; 1997; Hull, 2001). In essence this research reveals that those people who contemplate violence but do not proceed, are more likely to reinterpret the situation and forgive a perceived transgression, more likely to focus upon the (potential) victim's attempts to appease the situation or to adopt a lesser form of revenge. Interestingly, fear is associated with inhibiting violence as well as disinhibiting it.

Figure 1: Inhibitors to (lethal) Violence
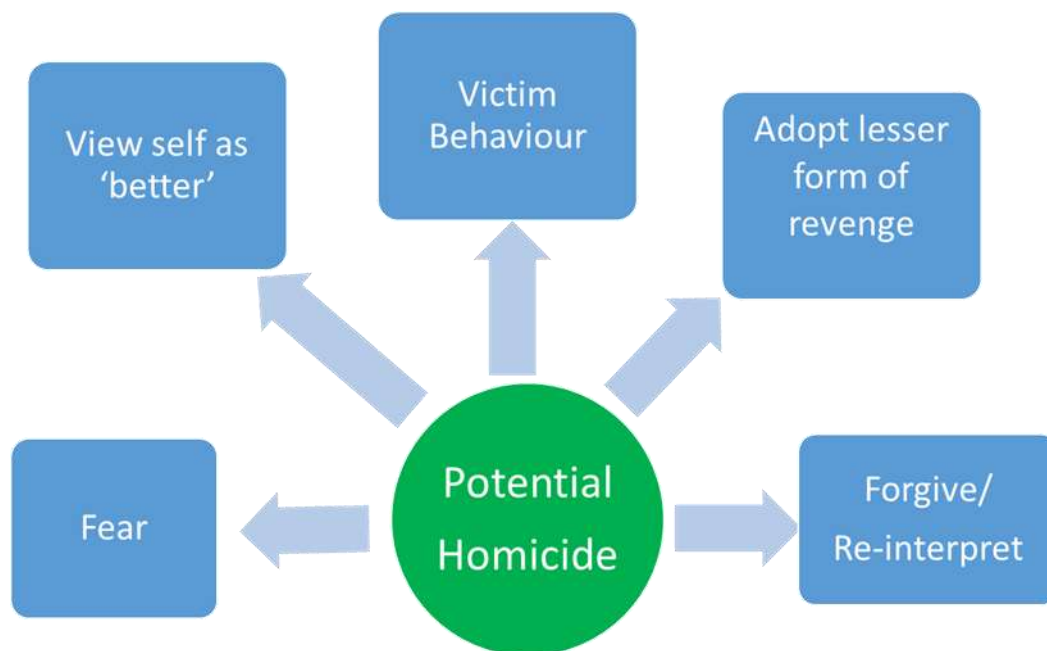
Source: Brookman, F. (forthcoming) *Understanding Homicide*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.

Media Messages

29. The media focus almost exclusively upon negative stories i.e. violent crime, terrorism and war and they rarely tell stories of the good things that young people do. They also mainly stay silent about peaceful/non-violent resistance and responses to violence across the world. There are many examples of violence being glorified (in war, in film, TV etc) and we need to dispel the myths that violence is heroic, fun and that it achieves anything of value. Julia Bacha is a filmmaker who has dedicated her work to documenting how Israelis and Palestinians are trying to end conflict using peaceful means. Her major observation is that there are dozens of examples of Palestinians defending their land through peaceful means but the international media do not tell these stories. She is working to make these important messages more visible so that these peaceful leaders and people become more valuable and effective. If peaceful means to such deep, entrenched cultural conflict can emerge and succeed, so too can the far less developed, often-times trivial disputes amongst young people on our streets here in the UK. The silences (from the international media) carry profound consequences for the likelihood that non-violence can grow or survive (see http://www.ted.com/talks/julia_bacha#t-91674). By contrast, the media's focus upon the 'knife crime youth problem' can have numerous negative effects.

Meaningfully Engaging Young People

30. There is considerable scope to involve young people (current and former offenders, victims where possible and young people in general) in a broad range of Government and other organisations' Steering Groups, Action Groups and Forums and, crucially, in the design and delivery of programmes of work that might help to steer young people away from violence and towards positive life choices. Far too often such groups fail to include the voice of young people who, after all, know better than any adults, what it is and how it feels to be a young person today. As Case and Haines (2019) put it "children are part of the solution to knife crime, not part of the problem".

Peer-to-peer educational or other support.

31. Peer-to-peer support and programme delivery can be flexibly adapted to young people with different needs and delivered in creative ways including through the use of art, crafts, drama or music and could run in tandem with the promotion of developing positive skills in, for example, mindfulness.

Children/Young People First, Offenders Second

32. Case and Haines (2015) argue that the prevention of first-time offending or reduction of reoffending, along with their associated negative behaviours and outcomes, should be reframed into work with children that targets the promotion of measurable, demonstrable and achievable positive behaviours and outcomes (e.g. school achievement, prosocial behaviour, engagement, participation) and positive outcomes (e.g. social inclusion, employment, qualifications, access to rights and entitlements). The Children's Society and many other youth organisations also advocate strongly for this approach.

Engage Credible Messengers and Supporters

33. Regardless of the nature of any new initiatives or schemes that might be introduced to tackle serous violence, it is important to bring members of diverse communities on board to help to positively promote them. Community members will only 'buy into' efforts that they believe in and so it would be important to engage the community at the developmental stages of new initiatives (e.g. given the controversy of stop and search, and well-documented damaging impacts upon police-community trust and relationships, communities would need to understand why and how this might be helpful as part of a wider set of proposed solutions).

Tackling the Homicide/Violence 'Moment'

34. Consideration should be given to turning what is known about **restraining judgements** into skills training for all young people when confronted with conflict. What we know about restraining judgements can be passed along to young people (in school, at home, in youth centres and via social media) in order to help them to find ways to avoid violent confrontation.   Compromise, walking away, and other

identifiable actions (that still allow young people to 'keep face' could be explored. At the same time let's also teach young people about empathy.

Improve Police-Community Relations

35. Where prevention fails, it is important that communities feel that violence, especially lethal violence, will be effectively investigated. Despite modern technology and forensic science, homicide investigators still rely upon the public and witnesses in order to help to solve homicide and the most difficult-to-solve homicides are invariably those lacking information profiles of any kind (e.g. CCTV, forensic science evidence) but especially a lack of human witnesses. Witnesses are unwilling (for many reasons) to engage with police (including fear of retaliation, distrust of police, lack of effective witness protection). Communities are the lynchpin to solving homicide and so it is important to find new ways to engage difficult-to-reach communities and their members who often hold important information. The FLO (Family Liaison Officer) role employed during homicide investigations (Brookman & McGarry, 2015) often works very well but could, with appropriate resources, be expanded to non-fatal violent crime investigations or used even more comprehensively in all murder enquiries.

Q 4. Is treating knife crime as a public health issue an effective approach?

36. The public health approach is one amongst many ways that knife crime might be approached. It is being advocated widely throughout government and amongst many practitioner groups and agencies. However, these various bodies often adopt different terminology and emphasis when discussing the public health approach that seems to have become something of a buzz phrase without a clear shared definition of this approach. Most importantly, there is no evidence yet from the UK that this approach works (despite some claims to this effect). That said, there is certainly effective collaborative work taking place in parts of the UK of the kind advocated by those who support the Public Health approach. For example, close collaborations in South Wales between Public Health Wales and South Wales Police over the past 25 years has helped to identify and map communities (including police beats) most impacted by violence by combining Accident and Emergency violence data with police data. This has allowed for targeted interventions (Michael, 2019; APCC, 2019). Nevertheless, claims that the Public Health Approach has been proven to work in tackling serious violence in South Wales has not been demonstrated.   Further, many of the discussions of the public health approach liken it to a contagious process, but say little about the role of structural disadvantage in creating the conditions for violence to emerge (see for example Ransford & Slutkin, 2017).

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