Fear and Fashion: Reducing the carrying and using of knives

Policy note from the multi-agency senior practitioners’ seminar, 3 November 2009
The notes below are drawn from the discussion at the policy seminar on knife crime held on 3 November. They are the author’s views, not the views of those who attended. This note sets out the priority areas for improving both understanding and practice in working with young people to reduce the carrying and using of knives.

1. Paradigms

The public and professional discourse about knife crime proceeds from a variety of starting points. The one that has been most heavily promoted by the Government has been the criminal justice paradigm. This is based on the idea that carrying or using a knife is an individual decision to commit a crime and therefore those that choose to do it should be detected (by stop and search or knife arches for example), charged (not cautioned), prosecuted and sentenced in a way consistent with the seriousness of the crime. For example, handing down less severe sentences for assaults with knives than assaults with guns is not defensible. In this view, a strong public interest - as is evidently the case for knife crime - requires exemplary sentencing with a view to deterring potential perpetrators as well as punishing those who have been caught and convicted.

An alternative perspective would be the sociological paradigm. In this view knife crime is a product of harmful changes in social structures in particular neighbourhoods. Young people are subject to more powerful peer influences and, simultaneously and proportionately, the influence of traditional ways of lives and the authority generation of parents and teachers has diminished. ‘Horizontal’ influences, as it were, have grown at the expense of ‘vertical’ ones. This growth in peer influences has led to ‘transgressive’ and violent fashions. This phenomenon has been noted since the 1960s when ‘mods and rockers’ were similarly associated with fashionable but violent lifestyles. These trends are observable in urban neighbourhoods in many countries of the world and are most marked in places with the highest levels of income inequality and the greatest social (often racial) tensions, such as South Africa, Brazil and some parts of the United States. In this analysis, the rise in knife crime comes about as a result of changes in culture and identity in some locations. Other sociological factors which may also have had an impact on rising knife crime are racial conflicts in some neighbourhoods, not just between black and white, but also so called ‘black on black’ conflict, territorial conflicts (which are not new, but seem to have a greater contemporary intensity), and neighbourhoods where aspirations are now absent and where family breakdown, poverty and social deprivation have become concentrated. Those with get up and go have got up and gone, leaving behind an alienated hardcore, ill-served by public services and law enforcement and prey to lawlessness and alternative criminal hierarchies. Subscribers to this view would argue that simply seeing knife crime as an act of individual criminal agency is simplistic and will achieve little in terms of deterrence and public protection in the longer term, which require prevention and education, as well as punishment.

Thirdly is the public health or epidemiological paradigm. This view of the world, not yet widespread but growing in influence, sees sudden rises in the incidence of certain types of crime as an ‘epidemic’ the causes (inequality, alienation, lack of aspiration) and consequences (prosecution, community hostility,
lack of victim empathy or remorse) of which all need to be addressed if the spread is to be contained and those affected are to be relieved of living with the problem. This is a multi-faceted and systemic approach.

Policy making can be eclectic, drawing from these three different mindsets, but it is nevertheless important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches which influence clarity of objectives, whether the measures will work at all and how long they will take to work. There is strong public (and media and political) support for punitive criminal justice approaches and a widespread belief that they represent a necessary and timely social response, but addressing the epidemiological or sociological underpinning of the problem of carrying and using knives requires an emphasis on prevention, protection and education, the beneficial effects of which take longer to be seen and, because of the time lag, are sometimes not noticed at all when they do finally appear. Public interest may by then have moved on to some other ‘crisis’. Long term family interventions of the sort promoted by Sure Start are particularly prone to the perception of short term failure, because their benefits are only to be seen in the long term, beyond political and media timelines. These long term approaches are nevertheless significant; in the end probably the most significant. Relying solely on criminal justice responses runs the risk of doing too much, too soon. On the other hand an absence of meaningful law enforcement leads the public to conclude that whatever is being done is too little and certainly too late.

2. Public interest

There may be many doubts amongst professionals who work with young people about the desirability or effectiveness of imposing custodial sentences on young people, but the strong public interest calling for a criminal justice response to knife crime cannot be doubted or denied. Political leaders and the Criminal Justice System would have found it difficult to defend a ‘business as usual, everything under control’ reaction. Something more was called for and something more was done: more arrests, more charges, and more custodial sentences. The Government’s Tackling Knives Action Plan has, after an initial focus on criminal justice responses, has more recently prioritized prevention and education.

3. Enforcement

As already noted, enforcement has improved. Detection is better, though stop and search remains controversial in some communities. Cautioning is less common and charging more common. And more custodial sentences are handed down. Knife crime has gone ‘up the tariff’ in response both to the rise in the incidence of knife crime and to the public concern. Some of those convicted of knife crimes have been ‘diverted’ away from custodial sentences and, though it is early days, that does seem to be producing a reasonable return in reducing re-offending. There is also some evidence from the work of Catch 22 with youth offending teams that targeted programmes for young offenders involved in knife or gun crime do seem to have an impact on reducing re-offending rates. The important lesson may be that
getting the knife-enabled element of the crime on to the charge sheet leads to that aspect of the crime being explicitly and proactively addressed during the sentence and that may be beneficial in reducing re-offending. This pattern has also been noted in harsher sentences for racially aggravated offences: noting the racist intention means that probation and youth offending staff can address that aspect of the crime directly. In other words, it may not be punitive sentences that make the key difference in reducing re-offending, but addressing explicitly particular aspects of the criminal behaviour, in this instance the use of the knife or the racist aggravation or motivation. More work is needed on inculcating empathy for the victims, for example through restorative justice, as a way of breaking the hold of strong, negative peer influences which may lead to a greater likelihood of re-offending. Promising results have been shown in evaluations of restorative justice and the Youth Justice Board’s emphasis on developing these approaches is welcome.

The number of knife-related fatalities is coming down and that suggests that some of these approaches have had an effect, though demonstrating that the more proactive enforcement is the factor that has had the most effect on reducing the incidence would be much more difficult. It may also be the case that the ‘fashion’ for using knives is passing on. Violent crime is not on the whole coming down, so other methods may be being used now to commit crimes which would hitherto have involved knives.

4. Peer influences

Reference has already been made to the ‘fashion’ element of knife crime. It does seem to be the case that violent fashions do arise ‘virally’ from the underground in certain neighbourhoods. Knife crime is not the first. Happy slapping was also a violent fashion for a while which has over time diminished. Carrying knives out of a misguided belief that they offer protection and carrying knives with a view to using them to threaten victims ahead of a theft cannot be regarded as fashion, but carrying knives because others do and using them in group disputes and conflicts can be regarded as unhealthy and destructive peer influences: a fashion in other words.

5. Aspirations, contributions, hope, choice

Too much work with young people is still problem-centred, focusing on a particular type of behaviour which may be self-destructive or destructive to others. It is as important, perhaps more important, to promote the positive engagement of young people with each other, with their communities and neighbourhoods, with their futures and with society as a whole. This requires young people to be encouraged to take a longer view of their own aspirations and to have a wider mental map of how their own behaviour fits in to society, rather than seeing themselves as an atomized individual who is only influenced by a few other like-minded young people and whose behaviour has little or no impact on other people, young or old. Work with young people needs to inculcate hope for the future, not just the absence of past problems. Cognitive approaches have showed promising results in widening horizons.
Important work has been done in Latin American countries on using welfare payments as ‘conditional cash transfers’ to incentivize a greater sense of personal agency and responsibility. These approaches could be profitable in encouraging young people to contribute to their community as well as developing higher aspirations for themselves. Personalised budgets which have been successfully implemented in social care and in supported housing could also have a larger role to play in work with young people, again as a way of inculcating a sense of personal responsibility and agency.

6. Parenting and family mediation

Although every parent feels hopeless and helpless some of the time, particularly if for example they suspect their child is carrying a knife, seeking professional help with parenting is still regarded as a stigma and therefore the only parents who are encouraged to seek that help, or indeed forced to take that help, are those parents whose children are a major problem to others. Parenting support should be like ante-natal classes, a universally accepted custom from which all benefit. Too many social care and youth work professionals also continue to regard parents and families as part of young people’s problems, not part of the solution; in other words the family is thought of as dangerous. As a consequence young people are not encouraged to maintain contact with their parents or siblings and inevitably that therefore lead isolated lives with only transient friends and relationships. Most young people and most of their parents want to have a good relationship and therefore a redoubled emphasis on rebuilding young people’s relationships with their parents through, for example, mediation is more beneficial than cutting young people adrift from their families and leaving them isolated in tough neighbourhoods and relying on professionals for support, which is often infrequently available and only during office hours.

7. Outcomes, evaluations, evidence-based practice

Across the board in social policy the emphasis placed on evaluation, evidence and achieving outcomes has grown in recent years. Some bemoan the amount of effort that goes into evaluation and producing evidence of, too them, self-evident benefits. Others worry that too much emphasis on evidence and evaluation de-prioritises innovation. But it is clear that the approach to some social policy areas, including work with young people, has lacked a robust evidence base and has therefore relied more heavily on hope and less conclusively on expectation. The results have been inevitably patchy and wasteful and so practitioners, including those in the voluntary sector, will have willy nilly to learn to live with a greater emphasis on data and standardized approaches to practice. The alternative is to continue with amateur, failed approaches lacking structure, method or content from which no one can realistically benefit, except for those paid a salary to continue to do the wrong thing. But, it should be re-iterated, that there will always be a need for innovation, however good the evidence, and there will always be a need for trusts and foundations to support innovation. Social policy and the practice that supports it must change at least as fast as the world changes and the world changes faster than ever before.
8. Relationships, skills, values

It is axiomatic that the best work with young people is done by those practitioners who have the best relationships with them. However, relationships are not enough. As noted, there also has to be structure, method and content. As important are skills and values. There is good evidence from recruitment studies to support the view that recruiting for values as well as skills beneficially removes the won’ts as well as the can’ts. Recruiters need to know what they are looking for and, as importantly, how they will know it when they see it.

Gerard Lemos

Lemos&Crane

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