

Knife Crime: Government Policy Debate on 27 June 2019

Summary

On 27 June 2019, the House of Lords is due to debate a motion moved by Lord Paddick (Liberal Democrat). The motion is that “this House takes note of the impact of government policy on knife crime”. This briefing sets out recent statistics relating to knife crime and provides an overview of government policy on the issue, alongside some of the reaction to it.

Data published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) demonstrates that in recent years, the level of offences involving a knife or sharp object has risen, in some cases reaching historic highs.

Responding to this rise in serious violence, including knife crime, the Government has announced a series of initiatives aimed at tackling the problem. These include: expanded police powers in relation to stop and search; ring-fenced funding to tackle knife crime; and a consultation on a new legal duty to support a multi-agency approach to preventing and tackling serious violence. These measures have received a mixed response. While some have welcomed the actions taken, others have argued the Government is not doing enough.

Is Knife Crime Increasing?

In recent years, ONS figures, along with data from the MoJ, have indicated an increase in the level of knife crime. The ONS data reports offences involving a knife or sharp object. The ONS has said that although the figures represent “a real rise in the occurrence of these types of crime, improvements in recording practices are also a factor”.¹

The number of homicides involving a knife or sharp object decreased last year following a historic high. In the year ending December 2018, there were 261 recorded homicides where a knife or sharp instrument was involved in England and Wales.² Although this represented a reduction of 4% from the previous twelve months, 4 in 10 (39%) of all recorded homicides still involved a knife or sharp instrument, the same proportion as the previous year. Earlier statistics, covering the year to March 2018, reported the highest number of knife and sharp instrument homicides in England and Wales (285 cases) since 1946, the year the Home Office homicide index began.³

Recent ONS statistics have also shown a rise in police recorded offences involving a knife or sharp instrument. In the year to December 2018, the police recorded 44,443 such offences, a volume rise of 6% on the previous year.⁴ This level of offences is the highest number reported since the year ending March 2011, the earliest point for which comparable data is available. The volume of knife crime has increased by 33% since that period. The most recent figures also show the continuation of a four-year trend showing a rise in recorded offences involving a knife or sharp instrument, following an initial decline. The offences ‘assault with injury and assault with intent to cause serious harm’ accounted for almost half of all offences involving a knife or sharp instrument (46%). Robberies accounted for a further 43%, with rape, attempted murder, sexual assault, and homicide all accounting for a much smaller proportion of offences (3%).

'Possession of an article with a blade or a point' offences also rose last year. They increased by 20% to 20,958.⁵ This rise is consistent with increases seen over the last five years. In addition, the amount (recorded in the year to December 2018) is the highest since the year ending March 2009, the earliest point for which comparable data is available. Commenting on the rise, the ONS contended that this figure "can often be influenced by increases in targeted police action in relation to knife crime, which is most likely to occur at times when rises in offences involving knives are seen".

Data published by the MoJ reflects the increases seen in police figures. The provisional figures cover cautions or convictions received for possession of a knife or offensive weapon in England and Wales, with offences of threatening with these types of weapons included.⁶ The trends highlighted by the MoJ included:

- **The number of knife and offensive weapon offences the criminal justice system (CJS) formally dealt with are at the highest level in nearly a decade.** The CJS dealt with 22,041 such offences in the year to March 2019. This compares to 16,438 in the year to March 2015 and is the highest number of offences dealt with since the year to March 2010 (23,667).
- **Offenders are now more likely to receive an immediate custodial sentence for a knife or offensive weapon offence.** In the year ending March 2019, 37% (8,219) of such offences resulted in an immediate custodial sentence, compared with 22% (6,109) in the year ending March 2009.
- **The average length of custodial sentences has increased.** Average sentences for knife and offensive weapon offences increased from 5.5 months to 8.1 months between the years ending March 2015 and March 2019, with 8.1 months also representing the longest average sentence in a decade.
- **The number of repeat offenders has risen.** Since the year ending March 2015, both the number and proportion of offenders who had one or more previous knife and offensive weapons possession offences increased year on year, rising from 25% (3,839 occasions) in the year to March 2015 to 28% (5,653 occasions) in the most recent figures. In addition, although 72% of offenders were dealt with for their first knife or offensive weapon possession offence in the year to March 2019, this figure has been decreasing and is now at its lowest level since the year ending March 2009 (80%).
- **The CJS also dealt with more first-time offenders.** The overall number of first-time offenders rose, continuing a five-year trend which has seen an increase from 11,429 in the year ending March 2014 to 14,183 in the year ending March 2019 (a 24% increase). This follows a 47% decrease between the year ending March 2009 and the year ending March 2014 (from 21,396 to 11,429).
- **The number of juvenile offenders convicted or cautioned for these offences rose.** The number increased by almost half (48%) between the year ending March 2015 and the year ending March 2019.
- **The number of adult offenders also increased.** While the number of adult offenders also rose, it did so by a smaller amount (31%) than juvenile offenders. However, adult offenders still accounted for 74% of the total increase in cautions and convictions between the years ending March 2015 and March 2019.⁷

NHS admissions data also provides an insight into offences involving knives and sharp instruments. In England, the NHS reported 4,986 admissions for 'assault by a sharp object' between April 2017 and March 2018. This was an increase of 15% compared with the year ending March 2017.⁸

Where is Knife Crime Most Prevalent and Who Does It Affect?

Urban areas have generally seen the highest rates of knife crime over recent years. The ONS reported that in the year ending December 2018, 33% of all crime involving a knife or sharp instrument happened in London (167 offences per 100,000 people).⁹ Outside of London, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, and the West Midlands had the highest rates (129, 118 and 111 offences per 100,000 population respectively). All these areas saw higher rates than the England and Wales average: 76 offences per 100,000 population. However, Merseyside saw the largest rise in these offences, with a 35% increase on the previous year. In contrast, Essex had the largest decrease: a 34% fall.

Young people have become increasingly involved in knife crime. In the year to March 2018, the number of homicide victims aged 16 to 24 increased by 45% compared to the previous year.¹⁰ In addition, the number of homicides committed by under-18s rose by 77% between 2016 and 2018.¹¹ The number of under-16s admitted to hospital due to knife attacks has also increased by 93% since 2012.¹² The ONS claims the figures have partially reflected an increase in serious violence in London and other cities “where young adults have been disproportionately affected”. In its *Serious Violence Strategy*, the Government refers to evidence suggesting the number of young people involved in episodes relating to knives is not part of a wholesale shift towards young offending.¹³

Government Policy and Responses

The Government has announced a series of initiatives aimed at tackling the issue of serious violence and knife crime. These measures have received a mixed response. While some have welcomed the actions taken, others have argued the Government is not doing enough. This section provides an overview of government policy and discusses some of the reaction to it.

Knife Crime Summit and Following Announcements

Prior to and during the serious violence summit held in April 2019, the Government announced several new measures to tackle knife crime. Chaired by the Prime Minister, Theresa May, the summit comprised of over 100 attendees, including: the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Cressida Dick; Patrick Green from the Ben Kinsella Trust; and Baroness Newlove, the then Victims’ Commissioner for England and Wales.¹⁴

Opening the summit, Mrs May stated that the rise in serious violence was a “deep-seated” issue that required a coordinated response.¹⁵ Focusing on actions to tackle the problem, Mrs May announced the creation of a ministerial taskforce that “will coordinate the Government’s role and make sure all departments are playing their part”. A new serious violence team, containing representatives from across government, would also be set up in the Cabinet Office. Mrs May said it would be “well-placed to assist local areas as they build operational equivalents in their own violence reduction units”. These units replicate action taken in London, where the mayor, Sadiq Khan, announced the creation of a violence reduction unit (VRU) in September 2018.¹⁶ The unit brought together specialists from health, police, local government, probation and community organisations to tackle violent crime and its underlying causes.

Although well received by some, the summit also drew criticism. For example, the chief executive of Barnardo’s, Javed Khan, welcomed the summit as an example of the Government and other organisations working together to find a solution. However, he also argued the need for better communication and information on the problem. He said:

To truly understand the scale of the problem and the root causes, it's vital healthcare professionals know what's going on in their area and keep accurate data and share information appropriately to help keep children safe.¹⁷

Reflecting on his attendance at the summit, the chair of the Police Federation, John Apter, contended that while everyone expressed a desire to end “this terrible epidemic”, he questioned “what next?”. Asserting that a “chat” will not solve the problem, he argued that the responsibility “lies firmly with the Government and it is in their gift to do something positive and decisive”.

Following the summit, other government ministers also made announcements relating to knife crime. For example, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Jeremy Wright, said that the Government had “renewed its commitment” to use sport to support young people in serious violence hot spots, through work with the Premier League and Sport England.¹⁸

In addition, making a statement to the House of Commons, the Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, announced he would “be making it simpler for the police, in the seven forces particularly affected by violent crime, to use section 60 (area-wide) stop and search powers where they reasonably believe that an incident involving serious violence may occur”.¹⁹ This pilot will run for up to a year, with a review after six months. He also reported that the College of Policing would work alongside forces to create new guidelines on how best the police can engage with communities on the use of stop and search.

The announcement of the extension of stop and search powers received both positive and negative reactions. Shadow Home Secretary, Diane Abbott, argued that “random stop and search doesn't work”. The Home Affairs spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, Ed Davey, agreed. He said the policy would not work and accused the Government of trying to tackle knife crime “on the cheap”.²⁰ Janet Daby (Labour MP for Lewisham East) also questioned whether young people would feel victimised by section 60 searches and would therefore not go to the police for protection and support.²¹ However, Huw Merriman (Conservative MP for Bexhill and Battle) described himself as a “firm advocate” of the use of section 60. He argued that stop and search had some impact and was potentially not being used enough.²² The Police Federation's John Apter also welcomed renewed support for stop and search, claiming it “had been lacking for far too long”, with “no credible alternative” available.²³

Spring Statement 2019

In the 2019 spring statement, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, announced additional funding to help the police target knife crime. He allocated £80 million for police forces in England, plus an additional £20 million of “reprioritised funding”.²⁴ The funding is ring-fenced to pay for additional overtime in relation to knife crime and for new violent crime reduction units “to deliver a wider cross-agency response to this epidemic”.

While some welcomed the announcement, it also some received criticism. Focusing on the purpose of the funding in a private notice question on knife crime, Louise Haigh, the Shadow Minister for Policing, argued:

We welcome the £100 million that was announced in the spring statement, but it is regrettable that it will be focused entirely on overtime and not on additional officers. Does the Minister [Victoria Atkins, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability] recognise how overstretched our police officers are, how much overtime they are already undertaking, how many rest days they have had cancelled and how much leave they are owed? Does she really believe that there is £100 million-worth of slack in the system to cover the additional overtime that is necessary this year?²⁵

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, also queried the intent of the funding. He said that as funding was not recurring, the Metropolitan Police would not be able to use it to recruit new officers.²⁶ He also argued that the amount was a “drop in the ocean” after years of decreasing police budgets.

Expressing mixed feelings upon the budget announcement, the chair of the Police Federation welcomed the funding, but also labelled it “a short-term fix”.²⁷ However, the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) stated that the funding would help to boost the number of officers patrolling crime hotspots; increase the use of stop and search; and help to disrupt criminal gangs.²⁸

Conservative Party Conference 2018

Sajid Javid announced several policies to tackle knife crime in his speech to the Conservative Party conference in October 2018. One policy was for the creation of a £200 million endowment fund to target young people at risk of starting a life of crime and violence. The charity Impetus—which aims to transform the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds—has since been appointed to help deliver the fund, which it is intended will support “a public health” approach to tackling serious violence.²⁹ In his speech, Mr Javid also said that changes in the market for illegal drugs was one of the causes of the rise in serious violence.³⁰ To address this, he announced a review of the illegal drugs market to look at who drug users are, what they take, and how they take it. Dame Carol Black is leading the review, with a call for evidence having been announced in May 2019.³¹ Mr Javid also spoke of plans for a new legal duty to support a multi-agency approach to preventing and tackling serious violence.³² This method for tackling knife crime is also referred to as a ‘public health approach’. Commenting on the duty, Mr Javid said it could create conditions for “relevant agencies and partners to collaborate and communicate regularly to share information and take effective coordinated action in their local areas”. A consultation launched by the Government on the proposed duty closed in May 2019, with the Government stating it is currently analysing the feedback received.³³

Following the announcement that the Government would consult on the proposal legal duty, several organisations expressed concern. The National Education Union’s Joint Secretary, Mary Bousted, said “neither the blame for or the solution to violent crime can be laid at the door of schools or front-line hospital staff”.³⁴ Shadow Home Secretary, Diane Abbott, agreed. She said although a “genuine” public health approach does work, this Government’s proposal would not.³⁵ She stated the Government’s reduction in public spending had contributed to the rise in violent crime. Also expressing concern, the Royal College of Nursing said that obligations to report people involved in violent crime could deter people “from seeking help for fear of being reported”.³⁶

However, the focus on a public health approach has also some received praise. For example, Gary Trowsdale, senior advisor to the Youth Violence Commission, said that the approach was “the way forward”, but required significant investment”.³⁷

Serious Violence Strategy

In his speech to the conference, Mr Javid also highlighted the Government’s *Serious Violence Strategy*. Published in April 2018, the strategy noted that while overall crime continued to fall, homicide, knife crime and gun crime had risen since 2014 across virtually all police force areas in England and Wales.³⁸ Framed on four key themes, the strategy set out the Government’s analysis of the trends relating to, and drivers of, serious violence. It also detailed the approach the Government planned to take to tackle the problem. It said:

We want to make clear that our approach is not solely focused on law enforcement, very important as that is, but depends on partnerships across a number of sectors such as education,

health, social services, housing, youth services, and victim services.³⁹

In relation to the four themes, government announcements referred to in the strategy included:⁴⁰

- **Tackling County Lines and Misuse of Drugs:** the Home Office announced the development of a new national county line coordination centre—a new multi-agency team of experts from the National Crime Agency (NCA), police officers and regional organised crime units⁴¹—as well as funding to support delivery of a new round of heroin and crack cocaine action areas, where partners are brought together to focus on the use of the drugs and offending in the local area.⁴²
- **Early Intervention and Prevention:** the Home Office has committed £11 million over the next two years through a new early intervention youth fund. It also announced that it would support the expansion of a youth violence intervention programme and continue to fund a young people’s advocates model. In addition, the Home Office would work with the Department for Education and OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) to focus on the risks surrounding crime and exclusion.
- **Supporting Communities and Partnerships:** the Home Office would support local partnerships through work with police and crime commissioners. It also committed £1 million of funding for both 2018/19 and 2019/20 for the community fund, and would continue the ending gang violence and exploitation (EGVE) fund and the EGVE review programme.
- **Effective Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Response:** the Home Office announced plans for new legislation to strengthen controls on knives, corrosive substances and firearms. This became the Offensive Weapons Bill (see ‘further policies’ section below). The Home Office also stated that it would work with Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to ensure its PEEL inspections⁴³ would focus on serious violence and that a thematic inspection of county lines in 2018/19 would take place.

Various parties have commented on the *Serious Violence Strategy* as a central part of the Government’s response to the rise in knife crime. Following the strategy’s publication, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee launched an inquiry into serious violence to assess the effectiveness of the Government’s approach to knife crime, gun crime and homicide.⁴⁴ The committee is currently taking evidence. Speaking to the committee, Sir Denis O’Connor, former Chief Inspector of Constabulary, criticised the strategy. Arguing it is “much more concerned with its narrative and less with action”, he said the strategy’s aim was “not absolutely clear beyond to make things better”. He thought more specific intentions would be valuable.⁴⁵ Sir Denis also found the analysis in the document to be “really inadequate”. He stated that while it contained “quite a lot about offenders”, there was a “gap on victims”, there was only one reference to places and it was silent on deterrence.⁴⁶ However, Sara Thornton, chair of the National Police Chiefs Council, provided a more positive view to the committee:

It is a really good strategy in terms of an understanding of the drivers of serious violence, but also thinking about what can we do in terms of organised crime in county lines, what can we do in terms of community and local intervention, what can we do about early intervention and also of course what can we do about law enforcement and criminal justice. Our concern is that it needs driving strongly and it also needs more co-ordinated and concerted resources behind it.⁴⁷

Suggesting improvements, she stated that “somebody at the very top of government needs to be driving the contributions” to the strategy, with clarity needed on what the short and long terms aims are.⁴⁸

However, on publication of the strategy, Diane Abbott, criticised it for not providing new money or extra police officers to tackle street violence.⁴⁹

Further Policies

Launched by the Home Office in March 2018, the #KnifeFree campaign intends to reduce knife crime among young people. Using real-life stories of young people who made the decision not to carry knives, the campaign highlights the consequences of carrying a knife and to encourage young people towards “positive alternatives”. As part of the campaign, the Home Office has worked with schools and the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Association to provide new material on knife crime ahead of the 2019 summer holidays. On 5 June 2019, 20,000 PSHE teachers received new lesson plans to help “further equip them to challenge myths and communicate to their pupils the realities of carrying a knife”. The lessons are for children aged between 11 and 16 years old.

In June 2018, the Government introduced the Offensive Weapons Bill in the House of Commons. It has since received royal assent.⁵⁰ The Act contains a range of measures intended to strengthen the law to help tackle violent crimes, particularly those involving knives and other bladed weapons, certain firearms and corrosive substances. Many of the measures relate to the sale or possession of such items. While some have come into force, the majority are yet to. In relation to knife crime, the Act aims to:

- strengthen the arrangements for the online sale of bladed articles, bladed products, and corrosive products; and
- prohibit the possession of certain offensive weapons, such as flick and butterfly knives.

Overall, the Act received cross-party support. However, it did receive some criticism from Labour and the Scottish National Party during its progress through Parliament, with both parties’ criticising the firearms provisions in the legislation.⁵¹

Further Information

- House of Lords Library, [Knife Crime: Policy and Causes](#), 21 May 2019
- Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, [Early Interventions to Reduce Violent Crime](#), 16 April 2019

¹ Office for National Statistics, [‘Crime in England and Wales: Year Ending December 2018’](#), 25 April 2019.

² *ibid.*

³ Office for National Statistics, [‘Homicide in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2018’](#), 7 February 2019.

⁴ Office for National Statistics, [‘Crime in England and Wales: Year Ending December 2018’](#), 25 April 2019: the police recorded 44,443 offences involving a knife or sharp instrument in the year ending December 2018. However, due to an undercounting issue, data collected by Greater Manchester Police (GMP) is not comparable over time. Therefore, the volume rise of 2,287 offences (6%) to 40,829 offences has been calculated through excluding GMP data.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Ministry of Justice, [Knife and Offensive Weapon Sentencing Statistics, England and Wales—Year Ending March 2019](#), 13 June 2019, pp 1–6.

⁷ *ibid.*

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¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, [‘Homicide in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2018’](#), 7 February 2019.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Emily Lindsay Brown et al, [‘Knife Crime: Causes and Solutions—Editors’ Guide to What Our Academic Experts Say’](#), *Conversation*, 11 March 2019

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- ¹⁴ Mark White, '[Knife Crime: PM Hosts Downing St Summit on 'Deep-Seated' Problem](#)', Sky News, 2 April 2019.
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- ²² *ibid*, col 303.
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- ²⁴ HM Treasury and Home Office, '[£100 Million Funding for Police to Tackle Violent Crime](#)', 13 March 2019.
- ²⁵ [Private Notice Question on 'Emergency Summit on Knife Crime'](#), *HC Hansard*, 22 March 2019, col 1399.
- ²⁶ Mayor of London, '[Mayor: Spring Statement Shows Government Failing Due to Brexit](#)', 13 March 2019.
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- ²⁹ Home Office, '[Charity Chosen to Deliver £200m Youth Endowment Fund to Tackle Violence](#)', 23 March 2019.
- ³⁰ Conservative Party, '[Sajid Javid Speech to Conservative Party Conference 2018](#)', 2 October 2018.
- ³¹ Home Office, '[Review of Drugs: Call for Evidence](#)', 10 May 2019.
- ³² Home Office, '[Consultation on a New Legal Duty to Support a Multi-Agency Approach to Preventing and Tackling Serious Violence: Government Consultation](#)', 1 April 2019.
- ³³ Home Office, '[Closed Consultation: Serious Violence: New Legal Duty to Support Multi-Agency Action](#)', 1 April 2019.
- ³⁴ Helen Warrell, '[Theresa May Urges Multi-Agency, Community Response to Knife Crime](#)', *Financial Times* (£), 1 April 2019.
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