

**Kent County Council**  
**Select Committee – Knife Crime in Kent**  
**Briefing note – 9 May 2019**

After falling for several years, it appears that knife crime in England and Wales is rising again. The Home Office reports that there were 39,818 knife crime offences in the 12 months ending September 2018. This is a two-thirds increase from the low-point in the year ending March 2014, when there were 23,945 offences, and is the highest number since comparable data was compiled. These statistics do not include those from Greater Manchester Police because of data recording issues. Nonetheless, out of the 44 police forces, 42 recorded a rise in knife crime since 2011.<sup>1</sup>

**Hospital admissions for knife assaults**

Data from NHS hospitals in England over a similar period showed an 8% increase in admissions for assault by a sharp object, leading the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to conclude there had been a "real change" to the downward trend in knife crime. Doctors reported that the injuries they were treating were becoming more severe, and that the victims were getting younger, with increasing numbers of girls involved.<sup>2</sup>

**What crimes knives are used for**

In the latest figures released by the Home Office - which include only selected knife offences - about half (19,761) were assaults that caused an injury or where there was an intent to cause serious harm; a further 18,556 involved robberies.<sup>3</sup>

**Homicides committed by knife**

In terms of homicides, the Home Office reports that, in about two out of every five killings, the victim was fatally assaulted with a sharp object or stabbed to death. The number of knife-related homicides went from 272 in 2007 to 186 in 2015. Since then it has risen every year, with a steep increase in 2017-18, when there were 285 killings, the highest figure since 1946. One in four victims were men aged 18-24. The figures also show 25% of victims were black - the highest proportion since data was first collected in 1997.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News (14 March 2019) Ten charts on the rise of knife crime in England and Wales, online, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42749089>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

### **Most violent attacks involve no weapons**

Although knife crime is on the increase, it is relatively unusual for a violent incident to involve a knife, and for someone to need hospital treatment. Most violence is caused by people hitting, kicking or shoving.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales, which includes offences that aren't reported to police, indicates that overall levels of violence have fallen by about a quarter since 2013. However, the police-recorded statistics - which tend to pick up more "high harm" crimes - have indicated that the most serious violent crime is increasing.<sup>5</sup>

### **Most perpetrators of knife crime are over 18**

According to the Ministry of Justice, in the year to September 2018, 21,381 people were cautioned, reprimanded or convicted for carrying a knife in England and Wales, most of whom were adults. One in five (4,459) was under the age of 18 - the highest number for eight years.<sup>6</sup>

### **Regional variation in knife crime offences**

The Home Office reports that knife crime tends to be more prevalent in large cities, particularly in London. For every 100,000 people in the capital, there were 168 knife offences in 2017-18, with separate figures, from the mayor's office, showing that young black and minority ethnic teenage boys and men were disproportionately affected, as both victims and perpetrators.

Next highest was the West Midlands, with 72 knife offences per 100,000 population, and Yorkshire and the Humber, 79.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

## **Knife crime in Kent**

The Guardian reports ONS figures to show that Kent experienced the largest, recent increase of knife crime in England and Wales. Between April 2010 and September 2018 knife crime in the county increased by 152%.<sup>8</sup>

### **General explanations for the rise in knife crime at national level**

Explanations for rising knife crime have ranged from police budget cuts, to gang violence and disputes between drug dealers. The decline in the use by police of stop and search has also been cited by some as a possible cause.

Anecdotal evidence from the police suggests that young people are now more inclined to carry knives because of growing confidence that they will not be stopped.<sup>9</sup>

### **Additional explanations for the rise in knife crime in Kent**

In addition to general explanations, more specific reasons put forward for the rise in knife crime in Kent are the spillover of violence from “county lines” – drug dealing that involves urban gangs moving drugs and cash between city hubs and provincial areas – as well as London councils’ relocation of homeless families to outside the capital.<sup>10</sup>

The multi-agency Kent and Medway Gangs Strategy 2018-2021 warns of “a steady increase in the number of gangs operating across Kent and Medway – from mostly London-based street gangs venturing into Kent to sell drugs, to the development of local ‘homegrown’ gangs.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Guardian (10 March 2019) County lines drugs blamed for Kent's big rise in knife crime, online, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/mar/10/county-lines-drugs-kent-knife-crime-rise-cuts>

<sup>9</sup> BBC News (14 March 2019) Ten charts on the rise of knife crime in England and Wales, online, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42749089>

<sup>10</sup> The Guardian (10 March 2019) County lines drugs blamed for Kent's big rise in knife crime, online, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/mar/10/county-lines-drugs-kent-knife-crime-rise-cuts>

<sup>11</sup> See the Kent and Medway Gangs Strategy 2018-2021

## National initiatives and strategies to tackle knife crime

Recent national strategies and initiatives to tackle knife crime include the following.

### The Offensive Weapons Bill 2017-19

The Offensive Weapons Bill 2017-19 is currently being debated by Parliament. New restrictions on the possession, sale and supply of knives are one of the key items covered by the Bill.<sup>12</sup>

The key changes that the Bill (as introduced) would make are as follows:

- new restrictions on online sales of bladed articles and corrosive products, including restrictions on deliveries to residential premises;
- a new offence of possessing certain offensive weapons in private (this includes particular types of knives, such as flick knives, gravity knives and “zombie” knives);
- a new offence of possessing a corrosive substance in a public place;
- a new offence of selling certain harmful corrosive products to under18s; and
- reclassifying certain firearms as “prohibited weapons” under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968.<sup>13</sup>

### Stiffer sentences

Public anxiety about knife crime, legislative changes and firmer guidance for judges and magistrates have led to the stiffer sentences, although offenders under 18 are still more likely to be cautioned than imprisoned.<sup>14</sup>

The average prison term for those jailed for carrying a knife or other offensive weapon has gone up from almost five months to well over eight months, with 85% serving at least three months, compared with 53% only 10 years ago.<sup>15</sup>

Sentences for all kinds of violent crime have been getting tougher, particularly for knife crime. The Ministry of Justice tracks the penalties imposed for those caught carrying knives and other offensive weapons in England and Wales. In the year ending December 2018, 37% of those dealt with were jailed and a further 18% were given a suspended prison sentence. The figures for 2008, when the data was first compiled, were 20% and 9% respectively. Over the same period, there has been a

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<sup>12</sup> House of Commons Library (25 march 2019) The Offensive Weapons Bill 2017-19, online, [file:///C:/Users/romagg01/Downloads/CBP-8349%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/romagg01/Downloads/CBP-8349%20(1).pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> BBC News (14 March 2019) Ten charts on the rise of knife crime in England and Wales, online, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42749089>

<sup>15</sup> BBC News (14 March 2019) Ten charts on the rise of knife crime in England and Wales, online, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42749089>

steady decline in the use of community sentences, and a sharp drop in cautions, from 30% to 11%.<sup>16</sup>

### The Serious Violence Strategy

The Serious Violence Strategy (2018) represents a significant programme of work involving a range of Government departments and partners in the public, voluntary and private sectors. This strategy stresses the importance of early intervention to tackle the root causes of violence and provide young people with the skills and resilience to lead productive lives free from violence.

The Strategy acknowledges the rise of knife crime across virtually all police forces areas in England and Wales. These increases have been accompanied by a shift towards younger victims and perpetrators.

The strategy is framed on four key themes: tackling county lines and misuse of drugs, early intervention and prevention, supporting communities and partnerships, and an effective law enforcement and criminal justice response.

Activities set out by the Strategy include the following.

- The establishment of a new Inter-Ministerial Group on the Serious Violence Strategy in order to oversee and drive delivery of this strategy. This will be chaired by the Home Office and will meet on a quarterly basis. Membership will include Ministers from the Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Work and Pensions, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Ministry of Justice, the Wales Office, and the Attorney General's Office, as well as the relevant NPCC Lead and senior representation from the NCA.
- The Home Office will also establish a new cross-sector Serious Violence Taskforce which will include key representatives from national and local government, police and crime commissioners and key delivery partners including representatives from health, education and industry.
- Testing and evaluation of early interventions aimed at preventing violence.
- National events with key sectors and further engagement with key partners including Police and Crime Commissioners, Community Safety Partnerships, police, local authority and health professionals, and academics.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> HM Government (2018) Serious Violence Strategy

## UK Youth Parliament – Make Your Mark

As knife crime has continued to climb over the last few years, the UK Youth Parliament believed that the issue needed to be addressed. In the 2018 “Make Your Mark” ballot, over 196,000 young people aged 11-18 from across the UK voted to put an end to knife crime. Members of Youth Parliament voted at the House of Commons to make this the England only campaign for 2019.

## **Local initiatives and strategies**

There are numerous initiatives and strategies that contribute to tackling knife crime in the county.

### The Kent and Medway Gangs Strategy 2018-2021

The strategy is a multi-agency partnership endeavour involving organisations including both Kent and Medway’s Community Safety Partnerships, and Safeguarding Children Boards. The strategy’s vision is to “protect and prevent young people from becoming involved with gangs; to tackle gang-related harm and youth violence; and to pursue effective enforcement action to deal with those embroiled in gang activities”.<sup>18</sup>

The Strategy informs that the average age of a gang nominal operating in the county is 15, but that younger children can also be part of these gangs – the youngest reported in the county was 10 years old. This highlights the importance of teaching young children about the risks of gangs and gang related crime early, so they are equipped to act appropriately if the circumstances should arise.<sup>19</sup>

Collaborative work has involved organisations and initiatives such as the following:

- In 2016 Kent County Council undertook a review of its youth justice provision and changed the configuration of its service from the criminal justice based model of onward referral and intervention, based primarily on offending behaviour, to an adolescent risk model which recognises and addresses the broader context of adolescent risk – including a greater focus on ensuring that children and young people are engaged in education, training or employment.
- Kent Police has adapted to meet the demands caused by the emergence of ‘home grown’ gangs and ‘county lines’ crime. Under the New Horizon model Kent Police has formed Gangs Investigation Teams, dedicated to tackling gangs in each division. As part of this process a gangs matrix has been developed to help identify and map the individuals involved in gang activities and to assess the threat, risk and harm they pose. Kent Police has also recently been restructured

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<sup>18</sup> See the Kent and Medway Gangs Strategy 2018-2021

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

to enable the force to better protect the most vulnerable people in the county from crime and exploitation. As part of this redesign, 20 Youth Engagement Officers have been recruited specifically to work with young people at risk of abuse and neglect, including through gang involvement.

- The Margate Taskforce has achieved notable success in the proactive identification of individuals vulnerable to gang exploitation. This was achieved primarily through the use of peer group analysis i.e. producing a visual network of individuals known to be involved in gangs, employing intelligence obtained from different organisations to map their relationships. This process was then used to identify schools that would benefit from awareness raising sessions on gangs and individuals who would benefit from a Family Support Panel. In addition, the Taskforce used geo-mapping to assess safeguarding risks by identifying 'hot spots' of activity that could then be targeted.
- Medway Community Safety Partnership, in partnership with the Council's Youth Services and the Woodlands Centre, made a successful bid to the Home Office Knife Crime Fund in 2017. This funding has allowed Medway to pilot early intervention work in schools looking at negative peer groups, joint enterprise, Child Sexual Exploitation and gang association. It has also enabled the Council to undertake training with professionals to educate and inform the workforce about gangs (including gang recruitment processes e.g. via social media) as well as to run youth engagement work and sports events designed to focus young people on positive activities and to divert them from gang involvement.
- The Integrated Offender Management (IOM) scheme aims to create a coherent framework for partners to manage adult and young offenders who are committing the most crimes and causing harm to local communities. The scope of the IOM has recently been expanded to include gang nominals, which is a positive step.<sup>20</sup>

### The Violence Reduction Challenge

When the Government published its national Serious Violence Strategy in 2018, Kent's Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Matthew Scott launched a Violence Reduction Challenge - a year-long study working with victims, residents, charities, statutory bodies and others to learn about people's experiences of violent crime, its causes, and how it can be tackled. The publication of a report detailing the finding and recommendations outcomes of the VRC will follow.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Kent Police Crime Commissioner (2019) Violence Reduction Challenge, online, <https://www.kent-pcc.gov.uk/what-we-do/projects-and-campaigns/violence-reduction-challenge/>

In addition, the PCC has created a £1m Violence Reduction Fund to invest in projects which aim to cut violent crime in Kent and Medway, and a multi-agency task force in Medway to enable partners to work closer together to deal with some of the underlying causes of crime.<sup>22</sup>

### Kent Police Campaign - 'Don't let a knife take life'

Kent Police has recently launched a dedicated Kent campaign 'Don't let a knife take life' to tackle knife crime and highlight the risks of carrying a knife. The focus of the campaign is prevention, delivered through an education and support initiative, which has been designed to assist schools and youth groups to independently talk to students about knife crime. The resource pack includes a class/group discussion exercise, support literature for both students and parents/carers and posters.<sup>23</sup>

### Operation Sceptre in Kent

The campaign, which was designed to support targeted enforcement and raise awareness of knife crime in the country, ran from Monday 11 – Sunday 17 March 2019.

In Kent, more than 26 weapons including knives, blades, a chainsaw and a baseball bat were recovered by officers put on dedicated patrols to support Op Sceptre.

Districts such as Canterbury, Dartford and Tunbridge Wells saw proactive weapon sweeps and community engagement events at key locations such as train stations, shopping centres and high streets in partnership with local councils and the British Transport Police (BTP).

Of the weapons seized, one of them was a large hunting knife found by officers from the Community Policing Team in Medway after they stopped and searched a vehicle in Rochester on Tuesday 12 March. Three people were arrested and suspected class A drugs were seized.

Following the successes of Operation Sceptre in the county, Kent Police announced that it would continue its level of enforcement action targeting knife crime.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kent Police Crime Commissioner (25 march 2019) £1m fund announced to tackle causes of violent crime, online, <https://www.kent-pcc.gov.uk/news/2019/03-march/£1m-fund-announced-to-tackle-causes-of-violent-crime/>

<sup>23</sup> Kent Police (2019) Knife Crime, online, <https://www.kent.police.uk/advice/knife-crime/>

<sup>24</sup> Kent Police (20 March 2019) Robust stance against knife crime to continue following Operation Sceptre successes, online, <https://www.kent.police.uk/news/policing-news/0319/robust-stance-against-knife-crime-to-continue-foll/>