

Smart Justice

“Smart action for a safer community”

Reducing knife carrying and knife violence

Solutions that work, not solutions designed to sound tough

Despite recent attention, there is little evidence that illegal knife carrying or knife violence is increasing. Media stories have created a perception that violent crime, perpetrated by young people with knives, is on the increase.

Any knife crime is unacceptable - we need to reduce illegal knife carrying and knife violence. But we need solutions which are proportional to the problem. We need solutions based on what has been proven to work, not solutions designed to sound tough but which may make things worse.

Knife carrying and knife violence are separate issues requiring different policy responses

Knife carrying is most commonly done by very young people who feel the need to protect themselves. Research suggests that the vast majority of those who carry knives never use them in violent crime, and grow out of the habit – knife carrying peaks at 14 years of age.¹ Although no single factor causes knife carrying, research indicates that fear and insecurity is a major factor, and that the influence of family, school and peer group is also important.² While males are much more likely to carry knives than females, there is no evidence that race or ethnicity is a factor in knife carrying.³

Knife violence is associated with quite different demographics and behaviours. Research suggests that both the perpetrators

and victims of knife violence tend to be older – peaking in the late teenage years and early twenties – and there is a strong correlation between involvement in the drug trade and use of knives in violence.⁴

Police data shows that assaults and robberies with knives have not increased

There is little evidence suggesting that *knife carrying* is increasing. What we hear is based on anecdotal reports and selective media reporting.

Although individual cases of *knife violence* have been highlighted in the media, Victoria Police crime statistics do not show an increase in knife violence. In fact, police data over the past decade shows:

- assaults with knives have remained constant when adjusted for population increase; and
- robberies with knives have dropped significantly.⁵

| Year | Robbery where a knife was used /threatened /displayed | Offences per 100,000 population | Assault where a knife was used /threatened /displayed | Offences per 100,000 population |
|---------|---|---------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1999/00 | 957 | 20.2 | 963 | 20.3 |
| 2008/09 | 752 | 14 | 1087 | 20.3 |

Research on reducing knife carrying and knife violence

Research suggests that the policy response to knife carrying and knife violence should address the distinct causes of these two problems. Unfortunately, many of the current policy proposals are focused on appearing “tough on knife crime” and are in fact likely to be ineffective or, at worst, counterproductive.

Stop and search powers breach human rights and may make the problem worse

In 2009, the Victorian Government passed laws giving police new powers to search anyone (including children) in designated areas, without any suspicion of wrongdoing. The Government admitted the

powers violate the Victorian Human Rights Charter, including the right to privacy and children's rights.

Research and analysis of similar powers introduced in the United Kingdom questions the effectiveness of the powers in reducing knife carrying⁶ and knife violence.⁷ Worse, the powers may be counterproductive as they disproportionately affect young people and marginalised groups, straining relations with police and leading to greater insecurity – a major motivation for young people to carry knives.⁸

Recent detailed Victorian research on preventing knife carrying concluded that the stop and search powers were not warranted.⁹

Tougher penalties are unlikely to deter knife carrying

In 2007 the government doubled penalties for knife carrying¹⁰. Overseas experience demonstrates that tougher penalties do not have a deterrent effect on knife carriage,¹¹ and that imprisoning more people simply increases the rate of reoffending after release.¹²

Knife amnesties may make the problem worse

Although knife amnesties create photo opportunities and the impression that something is being done, they are ineffective in reducing knife carrying. Given the wide availability of knives, an amnesty cannot noticeably impact on supply, unlike gun amnesties. In fact, the publicity associated with amnesties may exacerbate the feeling of insecurity which fuels knife carrying.¹³

Smart Justice solutions

Smart justice solutions to *knife carrying* are about dealing with the causes of knife carrying through early intervention and education campaigns – not through harsh law enforcement and punishment and breaching human rights.

Three areas for intervention suggested by recent research are:¹⁴

- *Information dissemination and education*
A targeted, long-term information campaign is an essential part of reducing knife carriage. The campaign should work at various levels, from the general - including mass media, school curriculum and parents – to the specific – including juvenile offenders. The Victorian Government's *Knives Scar Lives* campaign is generally a positive development in this area – particularly its use of role models to promote the message.
- *More support services for young people at risk*
Research shows that young people who carry knives often face multiple and interrelated problems including drug dependence, victimisation, homelessness and mental health issues. The Victorian Government's recently announced funding for 55 new youth workers is a welcome initiative in this regard. Specific programs targeting weapons carriage in services already catering to these groups could also be effective in reducing knife carrying.
- *Creating safer communities*
As long as young people feel unsafe in their communities, weapon carrying will continue. Programs designed to create safer communities with the active participation of young people can play a role in overcoming this.

Knife violence should be dealt with as part of a broader campaign to reduce violent crime, and the harms associated with drugs and alcohol. Refer to our other factsheets for more information on this.

This factsheet was produced on 25 May 2010

- 1 Bondy and others, *Living on Edge: Understanding the social context of knife carriage among young people* (2005), vii, 23, 112.
- 2 Bondy above n 1, vii; Eades and others, *Knife Crime: A review of evidence and policy* (2007) Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 23.
- 3 Bondy above n 1, vii-viii.
- 4 Bondy above n 1, vii.
- 5 Victoria Police Crime Statistics 1999/00, p 116 and 2008/09, p 23 & 25. See the Smart Justice factsheet on crime statistics for information on different methods of measuring crime.
- 6 Silvestri and others, *Young People, Knives And Guns* (2009), 44.
- 7 Fitzgerald, *Analysis of MPS Knife Crime Data and the use of s60 searches* (2010), 4-6; Travis, "Police stop and search 'not cutting knife crime', new figures suggest" *The Guardian* 24 January 2010; Totaro "Doubt case on London knife drive" *The Age* 27 February 2010
- 8 Bondy above n 1, x, 25.
- 9 Bondy above n 1, 134.
- 10 *Control of Weapons Amendment (Penalties) Act* (2007)
- 11 Eades above n 1, 29.
- 12 Silvestri above n 11, 44.
- 13 Eades above n 1, 27-28.
- 14 Bondy above n 1, 127-136.