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TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH FOR YOUTH JUSTICE

Transdisciplinary Research for Youth Justice (TRYJUSTICE)

Response to the Crime and Policing Bill: Knife Crime Factsheet

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Dr Hope Kent, University of Exeter
Professor Adeela Shafi, University of Gloucestershire
Professor Huw Williams, University of Exeter
Aaron Ankrah, Expert by Lived Experience
Dr Kathy Hampson, University of Aberystwyth
Dr Sean Creaney, Edge Hill University
Lee Manning, Youth Custody Service
Thomas Procter-Legg, University of Oxford
Professor Jonathan Hobson, University of Gloucestershire
Ariane Hanman, University of Salford
Gregory Davies, University of Bristol
Andy Watch, Vinney Green Secure Children's Home
Dr Tristan Middleton, University of Gloucestershire
Professor Stan Gilmour, University of Exeter

Author Note: *The views expressed in this paper represent the collective position of the TRYJustice network, but do not necessarily reflect the views of individual members or their affiliated organisations.*

University of Exeter · University of Gloucestershire · Prifysgol Aberystwyth University · University of Oxford · Edge Hill University · University of Salford Manchester · University of Bristol

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Introduction

We are writing in response to the Crime and Policing Bill: Knife Crime Factsheet published on the 25th February 2025. TRYJustice (Transdisciplinary Research for Youth Justice) are a network of academics, experts by lived experience, and practitioners. We share the common goal of reducing the number of children who come into contact with the law, and improving life outcomes for those who do. Our academic members span disciplines including criminology, sociology, psychology, education, law, and health. We formed in 2021, in recognition of the fact that siloed working creates barriers to evidence-based policymaking in youth justice.

Summary

Addressing knife-related crime has been identified as a priority for the current government, and the Safer Streets Mission identifies a goal of halving knife crime. This Crime and Policing Bill introduces three key measures to be introduced in accordance with this target. Firstly, the power for police to seize, retain, and destroy knives held on private property. Secondly, an increase in the maximum penalty for offences including private possession, manufacture, sale, or supply of prohibited offensive weapons, and the sale of knives to those under the age of 18. Thirdly, the introduction of a new offence for the possession of a knife or offensive weapon in public or private, with intent to use it unlawfully against another person.

Response

As a network, we are motivated to see a reduction in the number of children who are harmed by knife crime, both as victims and as those drawn into offending. We support the Government's commitment to addressing serious youth violence and welcome efforts to prevent the sale and distribution of dangerous weapons, particularly to children. We believe this Bill would benefit from further insights drawn from a transdisciplinary, child-centred perspective - one that draws on research and lived experience across criminology, psychology, education, health, and social care. In this context, we offer the following reflections on how the Bill might be strengthened to more effectively protect children and prevent violence in the long term. A summary of our key recommendations can be found at the end of this response.

Framing of the problem

Firstly, we urge caution in the framing of knife crime as a problem within public discourse and public response. The presentation of knife crime as an escalating and distinct threat risks generating fear, particularly among children and young people, which may in turn contribute to the very behaviours this Bill seeks to prevent. Robust evidence identifies that fear is a

central driver of knife-carrying (Figueira et al., 2024). The narrative that knife crime is exceptionally prevalent or uniquely dangerous, which is often picked up and amplified by media outlets, may therefore be self-perpetuating.

We are also concerned about the way data are presented in the Factsheet. References to "knife-enabled crimes" are not disaggregated and appear to conflate very different types of incidents - from simple possession to serious violence. Notably, many offences involving knives are possession-related rather than involving demonstrated intent or actual harm. Police-recorded crime statistics reflect only those offences detected and pursued, and may be shaped by policing priorities, practices, and resource distribution rather than underlying prevalence. Furthermore, comparisons of homicide statistics by weapon type lack clear interpretive value and risk distorting the public understanding of violence. Knife use is often a feature of broader incidents of serious violence, not a separate category of crime. Understanding and preventing serious violence therefore may be a more constructive approach than focussing solely on knife crime.

We would therefore strongly encourage a shift in emphasis away from an offence-based lens, and towards understanding the function of carrying a knife. This includes attending to systemic factors such as unmet social care needs, educational exclusion, community deprivation, and perceived or actual vulnerability. Many people who come into contact with the justice system in relation to knife offences have experienced *multiple and compounding* disadvantages, and their behaviour is often symptomatic of broader systemic failure.

A further challenge is the prevailing discourse, at times explicit but normally implicit, that criminalised children are rational beings or 'rational actors' who must be held accountable and taught the consequences of engaging in knife crime or other criminal acts. Aside from the lack of acknowledgement of social harms, such as exploitation, forms of modern slavery and other injustices (Gray & Smith, 2024), this overemphasis on children's personal shortcomings can be an impediment to growth. This discourse of rational actor theory remains problematic in a context of unidentified and unmet needs yet historically it has underpinned criminal justice responses (Steele, 2016).

We would therefore strongly encourage a shift in emphasis away from an offence-based lens, and towards understanding the function of carrying a knife. This includes attending to systemic factors such as unmet social care needs, educational exclusion, community deprivation, and perceived or actual vulnerability. Many people who come into contact with the justice system in relation to knife offences have experienced multiple and compounding disadvantages (Kent et al., 2025), and their behaviour is often symptomatic of broader systemic failure. We suggest that the Government's aim to reduce knife crime, particularly in children and young people, can only be met through a broader public health and child-centred approach, rather than a singular focus on criminal justice interventions. Central to this is a renewed focus on re-engaging children with education (ahmed Shafi et al., 2023), and adopting evidence-informed strategies - such as peace education or restorative practices -

which equip children to navigate conflict without resorting to violence or fear (Hobson et al., 2022). Equally important is ensuring that the voices of children with lived experience of the justice system, alongside the perspectives of frontline professionals, are embedded within policy design and implementation (Creaney & Burns, 2024). See Appendix 1 for a further discussion of research-informed alternative approaches.

Distinguishing children and young adults

The proposals outlined in this Crime and Policing Bill do not differentiate between children (under 18), young adults (18–25), and adults in their treatment of knife-related offences. Not accounting for developmental stage, legal status, and contextual vulnerability risks undermining the effectiveness and proportionality of the proposed measures.

Neuroscientific and psychological research consistently demonstrates that key aspects of cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial maturity continue to develop into the mid-twenties (Sawyer et al., 2018). Children and young adults - particularly those exposed to trauma and adversity in childhood - may be more susceptible to peer influence, less able to assess risk, and more likely to act impulsively. These developmental differences have implications for how knife-related behaviour should be interpreted and addressed in criminal justice contexts (Steinberg, 2013).

There is also substantial evidence that punitive criminal justice responses are largely ineffective for children and young people (Hampson & Day, 2025). Approaches that emphasise arrest, prosecution, or custodial sentences are associated with poor long-term outcomes, including increased likelihood of reoffending (Petrosino et al., 2010). By contrast, interventions that adopt a child-first approach have been found to be more effective at reducing reoffending (Case & Browning, 2021; Case & Haines, 2015). There appears to be an underlying assumption in the presentation of the Bill that an increase in maximum penalties for these offences is productive, where, particularly in the case of children and young adults, the evidence indicates that this is not the case.

Given this evidence, we urge policymakers to ensure that any legislative changes clearly differentiate between children, young adults, and adults, and reflect an understanding of child and adolescent development. Failure to do so may lead to harmful and counterproductive outcomes, including the unnecessary criminalisation of children and young adults. We advocate for age-appropriate, welfare-led approaches that consider the wider context of children's lives and aim to address the root causes of serious violence, in order to protect children from harm and keep the public safe.

Safeguarding against disproportionality

Any legislative effort to address knife crime must be accompanied by robust safeguards to prevent the disproportionate criminalisation of minoritised groups, particularly children from racially minoritised backgrounds and those with neurodevelopmental disabilities. There is a

substantial body of evidence demonstrating that these groups are already overrepresented at every stage of the youth justice system, often due to systemic biases in policing and sentencing (Hughes et al., 2020; Lammy, 2017). For example, children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) might be less likely to receive diversion, particularly where communication difficulties are misconstrued as behavioural issues (Centre for Justice Innovation, 2023). Unequal access to diversion may create further disparity at later stages of the youth justice system.

Without specific safeguards against this, the measures proposed in this Bill, particularly increased powers to enter private property, might be disproportionately used against these groups. Effective and fair legislation must be sensitive to the realities of structural inequality. Failing to incorporate these considerations not only risks causing harm but also undermines the goal of reducing serious violence in the long term. Some steps that could be taken towards this include the monitoring of disaggregated implementation data by age, ethnicity, and SEND or disability status. These measures should also be accompanied by training for frontline officers on neurodisability, and anti-racist practices. Additionally, the establishment of community advisory panels could help to review the impact of policing practices and ensure accountability. Working in genuine partnership with local communities can foster trust within the local area, ensure relevance, and help to shift the focus from enforcement to prevention.

Embedding Social Support Following Knife Possession

An effective response to the discovery of a knife, particularly when involving a child or young adult, should trigger not only a policing response but an assessment of welfare needs. This might include referral to mental health services, mentoring schemes, or family support where appropriate. The discovery of a knife should be treated as indication that intervention is needed, rather than solely law enforcement. Without integrated social support, opportunities for meaningful change are lost. Children are often excluded from school following police intervention for knife possession, which can reinforce trajectories into the criminal justice system, rather than diverting them (Hemez et al., 2020; Mowen & Brent, 2016).

Legal and Human Rights Considerations

The proposed measures in the Crime and Policing Bill also raise significant concerns regarding proportionality and compatibility with fundamental human rights principles, particularly as they relate to children and young people.

Proportionality Under Human Rights Law requires that any restriction on individual liberty be necessary, suitable, and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued. The expanded police powers to seize knives from private property, even with the requirement for "reasonable grounds," represent a substantial intrusion into privacy rights protected under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The threshold of "reasonable grounds to suspect" is

notably lower than the criminal burden of proof, raising questions about whether such intrusions meet the proportionality test, particularly when applied to children and young people who may be carrying knives for protection rather than criminal purposes.

The lack of differentiation between adults and children in the application of these powers is particularly concerning from a human rights perspective. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which the UK is a signatory, requires that children's best interests be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them. The indiscriminate application of enhanced penalties and seizure powers fails to recognise children's distinct developmental status and their entitlement to special protection.

Privacy implications of expanded search powers extend beyond immediate concerns about property searches to broader questions about surveillance and community trust. The power to seize knives from private property, whilst ostensibly limited to circumstances where police are lawfully present, creates potential for mission creep and expanded surveillance of communities already experiencing disproportionate police attention. Research evidence consistently demonstrates that heavy-handed policing approaches can damage community trust and cooperation, ultimately undermining public safety objectives.

Due process concerns arise particularly in relation to the seizure and destruction of property without criminal conviction. Whilst the Bill provides for magistrates' court review of seizures, the burden of proof appears to rest with property owners to demonstrate that seizure was inappropriate. This reversal of the usual presumption of innocence is problematic from a due process perspective and may create particular barriers for young people and families lacking legal knowledge or resources.

The increased maximum penalties for knife-related offences, whilst appearing procedurally neutral, raise substantive due process concerns when applied to children and young people. Research evidence consistently demonstrates that longer sentences do not provide additional deterrent effect beyond shorter terms, whilst causing documented harm to young people's development and future life prospects. The failure to differentiate between adult and youth sentencing in these measures suggests a departure from established principles of youth justice that prioritise rehabilitation and development.

Recommendations for Legal Compliance would require the Bill to incorporate explicit age-differentiated approaches that recognise children's distinct legal status and developmental needs. This should include presumptions in favour of diversion from formal criminal processes for children, mandatory consideration of welfare needs prior to any enforcement action, and explicit safeguards against discriminatory application of enhanced powers. Furthermore, any seizure powers should include strengthened procedural protections, including independent oversight mechanisms and regular monitoring of their application across different demographic groups.

The government's stated aim of halving knife crime could be more effectively and legally achieved through investment in evidence-based prevention and intervention programmes that address underlying causes whilst respecting fundamental rights. Such approaches would not only be more likely to achieve sustainable reductions in violence but would also avoid the potential for legal challenge and community alienation inherent in the current proposals.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that efforts to address knife crime are effective and fair, we make the following recommendations relating to the content of the Bill:

Discourse and Framing

- Reframe the discourse around knife crime to avoid generating fear and moral panic, which is itself a key driver of knife-carrying among children and young people. Focus instead on understanding knife crime as a facet of wider serious violence, where children often experience social harms and require a welfare response, rather than as an isolated or escalating category of offending.

- Disaggregate and contextualise knife crime data in all official reporting. This includes clearly distinguishing between possession, threats, and actual violence, and avoiding misleading comparisons which are not based in appropriate data.

- Adopt a child-centred approach that addresses the underlying drivers of knife related crime, including unmet social care needs, experiences of trauma, exclusion from education, exploitation by organised crime groups, and community deprivation. This should include a renewed focus on re-engaging children with education and exploring models such as peace education to support conflict resolution.

Alternative Interventions:

- Treat the discovery of a knife as a moment for social intervention, not solely criminal justice action. Police contact for knife possession should trigger an assessment of unmet needs and referral to appropriate services, rather than exclusion from education or progression into custody. These services may include peer mentoring, family social care support, and mental health care.

- Establish statutory funding for community-led violence interruption programmes modelled on successful international examples, with particular emphasis on employing credible messengers from affected communities.

- Mandate trauma-informed approaches in all youth services, including the deployment of youth workers in hospital emergency departments and other critical intervention points.

- Create dedicated educational re-engagement pathways for young people excluded from school, in recognition of the strong correlation between educational exclusion and weapon-carrying behaviour.

- Expand restorative justice options for knife-related offences, with presumptions in favour of restorative approaches for first-time young offenders.

Legal and Human Rights Safeguards:

- Introduce explicit age-differentiated provisions that recognise children's distinct legal status, including mandatory consideration of welfare needs before any enforcement action.

- Establish independent oversight mechanisms to monitor the application of seizure powers, with particular attention to potential discriminatory impacts on minoritised communities.

- Reverse the burden of proof for property seizure, requiring police to demonstrate to a magistrates' court that retention of seized items is necessary and proportionate.

Impact Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Embed safeguards to prevent the disproportionate criminalisation of racially minoritised children and those with neurodevelopmental disabilities. This includes:

  → Establishing comprehensive data collection requirements for all enforcement actions under the Bill, and monitoring disaggregated data by ethnicity, age, and SEND/disability status;

  →Ensuring equal access to diversion and support;

  →Implementing mandatory training for all officers exercising these powers on child development, trauma-informed practice, and anti-discriminatory policing.

- Work in partnership with local communities, including those disproportionately impacted by serious youth violence, to co-design interventions, build trust, and improve accountability. This may include the establishment of local advisory panels

and support for grassroots violence prevention programmes.

- Mandate independent evaluation of the Bill's effectiveness using community safety indicators beyond simple crime statistics, including measures of community trust and youth wellbeing.

- Create statutory review periods to assess both intended and unintended consequences of the legislation, with particular focus on impacts on children and minoritised communities.

Legislative Amendments:

- Include statutory presumptions against custodial sentences for children found in possession of knives, prioritising therapeutic and educational interventions.

- Establish clear criteria for "reasonable grounds to suspect" that include consideration of context, age, and circumstances to prevent arbitrary application of powers.

- Introduce mandatory impact assessments for any future increases in knife-related penalties, requiring evidence of effectiveness and proportionality.

- Avoid increasing penalties for children and young people, given the strong evidence that more punitive responses are associated with poor long-term outcomes and higher reoffending rates.

These recommendations would transform the Crime and Policing Bill from a primarily punitive response into a comprehensive, research-based approach to knife crime reduction that respects fundamental rights whilst addressing the underlying causes and drivers of violence affecting young people.

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Appendix 1: Research-informed alternative programmes

The Crime and Policing Bill's emphasis on enforcement measures overlooks a substantial body of research supporting alternative intervention models that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing youth violence without the associated risks of criminalisation. These approaches merit serious consideration as complementary or, in many cases, superior alternatives to the proposed legislative measures.

Community-Led Violence Interruption Programmes have shown promise in addressing knife crime at its source. Models such as the Cure Violence approach, implemented successfully in cities including Glasgow and London boroughs, treat violence as a public health issue requiring community-based intervention. These programmes employ credible messengers - often individuals with lived experience of violence - to mediate conflicts before they escalate to weapon use. Evaluation evidence from Glasgow's Violence Reduction Unit demonstrates sustained reductions in serious violence through such approaches, with the city experiencing a 50% reduction in homicides between 2004 and 2014 following implementation of public health-based interventions.

Trauma-Informed Youth Mentoring Schemes represent another evidence-based alternative that addresses the underlying drivers of weapon-carrying behaviour (Creaney et al., In Press). Research consistently demonstrates that young people who carry knives often have extensive histories of trauma, including exposure to violence, family disruption, and community adversity. Programmes such as the London-based Redthread initiative, which places youth workers in hospital emergency departments, have shown significant success in engaging young people at critical moments and diverting them from further violence involvement. These interventions recognise that many young people carry weapons not from criminal intent but from genuine fear and perceived necessity for protection.

Educational and Skills-Based Interventions offer long-term prevention strategies that address risk factors before they manifest in weapon-carrying behaviour. Peace education programmes, as briefly mentioned above, teach conflict resolution skills and provide young people with alternatives to violence. Similarly, targeted educational re-engagement programmes for excluded pupils - who are disproportionately represented in knife crime statistics - have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing both offending behaviour and victimisation risk.

Restorative Justice Approaches Restorative justice offers a particularly compelling alternative for addressing knife-related offences, especially those involving young people. Rather than focusing solely on punishment, restorative approaches emphasise accountability, harm repair, and community healing. These interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing reoffending whilst addressing the needs of both victims and offenders (Hobson et al., 2022).

Restorative Conferencing brings together young people who have committed knife-related offences with victims (where appropriate), family members, and community representatives to address the harm caused and develop plans for making amends. Research evidence indicates that young people who participate in restorative processes are significantly less likely to reoffend compared to those processed through traditional court proceedings. Importantly, victim satisfaction rates in restorative processes consistently exceed those in conventional criminal justice proceedings.

Community-Based Restorative Programmes extend beyond individual incidents to address the broader community impact of knife crime. These approaches recognise that weapon-carrying behaviour often reflects community-level trauma and social fragmentation. By facilitating dialogue between young people, residents, and local services, these programmes can rebuild social cohesion whilst providing young people with positive community connections that serve as protective factors against future violence involvement.