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Implications of Young Men's Discourses of Knife Carrying in Terms of Injury Prevention

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Whilst appreciating Shepherd and Brennan's [1] call for an integrated approach to tackling knife crime, findings from our interview study undertaken with a sample of young white British males who attended one of five youth centres in a large British city suggest some further factors that require attention in terms of injury prevention.

Our discourse analysis of the interview data suggests that the young men in our sample constructed knife carrying as a legitimate response both to potential threats, and to the lack of management of such threats by those in positions of authority. An example of the latter appears in the statement "We need to carry [knives] 'cos the police just prefer to stroll down the well-lit posh neighbourhoods. They won't go on patrol where the turf is rough and nasty you know". An example of the construction of knife carrying as a form of harm prevention appears in the statement "gangs usually attack in packs and you need something to balance the odds".

Given the types of claims outlined above, it is perhaps unsurprising that our sample constructed not carrying a knife as irresponsible, as highlighted in the following statement: "If your attackers turn you into a veg then they will be free in 1 or 2 years' time anyway. They will play their time away and laugh at you eating through a straw".

Another interesting feature of the data was that, in attempting to manage an image of themselves both as aware of the issues raised above, but also as law abiding, the young men in our sample typically spoke in the fourth person, an example of this being "You don't have to be gangsta. Like if you and your missus were about to get mugged by some scumbags in a back alley or something. Then she wouldn't mind if you had something". This use of the fourth person allowed our participants to signal their awareness of knife carrying behaviours and to advocate for the necessity of knife carrying, whilst not stating directly that they themselves carried knives.

Finally in terms of our findings, it is of note, and contrary to Shepherd and Brennan's suggestion that an aspect of knife carrying is about machismo, that whilst our participants did talk about knife carrying as a masculine behaviour, they at the same time appeared to resist evoking knives as a straightforward show of masculinity, as is demonstrated by the following statement: "It [knife carrying] is not about being macho or seeking trouble. It's about being streetwise".

On the basis of these findings, we would suggest that creating simple associations between knife-carrying and immaturity or deviance might prevent the success of campaigns aimed at reducing this behaviour. Evidence concerning avowing responsibility and recidivism [2] suggests that overemphasising internal causes for criminal behaviours might even incline some young men to see their behaviours as

inevitable, which could potentially increase the likelihood of antisocial behaviour.

Instead, we argue that preventing knife injuries must involve promoting recognition of the low controllability and unpredictability of knives. Such recognition might help to position knives as actually increasing, rather than decreasing, personal risks for young men.

Further, and in addition to Shepherd and Brennan's suggestion that greater police control of young people is necessary (i.e., through security screenings), our data would suggest that what is also needed is a more involved police presence aimed at fostering a sense of safety for young men.

Finally, and in contrast to Shepherd and Brennan's suggestion that the threat of being caught is perhaps more important than the actual consequences of being caught, our data suggest that young men perceive the consequences of being convicted for knife-related violence as relatively minimal, which both perpetuates their sense of disenfranchisement and depicts the consequences as largely irrelevant. This would suggest that appropriate forms of punishment for knife-related convictions are at least equally as important as are programmes aimed at increasing the surveillance of knife-carrying behaviours.

References

[1] Shepherd J, Brennan I. Tackling knife violence. *BMJ* 2008;337:a849.

[2] Maruna S, Mann RE. A fundamental attribution error? Rethinking cognitive distortions. *Leg & Crim Psych* 2006;11:155-177.