The Impact on Young People of Police Using Images of Knives in Social Media Posts

Research by:

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And

Peer-led research by the Violence Reduction Unit's Young People's Action Group

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Background

In January 2021, London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) was asked by its Young People's Action Group (YPAG) to examine concerns of images of knives and dangerous weapons seized by the police being published on social media.

The YPAG were concerned that posting images of knives seized by the police on social media could contribute to a sense of fear in communities, particularly amongst young people.

Young people have also explained that posts of knives on social media are being used as an intelligence source about what weapons are being carried in certain areas of the capital. They have raised concerns that is leads to young people getting hold of more dangerous weapons and knives in order to protect themselves.

The YPAG wanted to better understand whether their concerns were shared by a wider group of young people in London.

The Research

As a result, the VRU commissioned research – led by University College London – to investigate the impact on young people of using knife imagery in social media posts. This was done by exploring the impact that images of knives have on young people's perceptions of safety in London, the level of knife carrying as well as the fears and attitudes of seeing images of knives posted online.

The research found very little to suggest that viewing social media posts of knives seized by police had an impact on young people's attitudes towards knives and knife-carrying. It was suggested this may be due to de-sensitisation of images among young people. The researchers recommended further qualitative research, especially that which targeted young people already affected by knife-carrying or harm.

YPAG-led Peer Research

To support this research, to give wider qualitative context, and to enable young people to discuss their views around the use of knife imagery as a communications tool, the YPAG carried out peer-led surveys and a series of workshops with a group of young people aged 12-25.

The YPAG found that seeing the images made the majority of young people feel negatively (unsafe, fearful, scare and triggered). A very small number also admitted that seeing images of knives would make them more likely to carry a knife.

The YPAG recommends that the police stop posting images of confiscated knives because of the impact it has on some young people and communities, especially those who have experienced knife-related trauma.

They have also set out a series of recommendations of how the Met could visually demonstrate the work they are doing to tackle knife crime.

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Summary

The VRU commissioned UCL to research the effect that posting knife imagery on social platforms has on young people's attitudes towards knives and knife crime. The research will support the VRU, the MPS and other key strategic partners to improve effective messaging by achieving the following objective:

1. Examine the impact on young people of using knife imagery in social media posts

By answering the following research questions:

1. Does exposure to online images of knives make mortality more salient to individuals, and if so does this change their attitudes around knife carrying?
2. Does seeing police social media posts of police confiscated knives increase levels of fear and worry amongst young people?
3. Does seeing police social media posts of police confiscated knives alter young people's perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people?

To examine the impact on young people of using knife imagery in social media posts, an online experiment was conducted in June 2022 using the Qualtrics Online Survey Platform whereby participants were randomly shown one of multiple knife imagery police social media posts. Data was collected via a questionnaire that covered the general perceptions of knife-carrying/knife crime, views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives, responses to knife imagery and demographics. The participants consisted of 300 young people (male and female), living in London between the ages of 16 and 27, from mostly White, Asian, or Black backgrounds. Participants were recruited via the London VRUs existing networks.

Findings reveal that police social media posts of confiscated knives do not appear to encourage people to think about the serious and often deadly consequences of using or carrying knives. Exposure to social media posts of police confiscated knives had no impact on participants' willingness to carry a knife or on the perceived benefits of knife-carrying. Viewing the knife-related social media images did not shift participants' levels of fear and worry around knife carrying, nor did it alter young people's perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people. Although views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives predicted attitudes towards knife-carrying and perceptions of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people, such views did not moderate the effect of exposure to knife-related imagery.

Headline findings

Overall police social media posts of police confiscated knives **do not appear to**:
- shift attitudes towards knife carrying.
- shift levels of fear and worry around knife carrying.
- shift perceptions of the prevalence of knife carrying among young people.
- shift the perceived personal and social benefits of carrying a knife.

Participants who viewed knife carrying as personally and socially desirable:
- were both more likely to state they would be willing to carry a knife and could perceive more benefits to doing so.
- were no more or less likely to state they were fearful and concerned about knife crime.
- were more likely to state that knife carrying is prevalent among other young people.

Although views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives predicted attitudes towards knife-carrying and perceptions of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people, such views did not moderate the effect of exposure to knife-related imagery. Seeing the social media posts of police confiscated knives did not have any impact on those participants who viewed knife carrying as personally and socially desirable.

Background

Context

Knife crime continues to be a significant issue across the UK. , with 41,000 offences involving knives or sharp instruments recorded by police in 2021/2022. This was 41% higher than in 2010/11 when comparable records began.[1] And the latest figure suggests there was a 10% increase in knife-enabled crime recorded by police in the year ending March 2022 (49,027 offences) compared with the previous year.[2] London has the highest volume of knife crime offences in the country[3] and weapons, particularly knives, have consistently featured in feedback from VRU stakeholders as a key issue affecting young people in London.

Young people (those aged under 25) are disproportionately affected by knife crime compared to the general population, accounting for approximately 40% of both ambulance recorded knife assaults and police recorded knife crime with injury offences over the last few years. For assaults more generally, young people account for a quarter of incidents (as measured by ambulance data).[4]

The two most fundamental explanations as to why an individual may choose to carry a weapon is because they anticipate the potential of becoming either a victim or a perpetrator of violence (there is extensive evidence explaining the victim-offender overlap and in the context of knife-carrying the two terms are not mutually exclusive).

Among those carrying knives for protection, weapon-carrying may be driven by either direct anticipation of victimisation or a wider concern about safety.[5] The VRU's Strategic Needs Assessment[6] highlights research suggesting that a weapon may give a carrier confidence, be used in an attempt to deter violence and make the carrier feel better able to reduce their risk of harm in a violent situation.[7]

As violence by its nature involves two or more people, the VRU recognises that interpersonal factors are also likely to play an important role in behaviours related to weapon-carrying. Individuals may, through exposure to violence, assess the prevalence of weapon-carrying in their environment and respond accordingly.[8][9] Young people tend to over-estimate the prevalence of weapon-carrying among peers – with this overestimation being particularly true for those already carrying weapons.[10] Evidence for this comes from studies examining the relationship between the tendency to carry a weapon and the perception that one's peers also carry weapons[11] and from studies focusing on the relationship between individuals who carry weapons and the prevalence of their peers' weapon carrying[12]. For example, one US-based study investigated (1) whether high school students overestimate gun carrying by their peers, and (2) whether those students who overestimate peer gun carrying are more likely to carry

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[1] ONS 2021
[2] ONS 2022
[3] MOPAC Weapon Enabled Crime Data Dashboard, rolling 12 month offending trend "knife crime offences" October 2020 – October 2021.
[4] Greater London Authority/ Violence Reduction Unit Patnership Reference Group data (Jan 2019-August 2021)
[5] Farrall, Jackson and Gray 2009
[6] VRU 2020
[7] Brennan, 2017
[8] Brennan, 2019
[9] Williams et al, 2002
[10] Brennan, 2019
[11] Bailey, Flewelling, & Rosenbaum, 1997; Williams, Mulhall, Reis, & DeVille, 2002
[12] Bailey & Hubbard, 1991

firearms. Students substantially overestimated the percentage of their peers who carried guns; the likelihood that a respondent carried a gun was strongly associated with their perception of the level of peer gun carrying. [13] The belief that one's peer group regularly carry weapons inevitably has a normalizing effect on attitudes towards weapons, which is likely to perpetuate the carrying of weapons within that group.[14]

The positive feedback loop that this way of thinking creates is why weapon-carrying is often described as contagious. It is therefore possible to assume that reducing young people's estimation of the prevalence of weapon-carrying among peers could go some way to reducing weapon-carrying itself.

Knife imagery

Changing the existing narrative around violence is a key strategic aim of the VRU. The ongoing public debate around images of knives and dangerous weapons seized by the police being routinely published on social media speaks directly to this issue in terms of the intended and unintended effects this might have on children and young people directly affected by knife violence.

The VRU has listened to the views and opinions of young people who work with them and are involved in their prevention and early intervention programmes. They have suggested that posting images of knives by the police often heightens the sense of fear in communities, particularly amongst young people. Because of this potential for harm, the London VRU never posts images of knives on social media and encourages stakeholders to also refrain from doing so.

Other VRUs across the country, including Thames Valley VRU and South Yorkshire VRU, have successfully encouraged their regional police forces to avoid showing images of knives based on this potential for the images to make the public more, not less, worried about knife crime. However, in London, many of the images of knives posted online continue to come from social media accounts associated with the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS).

The MPS states that its primary objective for posting images of confiscated knives is to demonstrate to the public the good work being done in this area. The MPS believes that showing the images of recovered knives gives Londoners confidence in the effectiveness of the operational response to weapon-related violence by highlighting the scale of operational activity being undertaken to reduce violent crime in the capital, ultimately making Londoners feel safer.[15] It is likely the MPS is also attempting to highlight the seriousness of the problem its officers face by showing the scale and severity of knives being carried.

Although it is likely that the MPS social media posts are aimed at adults (specifically those aged 25 years or older), it is also likely that they are also viewed by young people (under 25) – particularly as images of knives are often widely shared. The VRU expects young people would have a wide range of emotional and behavioural responses to viewing images of knives. It's likely that some young people would feel scared or fearful looking at the images. However, with violent images being commonplace online and in other media forms, it is also likely that some young people would be desensitised to the images and have little or no reaction.[16]

The VRU predicts different emotional and behavioural responses from groups of young people that are or are not already involved with violence, with those that are already

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[13] Hemenway et al, 2011
[14] Brennan, 2019
[15] Southwark News 2020
[16] Drabman & Thomas, 1974; Carnagey et al., 2007; Funk et al., 2004

vulnerable to violence being more engaged with the images. Through stakeholder engagement the VRU has heard anecdotal evidence of instances where young people will actively look for photos of knives that are being confiscated in order to monitor what other young people are carrying and then equipping themselves with equal or more extreme weapons, leading to a cycle of escalating risk based on perceived threat. It is important to note that images of knives on social media might only influence a small number of young people to make a decision to 'upgrade' their weapon, or acquire one in the first place.

Some academic research seems to support these arguments. A recent qualitative study by researchers at The University of Strathclyde[17] found that sharing such images risked creating "a culture of fear" and "perpetuating negative stereotypes". Another study used a survey-based experiment to explore the impact of knife imagery in anti-knife crime campaigns, finding that knife imagery can help to get the attention of young people, but may also make them feel scared and more worried about knife crime.[18] However, a second recent quantitative study[19] presented the findings from two experimental studies exploring the effects of exposure to fear-based knife crime media campaigns on young people's intentions to engage in knife-carrying behaviour, and found that while exposure to knife-related campaign imagery increased mortality salience (the extent to which people are consciously or unconsciously aware of their own mortality), there was no effect of campaign condition on willingness to carry a knife or on perceived benefits of knife-carrying.

Although it appears that exposure to knife images may have an impact on young people, heightening their sense of fear about knife crime, it is not clear whether seeing social media posts of *police confiscated* knives increases levels of fear and worry amongst young people. If the MPS is right to believe that showing the images of recovered knives gives Londoners confidence in the effectiveness of the operational response to weapon-related violence by highlighting the scale of operational activity being undertaken to reduce violent crime, then it might be that levels of fear and worry amongst young people actually decrease. Existing studies have also yet to uncover whether exposure to online images of knives changes attitudes around knife carrying, and whether seeing police social media posts of police confiscated knives alters young people's perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people.

The present study focuses on social media posts of police confiscated knives specifically to assess these questions: whether exposure to such images has an impact on young people's awareness of their own mortality (i.e., perceive a threat to their life), their attitudes around knife carrying and general perceptions of knife-carrying/knife crime, levels of fear and worry, and their views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives.

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[17] Cogan et al., 2021
[18] Ramshaw & Dawson 2022
[19] Hobson, Yesberg & Bradford 2022

Research questions and hypotheses

- RQ1: Does exposure to online images of knives make mortality more salient to individuals, and if so does this change their attitudes around knife carrying?

    - H1 Viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives will increase people's awareness of their own mortality.
    - H2 Viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives will shift respondents' <u>willingness to carry a knife</u>, <u>perceived benefits of knife-carrying</u>, and views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives.

- RQ2. Does seeing police social media posts of police confiscated knives increase levels of fear and worry amongst young people?
    - H3 Viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives will increase <u>levels of fear and worry amongst young people</u>.

- RQ3. Does seeing police social media posts of police confiscated knives alter young people's perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people?
    - H4 Viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives will shift respondents' <u>perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people</u>.

Procedure

We used the online software platform Qualtrics to build and host the experiment. The experiment used a 2 level (social media imagery: knife-related vs. control) between-subjects design.[20] All study materials are included in the supplementary appendix. Duplicate responses to the survey were deleted. The final sample retained only the first entry from each IP address then dropping subsequent duplicates. Those who dropped out very early on in the survey and/ or skipped all the questions until the end were also removed from the sample of participants.

First, participants were randomly allocated to one of two **social media imagery** conditions. They were presented with four screenshots taken from Twitter that were either:

(1) Knife-related – tweets relating to knife crime, specifically police social media posts of police confiscated knives;
(2) Control – tweets that were unrelated to knife crime and reflected a variety of current social media posts (e.g., sugary drinks, cybercrime, vehicle tax and Blue Cross charity)

Participants viewed the four tweets sequentially. The order of the tweets was randomised to control for order effects.

A simple filler task then provided a short delay to remove the knife imagery from respondents' focal attention. As a manipulation check to test that mortality was indeed salient after the campaign imagery (and to answer RQ1), participants then completed an 'accessibility to death related concepts' task.

Participants were then asked a series of questions tapping into their knife-related self-esteem and cultural worldview. Next, participants were next asked a series of questions about their willingness to carry a knife, perceived benefits of carrying a knife, and experiences of knife crime. Then, participants were asked a series of questions about their levels of fear and worry, and their perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people. Finally, they were presented with a further short filler task to act as a distraction from the content of the campaign images (to help destress participants from any negative effects if they had viewed the knife related imagery) and provided with a full debrief.

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[20] We included a second set of experimental conditions (message prime: primed responsibility vs. control) to examine whether priming participants to consider the consequences of knife-carrying on others will shift individuals' attitudes around knife carrying. However, due to technical issues, we were not able to discern which participants were allocated to which of the two conditions at the point of data analysis. However, the random assignment will have meant that no bias was introduced, and consequently this technical error has not affected the results reported here.

Measures

Young people's awareness of their own mortality

To measure young people's *awareness of their own mortality*, we used an implicit test derived from Weber and colleagues (2015). Participants were presented with 20 word fragments and were asked to complete the fragments with the first word that came to mind. Five target words were present in the task (Buried, Coffin, Dead, Killed, and Skull). A score of 1 was assigned for every target word that was 'correctly' identified. These scores were then summed together for each participant.

Personal and social benefits of knife carrying

To measure the perceived personal and social benefits of carrying a knife we use the concepts of *self-esteem and cultural worldviews*. Participants rated on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree) their agreement with four statements about the association between certain behaviours and their own self esteem (e.g. Carrying a knife would make me feel protected when in public) and four statements measuring the extent to which carrying a knife was endorsed by their cultural worldview (e.g. My friends would have a higher opinion of me if I carried a knife). These measures all loaded strongly onto one underlying factor (a = .87), where higher scores indicate greater self-esteem and cultural worldviews related to knife carrying (or viewing knife carrying as more personally and socially desirable).

Willingness to carry a knife

To measure general *willingness to carry a knife*, participants were presented with a set of three independent statements (e.g. *"I would consider carrying a knife when I leave the house"*) and were asked to rate how much they agreed with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater willingness to carry a knife (a = .7).

Perceived benefits of knife-carrying

To measure participants' perceived *benefits of knife-carrying*, participants were presented with six scenarios, three of which were related to risk to self and three were related to risk to others. Participants were either asked how safe they would feel in that scenario if they had a knife (where 1 = Much less safe and 5 = Much more safe) or how likely they would be to carry a knife in such circumstances (where 1 = Much less likely to carry a knife and 5 = Much more likely to carry a knife). It is worth noting that this scale is essentially bi-polar: high scores indicate knife carrying has a positive valence (more likely and increases safety),

while low scores indicate knife carrying has a negative valence (less likely and diminishes safety) (a = .85).

Levels of fear and worry about knife crime

To measure levels of fear and worry, participants were presented with a set of three independent statements (e.g. In this moment, how worried are you about knife crime?) and were asked to rate how worried they were on a scale from 1 – not at all worried to 5 – extremely worried (a = .82).

Perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among others

To measure perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among others participants were presented with a one independent statement (It is likely that young people I meet around where I live will be carrying a knife) and were asked to rate how much they agreed with the statement on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree). Participants were also asked to indicate on a 0%-100% slider what percentage in London they think carry a knife. Higher scores indicate perceptions of greater prevalence of knife-carrying among others.

Experience of knife crime

To find out if participants have previously experienced a knife-related incident, whether as a victim, perpetrator or bystander, participants were asked directly using yes/ no questions (Have you ever been a victim of a crime involving a knife? Have you ever committed a crime involving a knife? Do you know of anyone who has been injured/killed by an incident involving a knife?)

Analysis plan

Young people's awareness of their own mortality

An independent samples t-test will be conducted to reveal whether our mortality salience manipulation was successful. We hypothesise (H1) that participants in the knife-related social media post condition will complete significantly more word fragments with death-related words than those in the control condition.

Attitudes around knife carrying, fear and worry, perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying

A series of linear regression models will be used to determine:

- whether viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives influenced participants' willingness to carry a knife, perceived benefits of knife-carrying and views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives (H2);
- whether viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives will increase levels of fear and worry amongst young people (H3).
- whether viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives will shift respondents' perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people (H4).

Results

Sample

Results are based on 300 participants. Duplicates (N = 125) were dropped, retaining only the first entry from each IP address then dropping subsequent duplicates[21]; and those who dropped out very early on in the survey and/ or skipped all the questions until the end (N = 53) were also dropped.

67% of participants reported being under 18, and 6% of participants reported being 19. 19% of respondents reported being between the ages of 20-27.[22] 43.7% of the sample were male, 50.2% female, 3.1% chose 'other', and 3.1% preferred not to say. 36% of participants reported being White, 24% of respondents reported being Asian, 26% reported being Black, and 8% reported mixed ethnicity. 4% said 'Other' and 3% preferred not to say.

10.6% of respondents reported having been a victim of a crime involving a knife. 4.1% of respondents reported having committed a crime involving a knife. 58.2% of respondents reported knowing someone who has been injured/ killed by an incident involving a knife.

25.5% of participants thought that 0-20% of young people in London carry a knife; 14.6% thought the number to be between 21-40%, 41% thought it to be between 41-60%, and 19% thought it to be 61% and over.[23]

Those who viewed knife carrying as personally and socially desirable made up 18% of the sample.[24]

Young people's awareness of their own mortality

An independent samples t-test revealed that our mortality salience manipulation was not successful. Inconsistent with H1, participants in the knife-related social media post condition

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[21] Results remain the same when including only those with one and one only IP address, i.e., cutting those with duplicates even on the first attempt.

[22] .5% of the sample were 11 and 14 years old respectively. 1% of the sample was 15 years old, and 19% of the sample were 16 years old. 22% of the sample were 17, and 24% of the sample were 18. 19-year olds made up 6% of the sample. 3%, 3%, 4%, 1%, 4%, 2%, .5% and 1% reported being 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 years of age respectively. 9% of the sample did not state their age.

[23] 11.2% of participants thought that 1-10% of young people in London carry a knife.; 14.3% of participants thought that 11-20% of young people in London carry a knife; 16.3% of participants thought that 21-30% of young people in London carry a knife; 15.3% of participants thought that 31-40% of young people in London carry a knife; 10.2% of participants thought that 41-50% of young people in London carry a knife; 9.9% of participants thought that 51-60% of young people in London carry a knife; 8.9% of participants thought that 61-70% of young people in London carry a knife; 5.1% of participants thought that 71-80% of young people in London carry a knife; 2% of participants thought that 81-100% of young people in London carry a knife.

[24] Those participants who averaged *above* 2.5 on the 5-point personal and social desirability of knife carrying measure.

did not complete significantly more word fragments with death-related words (M = 1.47, SD = 0.99) than those in the control condition (M = 1.34, SD = 1.08), t(298) = -1.04, p = .298. In other words, death-related concepts were not more accessible to participants after viewing knife imagery.

Personal and social benefits of knife carrying

To test the first part of H2, a linear regression model was used to determine whether viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives influenced young people's views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives.

Outcome variable inserted was participants' views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives. Social media post condition (dummy coded 1=knife-related, 0=control) was entered as the explanatory variable. Inconsistent with H2, there was no significant effect of social media condition on participants' views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives (B = 0.09, SE = 0.09, p = .292, R^2 = .00). Viewing the knife-related social media images did not shift participants' views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives.

Perceptions of Knife-Carrying

To test H2, a series of linear regression models were used to determine whether viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives influenced participants' willingness to carry a knife and perceived benefits of knife-carrying; and whether views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives moderated the effects of social media condition on willingness to carry a knife and perceived benefits of knife-carrying.

Outcome variables inserted were participants' willingness to carry a knife and perceived benefits of knife-carrying. Social media post condition (dummy coded 1=knife-related, 0=control) was entered as the explanatory variable in Model 1. In Model 2, personal and social desirability of carrying knives scores were added, and an interaction term between social media post condition and personal and social desirability of carrying knives was entered in Model 3.

As shown in Table 1, inconsistent with H2, there was no significant effect of social media condition on either willingness to carry a knife (B = -0.12, p = .282) or perceived benefits of knife-carrying (B = -0.20, p = .051). Viewing the knife-related social media images did not shift participants' attitudes towards knife carrying.

Controlling for social media condition, personal and social desirability of carrying knives scores were significantly and strongly related to both willingness to carry a knife (B = 0.65, p

< .001) and perceived benefits of knife-carrying (B = 0.46, p < .001). Participants who viewed knife carrying as personally and socially desirable were both more likely to state they would be willing to carry a knife and could perceive more benefits to doing so. There was no significant interaction between social media condition and personal and social desirability of carrying knives (willingness to carry a knife B = -0.04, p = .707; perceived benefits of knife-carrying B = 0.02, p = .853). Inconsistent with H2, personal and social desirability of carrying knives did not moderate the effect of social media condition on willingness to carry a knife/perceived benefits of knife-carrying.

Levels of fear and worry amongst young people

To test H3, a series of linear regression models were used to determine whether viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives influenced levels of fear and worry amongst young people.

Outcome variable inserted was participants' levels of fear and worry. Social media post condition (dummy coded 1=knife-related, 0=control) was entered as the explanatory variable in Model 1. In Model 2, personal and social desirability of carrying knives scores were added, and an interaction term between social media post condition and personal and social desirability of carrying knives was entered in Model 3.

As shown in Table 2, inconsistent with H3, there was no significant effect of social media condition on participants' levels of fear and worry (B = 0.11, p = .364). Viewing the knife-related social media images did not shift participants' levels of fear and worry around knife carrying.

Controlling for social media condition, views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives were not significantly related to participants' levels of fear and worry around knife carrying (B = 0.05, p = .513). Participants who viewed knife carrying as personally and socially desirable were no more likely to state they were fearful and concerned regarding knife crime. There was no significant interaction between social media condition and personal and social desirability of carrying knives (B = 0.16, p = .318). Inconsistent with H4, views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives did not moderate the effect of social media condition on participants' levels of fear and worry around knife carrying.

Perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people

To test H4, a series of linear regression models were used to determine whether viewing police social media posts of confiscated knives influenced respondents' perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people.

Outcome variable inserted was respondents' perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people. Social media post condition (dummy coded 1=knife-related, 0=control) was entered as the explanatory variable in Model 1. In Model 2, personal and social desirability of carrying knives scores were added, and an interaction term between social media post condition and personal and social desirability of carrying knives was entered in Model 3.

As shown in Table 2, inconsistent with H4, there was no significant effect of social media condition on participants' perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people (B = 0.06, p = .652). Viewing the knife-related social media images did not shift participants' perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people.

Controlling for social media condition, personal and social desirability of carrying knives scores were significantly and strongly related to participants' perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people (B = 0.32, p < .001). Participants who viewed knife carrying as personally and socially desirable were more likely to state that knife-carrying was prevalent among other young people. There was no significant interaction between social media condition and personal and social desirability of carrying knives (B = -0.00, p = .981). Inconsistent with H5, views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives did not moderate the effect of social media condition on participants' perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people.

Conclusion

In sum, we find very little to suggest that viewing social media posts of knives seized by police has an effect on young people's attitudes towards knives and knife-carrying. Inconsistent with H1, viewing the knife-related social media posts did not increase young people's awareness of their own mortality. In other words, death-related concepts were not more accessible to participants after viewing knife imagery, from which we can conclude that respondents did not feel particularly threatened by the images and what they implied. Police social media posts of confiscated knives did not appear to encourage young people to think about the serious and often deadly consequences of using or carrying knives.

Exposure to knife-related police social media posts had no impact on participants' willingness to carry a knife or on the perceived benefits of knife-carrying. Participants who viewed the knife-related social media images were no more or less likely to report behavioural intentions to carry a knife than participants in the control condition. Thus, H2, that viewing police social media posts of police confiscated knives will shift respondents' willingness to carry a knife and perceived benefits of knife-carrying was not supported. However, although views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives strongly predicted behavioural intentions to carry a knife, this did not moderate the relationship between exposure to knife-related imagery and knife-carrying intentions.

Similarly, inconsistent with H3 and H4, viewing the knife-related social media images did not shift participants' levels of fear and worry around knife carrying, nor did it alter perceptions of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people. In the case of fear and concern around knife-crime, participants who viewed knife carrying as personally and socially desirable were no more likely to state they were fearful and concerned regarding knife crime; but participants who viewed knife carrying as personally and socially desirable *were* more likely to state that knife-carrying was prevalent among other young people. Views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives did not moderate the relationship between exposure to knife-related imagery and fear and worry amongst young people, nor exposure to knife-related imagery and the perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people.

With knife crime images being commonplace online and in other media formats, it may well be that some young people have become de-sensitised to the images and have little or no reaction to images of confiscated knives posted on social media. It is also interesting that we found even less of an effect of knife-imagery than in two existing UK-based quantitative studies[25]. Unlike the present study that used police social media (the police do not publish

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[25] Hobson, Yesberg & Bradford 2022; Ramshaw & Dawson 2022

images of gory knives), both those used gory images (from media campaigns specifically aiming to deter people from carrying a knife), so we think we might tentatively conclude that it is the gore that is important, not the image of the knife per se.

Although the present study had several strengths, like all research it was also subject to limitations. The short time period available to conduct this study, and, relatedly, the quantitative nature of the online survey, could not uncover why social media images of police confiscated knives did not impact the sample of young people surveyed. It is for future (qualitative) work to explore this important issue. Naturally, however, it remains a possibility that our findings do count as evidence that social media posts of police confiscated knives do not appear to 'harm' young people. Future research could profitably probe this question, and explore in more depth whether and how knife images impact on young people. Qualitative research and/ or the targeting of specific areas using multiple detailed knife images (for example, gory knife images vs. images of police confiscated knives) could give greater context to what is quite a complex issue.

Tables

Table 1. Linear regression models predicting willingness to carry a knife and perceived benefits of knife-carrying[26]

N = 300	willingness to carry a knife			perceived benefits of knife-carrying		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	b SE	b SE	b SE	b SE	b SE	b SE
Knife image condition (ref: control)	-.12 .11	-.07 .09	-.14 .22	-.20 .10	-.15 .09	-.11 .23
Personal/ social desirability		**.65*** .06**	**.71*** .18**		**.46*** .06**	**.43* .19**
Image condition*Desirability			-.04 .11			.02 .11
R^2	.00	.31	.31	.00	.19	.18

Note: unstandardised coefficients, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

Table 2. Linear regression models predicting levels of fear and worry amongst young people and perceptions of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people

N = 300	Fear and worry amongst young people			perceived benefits of knife-carrying		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	b SE	b SE	b SE	b SE	b SE	b SE
Knife image condition (ref: control)	.11 .13	.12 .13	.40 .31	.06 .14	.09 .14	.08 .34
Personal/ social desirability		.05 .08	-.19 .25		**.32*** .09**	**.33* .28**
Image condition*Desirability			16 .16			-.01 .17
R^2	.00	.00	.00	.00	.05	.05

Note: unstandardised coefficients, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

[26] As reported in the 'Results' section, viewing the knife-related social media images did not shift participants' views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives.

Supplementary Appendix

Knife-related condition – tweets relating to knife crime, specifically police social media posts of police confiscated knives
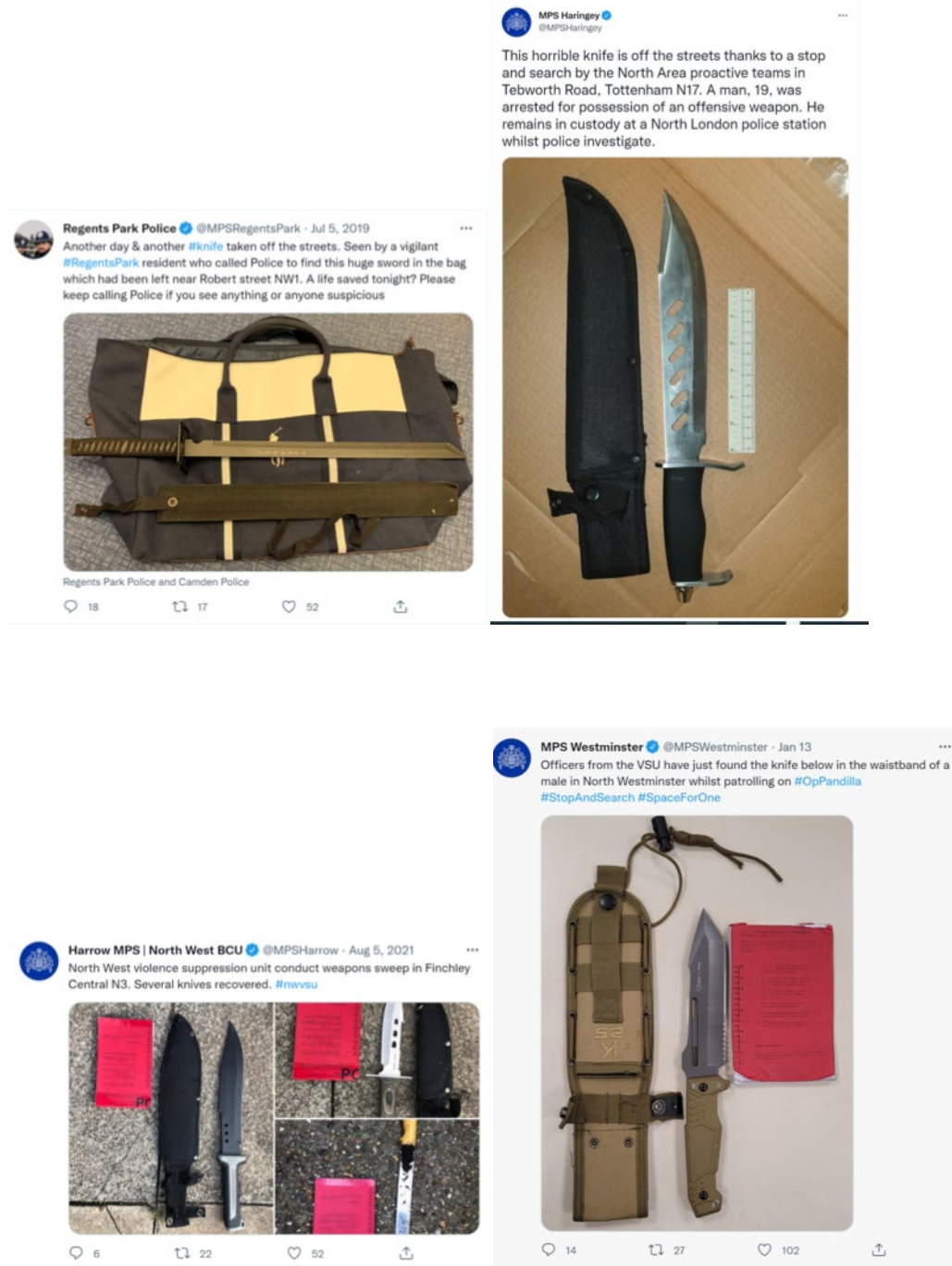
Control condition – tweets that were unrelated to knife crime and reflected a variety of current social media posts
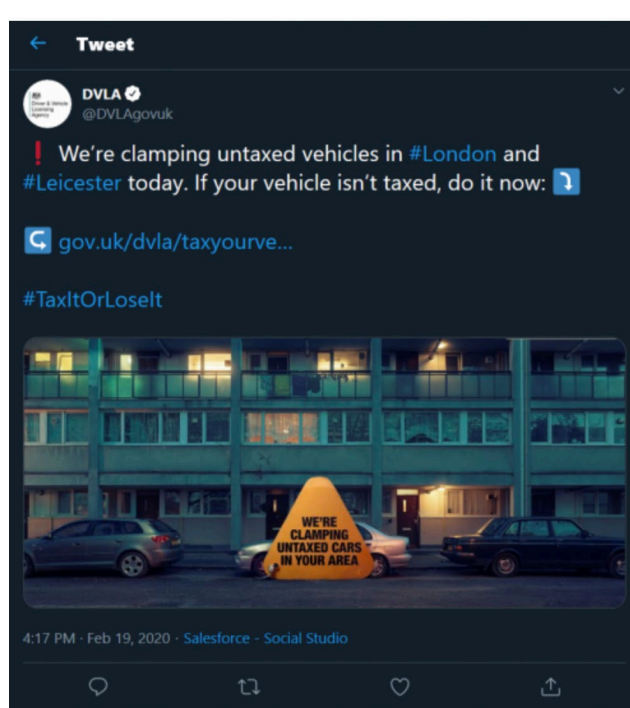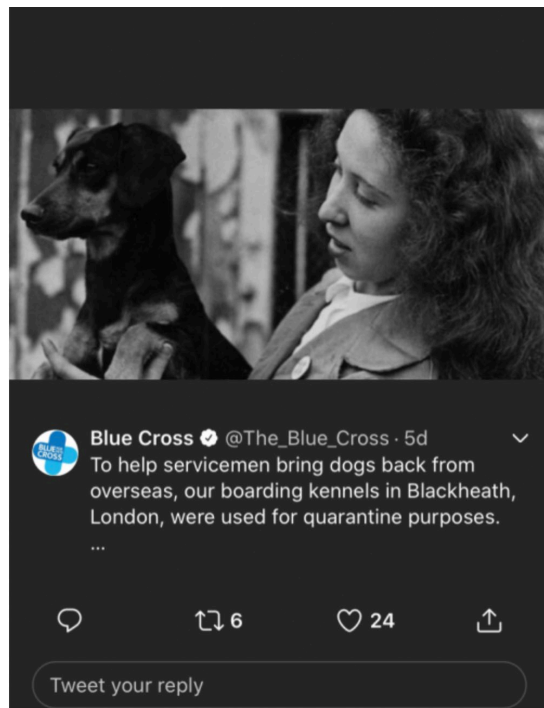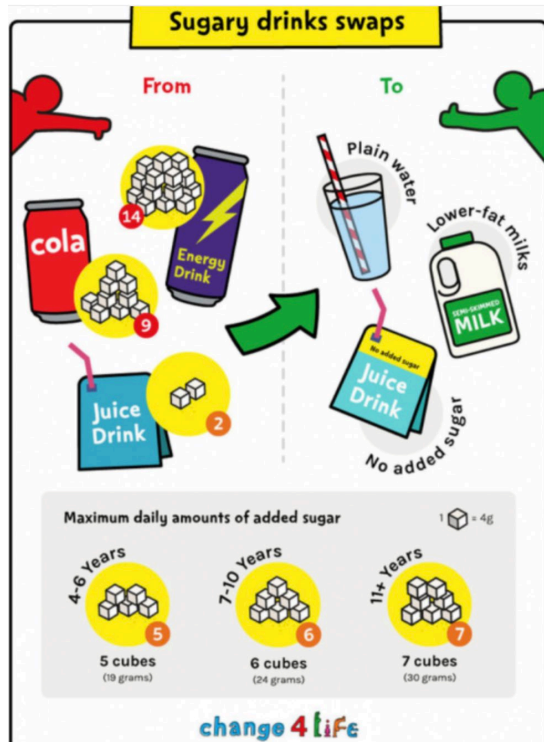
Young people's awareness of their own mortality

Please complete the following words by filling in the two blank spaces for each word. **Write the whole word in the box provided.**

Use the first word that comes to mind. If you cannot think of a word then please move onto the next word.

BU _ _ ED

PLA _ _

WAT _ _

DE _ _ _

MU _ _

S _ _ K

B _ T _ LE

M _ J _ R

FL _ W _ R

GE _ _

CHA _ _

KI _ _ ED

TAB _ _

W _ _ DOW

SK _ _ L

TR _ _

P _ P _ R

COFF _ _

POST _ _

R _ DI _

Views on the personal and social desirability of carrying knives

   1- Strongly disagree to 5 – Strong agree

Carrying a knife would make me feel protected when in public.
Carrying a knife would make me feel more positive about myself.
Carrying a knife would give me more confidence.
Carrying a knife would make people respect me more.
My friends would have a higher opinion of me if I carried a knife.
I have more to gain by carrying a knife than I do to lose.
People see knife carrying as a sign of strength.
Others would feel safer in my company if I carried a knife.

Willingness to carry a knife

   1- Strongly disagree to 5 – Strong agree

I would consider carrying a knife when I leave the house.
There are certain situations when I would consider carrying a knife.
I can understand why some people would carry a knife.

Perceived benefits of knife-carrying

Next you will be presented with a series of scenarios. Please read the scenarios and answer the questions below.

A male punches you in the face over a disagreement and he knocks you to the floor then stands over you and goads you to get up and continue fighting. In this situation how would you feel if you were in possession of a knife as opposed to being without one?
1 - much less safe; 5 – much more safe

You are leaving the cinema at night when two men confront you and demand you give them your wallet. In this situation how would you feel if you were in possession of a knife as opposed to being without one?
1 - much less safe; 5 – much more safe

A local gang who have a reputation for carrying knives have begun to hang around near to your house. You are not friends with them. Some of your friends have been threatened by the gang with knives in the past. Would this make you more or less likely to carry a knife?
1 - much less likely to carry a knife; 5 – much more likely to carry a knife

You have been at a football match with a group of friends. On the way home, you are confronted by a group of rival fans who start shouting abuse and then attack you and your friends. In this situation how would you feel if you were in possession of a knife as opposed to being without one?
1 - much less safe; 5 – much more safe

You and your friends are at the local pub. On the way back from the bar, one of your friends accidentally spills a drink over another group and an argument ensues. The argument escalates and pool cues and glasses are used as weapons. In this situation how would you feel if you were in possession of a knife as opposed to being without one?
1 - much less safe; 5 – much more safe

You are due to attend a party with a group of friends. One of them tells you that there is a chance there may be some gatecrashers there after the party was advertised on social media. They tell you that last time there was a party there one of their friends was stabbed after trouble erupted with uninvited guests. Would this make you more or less likely to carry a knife?
1 - much less likely to carry a knife; 5 – much more likely to carry a knife

Levels of fear and worry about knife crime

1 – not worried at all; 5 – extremely worried

In this moment, how worried are you about knife crime?
In this moment, how worried are you about becoming a victim of a knife incident?
In this moment, how worried are you about someone you know becoming a victim of a knife incident?

Perception of the prevalence of knife-carrying among other young people

1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree
It is likely that young people I meet around where I live will be carrying a knife

0%-100% slider
What percentage of young people in London do you think carry a knife?

Experience of knife crime (yes/ no)

Have you ever been a victim of a crime involving a knife?
Have you ever committed a crime involving a knife?
Do you know of anyone who has been injured/killed by an incident involving a knife?

Demographics
Age
Ethnicity
Gender

KNIFE IMAGERY PEER-RESEARCH BY THE YPAG

VRU | MAYOR OF LONDON
VIOLENCE REDUCTION UNIT

What was the aim of our research?

We are aware that many young people feel that the **posting of confiscated knives by the MPS** is not needed and could cause more harm than good. For this reason, we wanted to understand how young people felt about knife imagery being posted online and its effects on people within their community such as their peers, families and wider community.

How did we conduct it?

We conducted surveys and workshops at **Youth Takeover Day** at City Hall to ask young people how they felt about seeing images of confiscated knives posted by the Met. We designed survey questions that would give the best insight into the topic, as well as follow-up questions to be discussed at the workshop.

The **survey** was conducted using tablets, so the young people could answer the questions in between rotating around the different stations.

We then invited them to the **'Have Your Say' workshops** to further discuss and debate the topic with a few prompts, such as why the police post images of confiscated knives, whether these images achieve that goal and what more that could be done to tackle knife crime and violence in London.

Key context / Limitations

With a topic as sensitive as this, we feel that a lot young people may not have been as open and truthful about their experiences. It was visible that some people purposefully refrained from answering questions such as claiming to know others that may carry weapons even for their safety. The potential reasons for this are:

- It may have been hard to open up to strangers and frustrating when others did not understand the culture and shared trauma a lot of young people experience.
- They may have felt the survey was less anonymous due to being in City Hall, surrounded by Police Officers and other professionals, and feeling as though if they answered honestly they might get into trouble because of their responses.
- Feeling uncomfortable with giving personal details or being unsure about what the data was being used for.

Who took part?

- We received **40 responses** from the survey and **43** young people participated in the workshops, where we managed to accumulate a lot more responses that varied in experiences and ideas.
- Demographic information was only collected for the surveys, but there was an almost equal response rate from girls and boys.
- Young people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds were also represented, with individuals from Black/Black British backgrounds responding most.
- A diverse group of young people between the ages of **12-24** were surveyed, with 16-25 year olds responding most, but there was also significant representation from 12–15 year-olds.

Findings

Below we have highlighted our key findings from the survey and have also put together a list of recommendations for the Met police based on the discussions from the workshops. A big theme was **community engagement**, with young people suggesting that the police should be more directly involved in youth activities and conversations to build trustful relationships. This along with **better communication** with communities that are heavily affected by violence would help young people feel a lot safer about knife crime and violence.

Findings from the survey

Key findings:

Young People were asked 'If you saw images of confiscated knives posted on social media by the police, how would it make you feel?'

🔴 Eighteen negative responses, including feeling unsafe, scared, worried, afraid and concerned

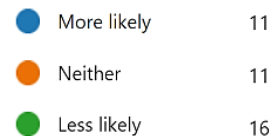🟢 Six positive responses, including feeling safe and reassured

🔵 Ten neutral responses, including feeling normal, not minding and feeling unaffected

NB: Through discussions with youth consultants after the survey, a common consensus was reached in which we felt the number of positive and neutral responses reflected the lifestyles of those who attended Youth Takeover Day, rather than those who would feel directly affected by knife imagery.

Do you think seeing these images would make <u>you</u> more or less likely to carry a knife?
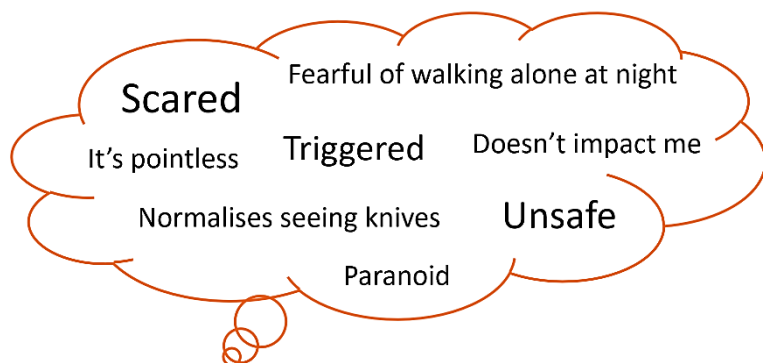
🔵 More likely		3
🟠 Neither		18
🟢 Less likely		17
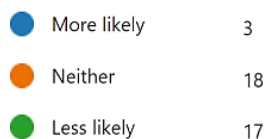
Do you think seeing these images would make <u>someone already carrying a knife</u> more or less likely to continue carrying a knife?

🔵 More likely		11
🟠 Neither		11
🟢 Less likely		16

Findings from the workshops

How might seeing the images of the confiscated knives make people feel?

Scared
It's pointless
Fearful of walking alone at night
Triggered
Doesn't impact me
Normalises seeing knives
Unsafe
Paranoid

"If I see someone is carrying something horrific in my area and all I'm carrying is a flick knife... what do you think I'm gonna do?!

"You're still going to have knives on the streets so is it really going to make change, it's a bit dumb and ..."

"We know there are knives here, we live here. What else are they [the Met] doing?"

"The knives being carried aren't butter knives."

Is there anything different or more the police could do to achieve their goals?

- Positively engage with young people e.g. in schools
- Change the way they talk and engage with young people
- Sensor photos of knives / include a trigger warning
- Make it harder for people to buy large knives
- Stop and search youth events in collaboration with the police to better understand what they do and to build trusting relationships
- More youth clubs/groups and more positive opportunities for young people
- Stop targeting Black and racially minoritised communities
- Less aggressive stop & searches
- More preventative interventions in educational/family settings
- Address the root causes of knife crime e.g. poverty
- Film videos of police officers talking about confiscated knives rather them showing images
- Knife crime virtual reality experience – to show the impact of knife crime on the victim, their families and their community

What YPAG recommend to the Met Police:

- Focus on the root causes of knife crime e.g.poverty
- Better communication with communities affected by violence through events
- Make large knives harder to buy and less accessible
- ⚠️ Stop the posting of knife imagery, but where it is deemed necessary police should censor images