

The impact on young people of police using images of knives in social media posts

Research

A bus on a London road at night

Key information

Publication type: General

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The research

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.

The VRU commissioned research, led by University College London (UCL), 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.

Methodology

To examine the impact on young people of using knife imagery in social media posts, UCL researchers conducted an online survey experiment in June 2022 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.

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.

Key findings

The UCL survey found 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 desensitisation of images among young people.

The UCL research recommended further qualitative research. Following on from this work, the YPAG carried out peer-led research. This found that seeing the images made the majority of young people feel negatively (unsafe, fearful, scared and triggered).

A very small number also admitted that seeing images of knives would make them more likely to carry a knife.

Recommendations

UCL researchers recommended further qualitative research, focusing particularly on young people already affected by knife-carrying or harm.

From the peer-led qualitative research, the YPAG recommended 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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