

MORE HARM THAN GOOD: KNIFE IMAGES ON POLICE SOCIAL MEDIA



A report by Caroline Russell AM
Green Party Member of the London Assembly
October 2022



City Hall **Green**
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SUMMARY

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) is still sharing far too many images of knives on social media.

I believe these images have a harmful effect on young people, and academic studies back this up too.

Since my research last year into the number of knife images shared on police Twitter accounts, which resulted in coverage on BBC One as well as in The Guardian, there has been a big drop in the number of knife images shared by the MPS and I'm glad to see this change.^{1,2}

It shows that the voices of young people, knife harm reduction charities, and academics, who are also critical of the sharing of these images, may have been heard, making young people safer.

My latest data, looking at police use of Twitter, shows the number of images shared by the MPS has almost halved over this last year.

Many police teams across London, in every Basic Command Unit (BCU), already do a good job of showing their work keeping communities safe, without filling their social media with pictures of scary blades.

While it is clearly possible for the MPS to show the good work they are doing in local communities to reduce knife violence without having to share images of knives on social media, there is considerable variation in approach between different police accounts.



It appears that there is no consistent communications policy across the MPS on sharing knife images and even across BCUs there is often a stark difference between ward and borough-wide accounts.

A study funded by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) shows the detrimental impact that these images can have on young people, and I expect that the upcoming research from the Young People's Action Group on London's VRU will show similar results when it is finally published.^{3,4}

I hope the new Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and his team will read my new research and introduce a consistent communications policy to halt the practice of sharing terrifying knife images altogether.

Recommendation

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) should introduce a consistent communications policy and stop sharing images of knives on social media immediately, across every MPS branded account.

Caroline Russell AM
October 2022

THE TIMELINE

Greens on the London Assembly have repeatedly challenged the sharing of knife images by the police, including in schools, raising the harm of this practice in questions to the Mayor since 2017.^{5,6,7,8,9}

Sheffield Hallam University announced in October 2020 that they were conducting a study to explore: “the impact of knife crime images on young people.”¹⁰



The research followed a decision by Thames Valley Police in September 2019 to avoid showing knife images for: “fear that they are making the public more, not less, worried about knife crime.”¹¹

A pre-print of the research was published in September 2021 with final research published in the Journal of Youth Studies in June 2022.^{12,13}

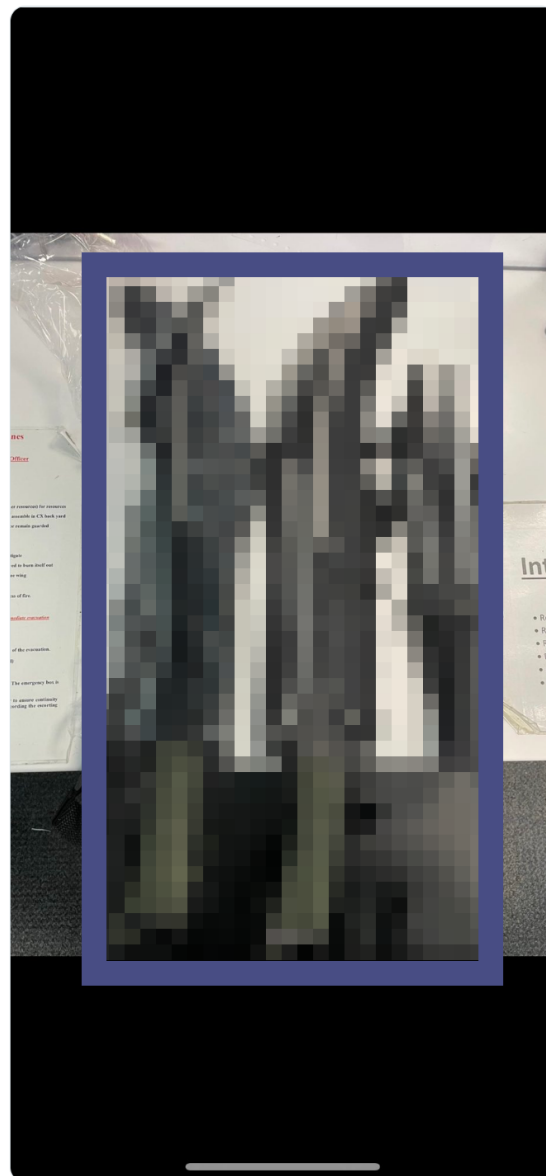
At the Mayor’s summit on tackling violence in July 2021, I raised the issue of images of weapons being shared by police social media accounts. It was powerful to hear from Tyrell Davis Douglin, a member of the Young People’s Action Group which is part of London’s Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), that seeing photographs of blades can prompt young people to start ‘upgrading tools’.¹⁴

Last September I exposed the scale of the use of images of knives by the police on Twitter.¹⁵

My research that revealed that from July 2020 to August 2021, the MPS circulated more than 2,100 images of knives on Twitter.^{16,17}

 Met Police Taskforce 
@MetTaskforce

Car made off from TSG U534 last night on @MPSOxfordSt only to be found shortly after... Occupants arrested for supplying Cannabis and Class C drugs, obstruction, assault police, theft and 1 arrested for these horrible knives. You can run, but you can't hide @MPSWestminster ^5268U



12:05 PM · Jan 4, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

70 Retweets · 27 Quote Tweets · 460 Likes



In October 2021 I raised the harm caused by the police sharing knife images on social media with the Mayor at Mayor's Question Time. He recognised the issue but said: "Let us wait and see what the evidence is."¹⁸

The same month I wrote asking him to use his influence to direct the MPS to pause the sharing of images of knives on social media, to which the Mayor did not respond.¹⁹

Fellow London Assembly Members agree with me about the need to tackle the harm of sharing knife images. They unanimously passed

my motion in December 2021 calling on the Mayor to ask the MPS to pause the sharing of images of knives on their social media pages immediately.²⁰

It was good to see, in January 2022, a group of young people working with London's VRU commission research looking at the impact on of knife images published on social media by the police. The research was meant to be published by the end of March. Almost six months later we're still waiting for it.²¹

The Sheffield Hallam University research was published in full in the Journal of Youth Studies in June 2022.²²

The findings suggest that: **"the use of knife seizure images may provoke negative reactions and create a culture of fear (as exacerbated by the media), potentially encourage knife carrying (e.g. for protection) and perpetuate negative stereotypes and pre-conceived beliefs about who is likely to carry a knife."**

It also raised the need to: **"understand young people's perspectives and experiences of knife crime, raise awareness and engagement with relevant partner agencies and community-based activities, and encourage efforts to build trust and cooperation between young people affected by knife crime."**

I wrote to the Mayor again quoting this research urging him to call on the MPS to cease the sharing of images of knives on all MPS social media accounts.²³

A year on from my original audit, I have had another look at the number of images of knives shared by police on Twitter over this last year. My findings are laid out below.



FINDINGS

OVERALL

With my team, I looked at every image posted by every MPS Twitter account that I could find between 1 August 2021 and 31 July 2022. I checked a total of 693 separate Twitter accounts, which included 32 borough accounts, every ward account (638) and 23 different central MPS accounts.

We decided to count any image of a 'real' knife as a knife image, regardless of whether they were used in campaign material or were images of knife seizures. Cartoon or drawn representations of knives were not included.

Knives from still images were counted but not videos. In addition, the number of knives in an image was not counted.

Retweets from other accounts were not included, just original posts.

Some accounts that shared no images of knives still shared images of other weapons like firearms, hammers, and knuckle dusters, but these were not counted.

A total of 1,060 images of knives were shared by the MPS from 275 of its 693 Twitter accounts in the time period.

This total is almost 50 per cent down on an estimated 2,100 knife images shared the year before.

The account that shared the highest number of images was the Roads and Transport Policing Command which shared 66 images of knives this year, down from 82 images the year before.²⁴

This was closely followed by Met Police Taskforce which shared 52 images compared to 229 the year before, a welcome 75 per cent drop.²⁵

The three worst borough accounts were Newham MPS (44), Waltham Forest MPS (27), and Barking & Dagenham MPS (38).^{26,27,28}

418 accounts shared no knife images at all. While some of these accounts did seem to be dormant, not tweeting at all during the time period, **the majority were active accounts sharing positive images of officers out in their communities providing reassurance, conducting weapons sweeps and keeping people safe.**



LONDON-WIDE ACCOUNTS

I looked at 23 London-wide MPS accounts that aren't tied to a specific area.

This year these accounts shared a total of 159 images of knives, but they were shared from just seven accounts.


These accounts were @MPSRTPC (66), @MetTaskforce (52), @MPSSpecials (17), @MetCC (16), @MPSFirearms (5), @MPSViolentCrime (2), @MPSHeathrow (1).

The main MPS account (@metpoliceuk) shared no images of knives during the time period, having shared 15 images the year before.


Disappointingly however, just three days after the time period I was looking at, an image of a huge knife found on a knife sweep with the Mayor was shared.



Metropolitan Police
@metpoliceuk




The Met's new violent crime lead, Cmdr Rachel Williams, was joined by the @MayorofLondon on patrols with @MPSViolentCrime



Two large knives recovered.

Officers are working hard alongside partners so we can all enjoy a #SaferSummer

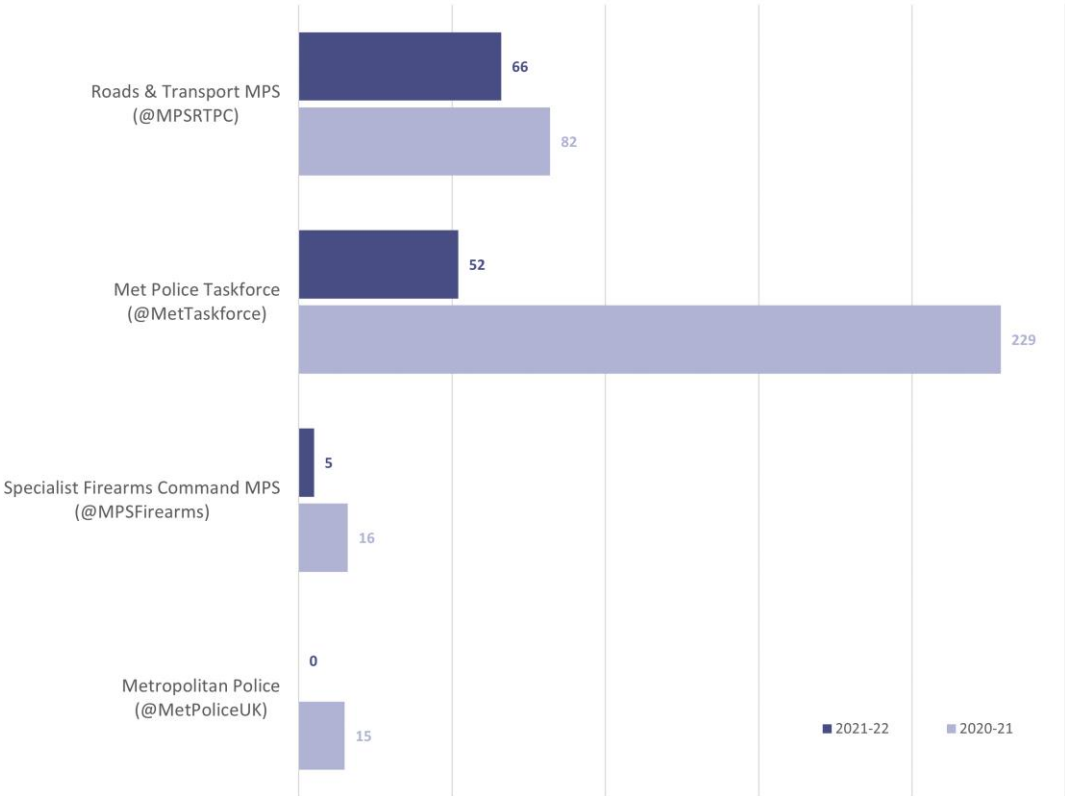
#TacklingViolenceTogether



10:30 AM · Aug 3, 2022 · Hootsuite Inc.

15 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 57 Likes

Knife images shared by four London-wide MPS Twitter accounts from 1 August 2020-31 July 2021 compared to 1 August 2021-31 July 2022



BASIC COMMAND UNITS (BCUs)

The MPS groups the 33 boroughs in to 12 Basic Command Units (BCUs).²⁹

The number of knife images shared varies hugely between BCUs with four BCUs (East, West, North and North East) sharing 100 or more images from borough and ward accounts combined, while two (South West and Central South) shared fewer than 30.

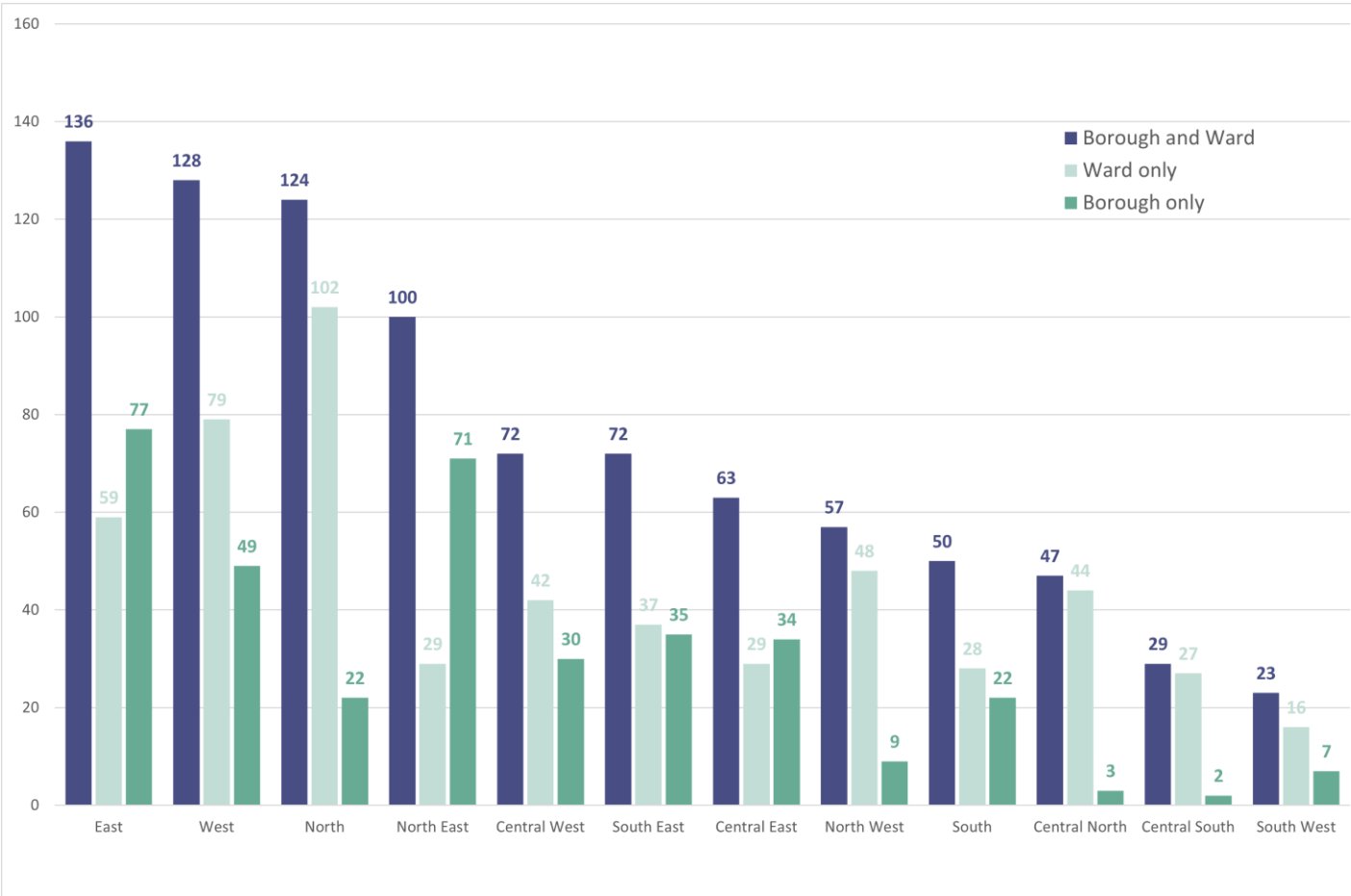
In some BCUs the borough accounts e.g. Enfield and Haringey in North BCU, tweet very few

images, while ward accounts in the same BCU are tweeting a lot of them.

By contrast in North East BCU (Newham and Waltham Forest) the borough accounts are prolific tweeters while the ward accounts share many fewer.

Looking at the data by BCU it appears there is no London-wide strategy or policy about the use of images of knives by police social media accounts at either ward, borough or BCU level.

Knife images shared by MPS borough and ward Twitter accounts from 1 August 2021-31 July 2022 grouped by BCU



BOROUGH ACCOUNTS

The 32 borough Twitter accounts have scaled back significantly, sharing 361 images of knives compared with 612 the year before. This represents a welcome 41 per cent drop.

While this represents an improvement on last year, the number of knife images shared should be zero.

The most prolific accounts last year were Enfield, Waltham Forest, and Haringey who shared 57, 50, and 40 images of knives respectively.

This year it is good to see that these accounts have done much better. Enfield shared just eight images, a huge 86 per cent drop. Waltham Forest shared 27, a 46 per cent drop, and Haringey shared 14, a 65 per cent drop.

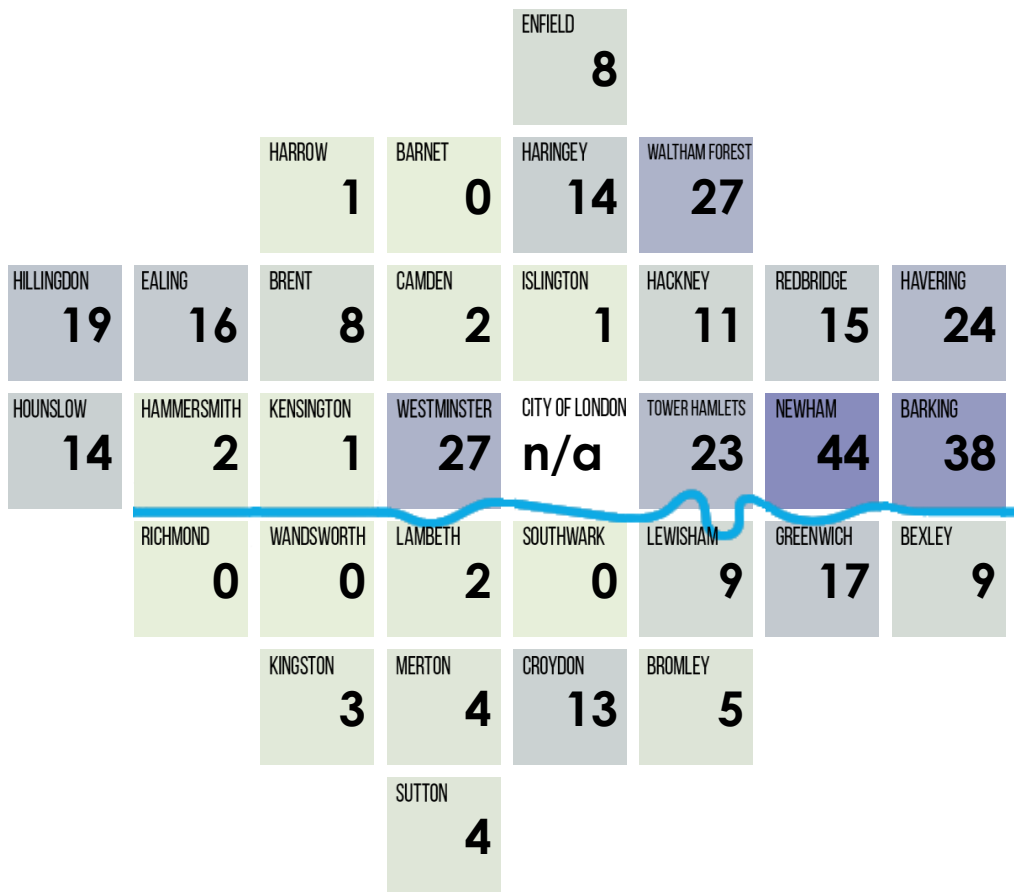
The worst three accounts this year are Barking and Dagenham sharing 38 images, and Westminster and Waltham Forest, each sharing 27.

These figures represent a welcome reduction on last year for Westminster (-9) and Waltham Forest (-23).

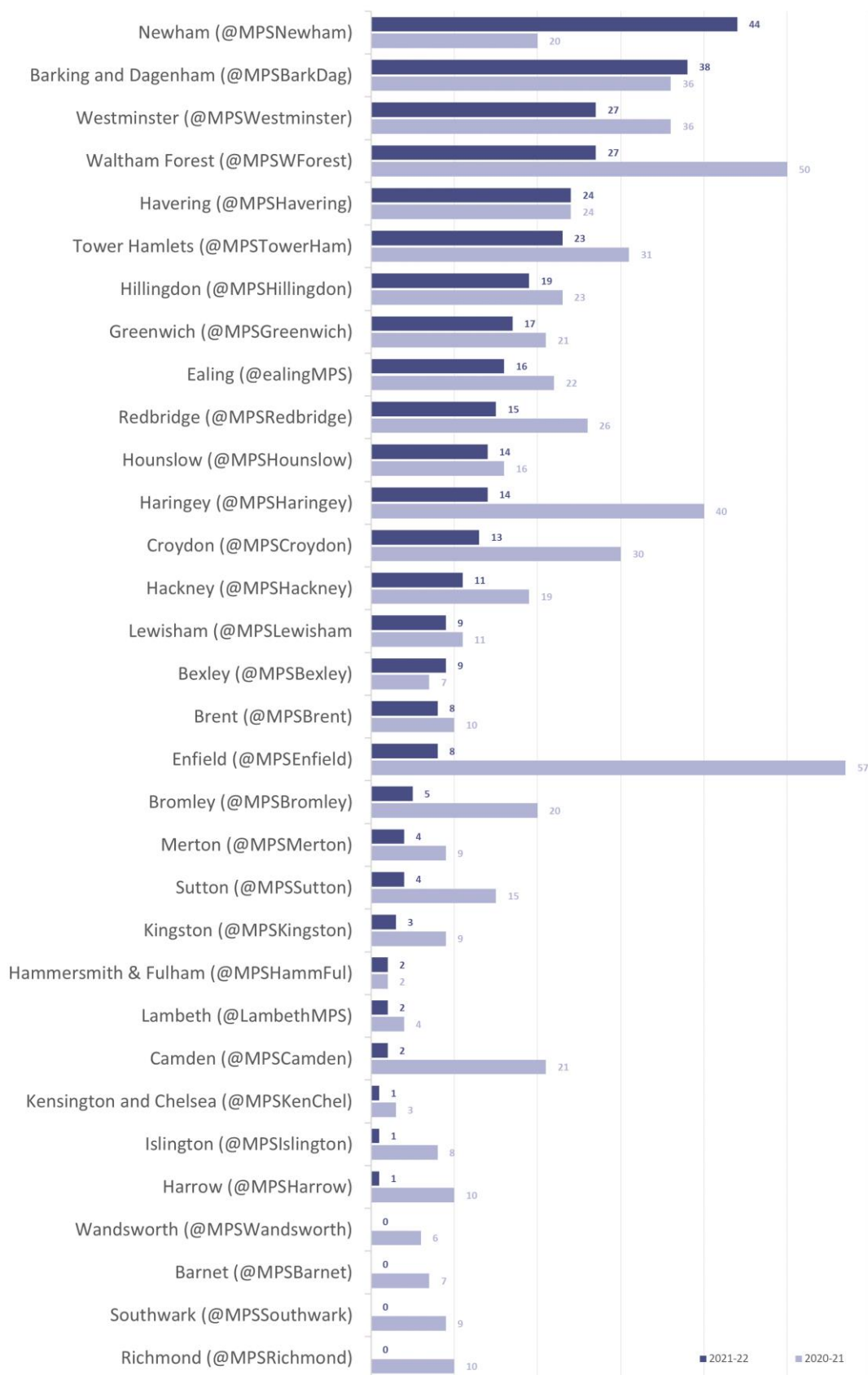
Five borough accounts did not reduce the number of knife images shared compared to last year. These were Newham (+22) Barking and Dagenham (+2), Bexley (+2) Hammersmith & Fulham (no change), and Havering (no change).

A third of the accounts showed three or fewer knife images, which shows it is not essential for police to share these frightening pictures to communicate with Londoners about their work.

Knife images shared by MPS borough Twitter accounts August 2021-July 2022



Knife images shared by borough MPS Twitter accounts from 1 August 2020-31 July 2021 compared to 1 August 2021-31 July 2022



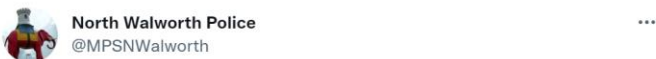
WARD ACCOUNTS

There are 638 MPS ward accounts in London. Of these, 240 accounts shared a total of 540 images of knives between them.

The local ward accounts sharing the most knife images were Haselbury Police (in Enfield) and Botwell Police (in Hillingdon) who shared 11 images each.^{30,31}

398 ward accounts didn't share a single image of a knife.

For example, the account for North Walworth in Southwark in the Central South BCU show police cadets helping with weapon sweeps focusing on the people participating and not on the weapons they were looking for.³²



North Walworth Police
@MPSNWalworth

Massive thanks to the @mpssouthwarkvpc Cadets for assisting @MPSNWalworth with 2 Weapons Sweeps last Saturday... items found & safely disposed of inc. empty glass bottles & an XL wooden Crayon (with metallic insert) & surprisingly a gigantic unopened can of Baked Beans!



2:39 PM · Feb 10, 2022 · Twitter Web App

2 Retweets 5 Likes

While the account for Abbey ward in Merton in the South West BCU shows officers busy conducting weapon sweeps, **but they don't post images of any of the actual knives they find.**³³



Abbey Police
@MPSAbbeyVW

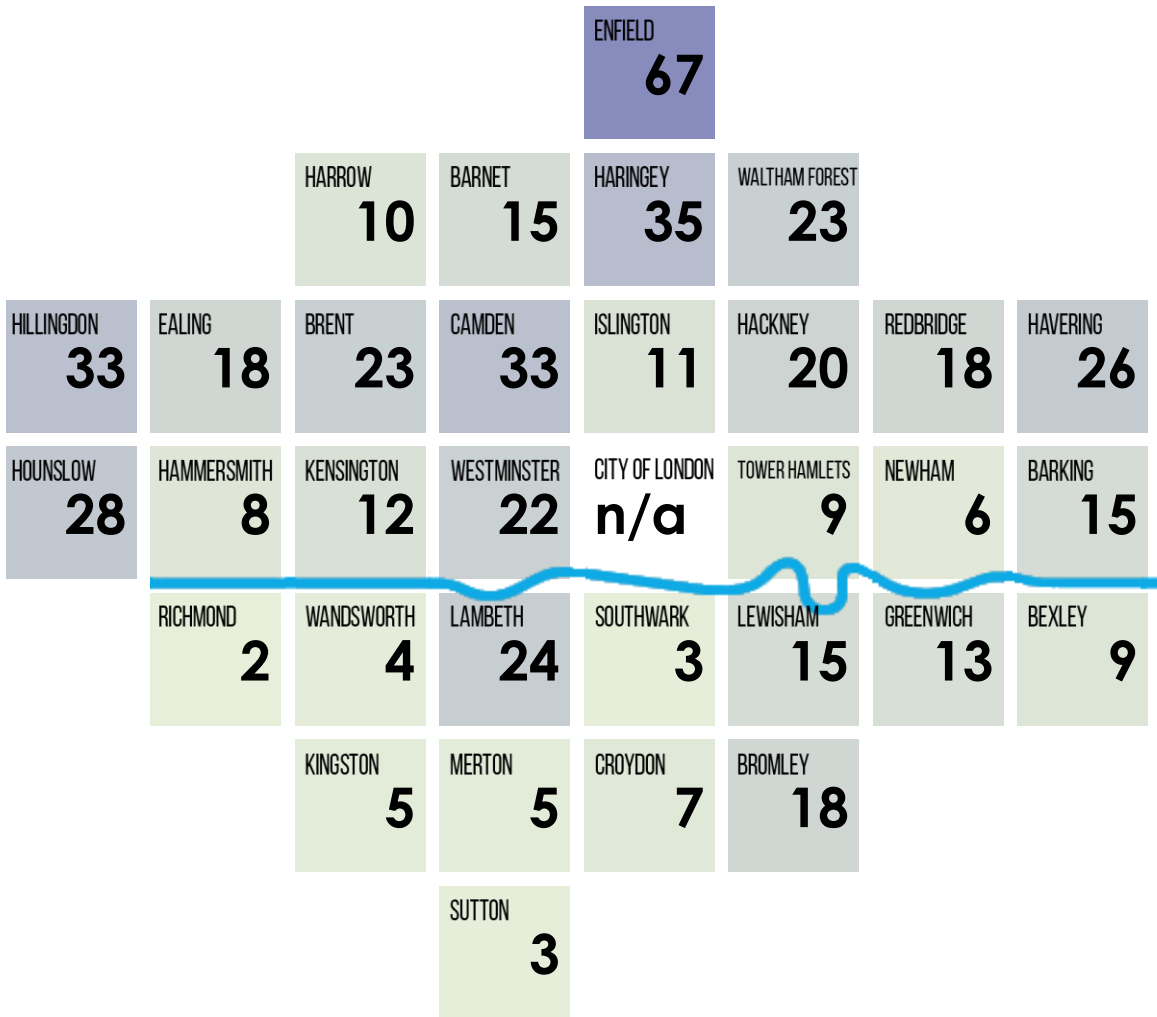
Abbey Wards officers have been out conducting weapon sweeps around the local area. Some sort of adapted weapon was found and seized. This has been disposed of accordingly.
[#keepingabbeysafe](#)



3:39 PM · May 18, 2022 · Twitter for Android

4 Retweets 10 Likes

Knife images shared by MPS ward Twitter accounts August 2021-July 2022



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

I would like to hear Londoners' views on the use of images of knives by the police on social media.

Use the tables in the appendix below to find your local borough account and my [Google Sheet](#) link for your local ward account and see how well they did.³⁴

Let them know what you think by tweeting at them or sending a message via the MPS thanks and complaints form <https://www.met.police.uk/fo/feedback/tc/thanks-and-complaints/>.³⁵

Explain you want them to stop sharing knife images, or thank them for showing the good work they are doing in your local community without sharing harmful images of knives.

Please get in touch with me if you have any comments or suggestions.

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This report sets out my views as an individual Assembly Member and not the agreed view of the entire Assembly.

The report front cover uses a photo by [John Schnobrich](#) on [Unsplash](#)

APPENDIX

Table showing the number of images shared by MPS London-wide Twitter accounts from 1 August 2021 to 31 July 2022

Account name	Link to Twitter account	Number of knife images shared
Roads&Transport MPS	https://twitter.com/MPSRTPC	66
Met Police Taskforce	https://twitter.com/MetTaskforce	52
MPSSpecials	https://twitter.com/MPSSpecials	17
Met Contact Centre	https://twitter.com/MetCC	16
Specialist Firearms Command MPS	https://twitter.com/MPSFirearms	5
Violent Crime Taskforce	https://twitter.com/MPSViolentCrime	2
Aviation Policing Heathrow	https://twitter.com/MPSHeathrow	1
#TheMet within communities	https://twitter.com/MPSCommunities	0
City Airport Police	https://twitter.com/MPSCityAirport	0
Cycle Safety Team	https://twitter.com/MetCycleCops	0
London Bridge BID Police	https://twitter.com/MPSLondonBdgBID	0
Met Police Brentford FC	https://twitter.com/MPSBrentfordFC	0
Met Police Chelsea FC	https://twitter.com/MPSChelseaFC	0
Met Police Millwall FC	https://twitter.com/MPSMillwallFC	0
Met Police QPR FC	https://twitter.com/MPSQPRFC	0
Met Police West Ham Utd FC	https://twitter.com/MPSWestHamUtdFC	0
Metropolitan Police	https://twitter.com/metpoliceuk	0
Metropolitan Police Events	https://twitter.com/MetPoliceEvents	0
MPS Cadets	https://twitter.com/MPSCadets	0
MPS Football Unit	https://twitter.com/MPSFootballUnit	0
MPS Mental Health Team	https://twitter.com/MPSMentalHealth	0
MPSonthewater	https://twitter.com/MPSonthewater	0
MPSOnTheBox	https://twitter.com/MPSOnTheBox	0



Table showing the number of images shared by MPS borough Twitter accounts from 1 August 2021 to 31 July 2022

Borough name	Link to Twitter account	Basic command unit (BCU)	Number of knife images shared
Barking and Dagenham	https://twitter.com/MPSBarkDag	East	38
Barnet	https://twitter.com/MPSBarnet	North West	0
Bexley	https://twitter.com/MPSBexley	South East	9
Brent	https://twitter.com/MPSBrent	North West	8
Bromley	https://twitter.com/MPSBromley	South	5
Camden	https://twitter.com/MPSCamden	Central North	2
Croydon	https://twitter.com/MPSCroydon	South	13
Ealing	https://twitter.com/ealingMPS	West	16
Enfield	https://twitter.com/MPSEnfield	North	8
Greenwich	https://twitter.com/MPSGreenwich	South East	17
Hackney	https://twitter.com/MPSHackney	Central East	11
Hammersmith & Fulham	https://twitter.com/MPSHammFul	Central West	2
Haringey	https://twitter.com/MPSHaringey	North	14
Harrow	https://twitter.com/MPSHarrow	North West	1
Havering	https://twitter.com/MPSHavering	East	24
Hillingdon	https://twitter.com/MPSHillingdon	West	19
Hounslow	https://twitter.com/MPSHounslow	West	14
Islington	https://twitter.com/MPSIslington	Central North	1
Kensington and Chelsea	https://twitter.com/MPSKenChel	Central West	1
Kingston	https://twitter.com/MPSKingston	South West	3
Lambeth	https://twitter.com/LambethMPS	Central South	2
Lewisham	https://twitter.com/MPSLewisham	South East	9
Merton	https://twitter.com/MPSMerton	South West	4
Newham	https://twitter.com/MPSNewham	North East	44
Redbridge	https://twitter.com/MPSRedbridge	East	15
Richmond	https://twitter.com/MPSRichmond	South West	0
Southwark	https://twitter.com/MPSSouthwark	Central South	0
Sutton	https://twitter.com/MPSSutton	South	4
Tower Hamlets	https://twitter.com/MPSTowerHam	Central East	23
Waltham Forest	https://twitter.com/MPSWForest	North East	27
Wandsworth	https://twitter.com/MPSWandsworth	South West	0
Westminster	https://twitter.com/MPSWestminster	Central West	27

For a table showing the number of images shared by the 638 MPS ward Twitter accounts from 1 August 2021 to 31 July 2022 see this [Google Sheet](#)

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<https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/assembly-members/publications-caroline-russell/publication-caroline-russell-letter-mayor-knife-images-crime-prevention-communication>

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- ²¹ New research to examine impact of images of knives on social media, 10 January 2022 <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/research-on-images-of-knives-on-social-media>
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