



Knife surrender initiatives

Toolkit technical report

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Knife surrender initiatives: YEF Technical Report

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Plain language summary

The objective of this technical report is to review the evidence on the effect of knife surrender initiatives on children and young people's involvement in crime and violence.

The core aspect of knife surrender initiatives is to encourage individuals to surrender knives. In this way knife surrender initiatives can be considered a type of weapon amnesty. Knife surrender initiatives typically involve placing a 'bin' or a collection box at a particular location where weapons such as knives can be surrendered. Knife surrender initiatives can also include compensation or 'buyback schemes', which offer payments for weapons handed in.

An individual may surrender a knife but does not address the reasons for carrying that knife (e.g., protection, fear, malicious intent), and the individual could procure another knife (or other weapon) and take part in violence. Furthermore, research is limited on why individuals may surrender a weapon or take part in knife surrender initiatives. Therefore, our understanding about the theory of change involved in knife surrender initiatives is very limited.

The evidence on the effectiveness of knife surrender initiatives and weapon amnesties in general is also very limited, but there are some primary evaluations. There is currently no systematic review or meta-analyses on the impact of knife surrender initiatives. Most of the evaluations on weapon amnesties have been conducted in the US, and the transferability of the findings to a UK context may be questionable. This is because of the availability of firearms in the US and the cultural relationship with firearms in the US is different to that in the UK.

In evaluations of knife surrender initiatives in England and Scotland, there were initial declines in the number of offences, but the effects of the intervention were not sustained. For example, in London an evaluation found initial declines in police recorded knife-related offences five weeks following the intervention, but the rate returned to pre-amnesty levels after eight weeks.

Possible barriers to successful implementation of knife surrender initiatives may include: not choosing the right geographical location for the intervention; not choosing the right location for the collection bin; or not targeting the right weapons.

In summary, knife surrender initiatives are often implemented by police forces in the UK, but police data shows that these are of limited effectiveness. Further research and evaluation studies, especially those using mixed methods designs, are needed to better understand when, where and how knife surrender initiatives may be effective.

Objective and approach

The objective of this technical report is to review the evidence on the effect of knife surrender initiatives on children and young people's involvement in crime and violence.

There is currently no systematic review or meta-analysis on the impact of knife surrender initiatives. Thus, the current technical report does not include a headline impact estimate or an evidence rating. The evidence on the effectiveness of knife surrender initiatives is very limited, but there are some primary evaluations. There have also been evaluations of weapon amnesties, but most of these have been conducted in the US, and so the transferability of the findings to a UK context may be questionable, particularly due to the very different legislative landscapes and availability/use of certain weapons (e.g., firearms).

Inclusion criteria

Reviews considered for inclusion were high-quality systematic reviews and meta-analyses that examined the effectiveness of weapon amnesties, with a particular focus on knives, on children and young people's involvement in crime and violence. Whilst the approach is labelled as knife surrender initiatives, it is possible that weapons other than knives may be surrendered during these initiatives.

No relevant systematic reviews or meta-analyses were identified, and so the current technical report draws on evidence briefings and summaries relating to violent offending and knife crime in general (i.e., Eades, et al., 2007; McNeil & Wheeler, 2019; Sethi et al., 2010; Wieshmann et al., 2021).

Eades et al. (2007) published a report on the evidence and policy landscape surrounding knife crime in England and Wales. The report also includes evidence from Scotland. Legislative issues, definitional issues, and an outline of the impact of knife crime is provided alongside some discussion on knife surrender initiatives to prevent knife crime is reported.

McNeill and Wheller (2019) published an evidence briefing on knife crime for the College of Policing, and we also use this report to inform the current technical report. Similar to other publications on this topic, this report provides an overview of the proposed causes and risk factors for knife crime. Interventions to reduce knife crime are presented and reviewed, including evidence on knife surrender initiatives. McNeill and Wheller (2019) call these knife amnesties.

The report by Sethi et al. (2010) was for the World Health Organisation (WHO) on preventing violence and knife crime among young people in Europe. The report provides a detailed overview of the prevalence of violence amongst children and young people in Europe and outlines possible effective interventions and prevention programmes, in a way not dissimilar from the YEF Toolkit.

Wiesmann et al. (2021) provide a detailed overview of violence in London in a report produced for the Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit. The report concentrates on the reasons why violence occurs and presenting some approaches to prevent and/or reduce violence, of which interventions to prevent knife carrying are one strand. Little information is provided about knife surrender initiatives, but the authors highlight the need for rigorous evaluation of existing interventions to reduce knife carrying.

Exclusion criteria

Reviews that focussed only on gun crime and gun amnesties (e.g., Koper & Mayo-Wilson, 2006), legislation to prevent gun crimes (e.g., McPhedran, 2016), or were too broad and did not report subgroup analyses related to knives or young people (e.g., Hinkle et al., 2020) were excluded. Reviews or studies on weapon amnesties or weapon surrender initiatives that may be implemented in a region following armed conflict (e.g., WHO, 2009) were also excluded.

Outcomes

The outcomes of interest in a future review of knife surrender initiatives would be diverse and varied but related to the involvement of children and young people's involvement in crime and violence. A future review of knife surrender initiatives could examine the impact of the intervention and perform subgroup analysis to compare the impact on later weapon ownership, and violence using knives, guns, and other weapons. Moreover, the impact on neighbourhood crime could be assessed if there were sufficient evaluations with subgroup analyses which allowed for the crimes committed by children and young people to be separated from those crimes committed by adults.

Description of interventions

The core aspect of knife surrender initiatives is to make it possible and desirable for individuals to surrender weapons. In the UK this type of intervention is typically called a knife surrender or amnesty (Sethi et al., 2010). Knife surrender initiatives typically involve placing a 'bin' or a collection box at a particular location, where weapons such as knives or guns can be surrendered (McNeill & Wheller, 2019).

The intervention targets weapons that may be used to inflict injury or harm in a violent act, but do not address the reasons why such violence occurs. As Eades et al. (2007, p. 27) state, "knife amnesties address but one tool of expression of interpersonal violence and do nothing to address the underlying causes of such violence". An individual may surrender a weapon, but without addressing the reasons for carrying that weapon (e.g., protection, fear, malicious intent), the individual may procure another weapon and proceed to take part in violence. However, not all knives are equally attractive for use in violence or to carry for protection. A weapon such as a knife is not needed to commit violence, but it would make the commission of violence more harmful/lethal.

A knife surrender initiative may be implemented alongside a media campaign (e.g., #knifefree campaign; Wiesmann et al., 2021) or other prevention strategies such as improved safety measures in places where alcohol is consumed or improved communication with businesses that sell knives (Sethi et al., 2010). McNeill and Wheller (2019) refer to schemes in the UK such as 'Bin a Blade' or 'Word 4 Weapons' that implemented a knife surrender initiative and also aimed to increase awareness of the dangers associated with carrying a knife.

There is a 'no questions asked' policy in place for knife surrender initiatives, however some schemes may involve the inspection of deposited weapons at a later date to identify any connection with criminal offences. In these instances, the weapon surrender does not protect anyone from investigation or prosecution¹.

Theory of change/presumed causal mechanisms

There is limited evidence-based research on a possible theory of change or presumed causal mechanism in knife surrender initiatives. The College of Policing problem solving guide (2021) outlines that in relation to knife bins, these may work to reduce knife crime by reducing the number of knives

¹ We are grateful for this insight from academic and practitioner who reviewed earlier versions of this report.

in circulation and reducing the perceived need to carry a knife. Knife surrender initiatives may not be designed to affect long-term change, but instead offer an opportunity to remove dangerous weapons from circulation in the immediate or short-term, in order to reduce opportunity for use in violence².

Wieshmann et al. (2021) outline that there are several ‘drivers’ that may explain why an individual may choose to carry a weapon, specifically focusing on why young people carried knives in London. These drivers include self-defence, victim coercion, causing harm to others, and self-presentation (Wieshmann et al., 2021, p. 56). Therefore, an intervention such as a weapon amnesty, that specifically targets the act of carrying a weapon, may be effective in reducing the violence committed using said weapon. However, the presumed causal mechanism in weapon amnesties, such as knife surrender initiatives, does not address the “underlying causes of the problem” (Eades et al., 2007, p. 28). As such, without additional intervention components that address the reasons why an individual may want to use a weapon and cause harm or injury, knife surrender initiatives may have little long-term impact.

In addition, McNeill and Wheller (2019) outline that there is no research on why individuals may surrender a weapon or take part in a weapon amnesty, therefore, our understanding about the theory of change involved in knife surrender initiatives is very limited. Therefore, to impact long-term change and reduce the use of knives, it is likely that knife surrender initiatives need to be implemented alongside other intervention and prevention programmes. Furthermore, if knife surrender initiatives involve a ‘no questions asked’ policy, it may be difficult to determine whether weapons surrendered were indeed intended for use in violence. Yet if surrendered weapons may be subjected to inspection and analysis for investigative purposes and this is widely known, this could also reduce the likelihood that weapons would be surrendered.

Wieshmann et al. (2021) also raise an important issue of a possible undesirable intervention effect. Implementing an intervention such as a knife surrender initiative may lead to increased public awareness or fear about the prevalence of weapons. This increased fear may increase the numbers of weapons being carried, as individuals choose to carry a weapon for self-defence (College of Policing, 2021). This is particularly a concern if a knife surrender initiative is accompanied by a media campaign (e.g., #knifefree and London Needs You; Wieshmann et al., 2021). Other possible undesirable impacts may be that a knife bin could “provide cover” for individuals found to be carrying knives by the police

² We are grateful to Iain R Brennan for these insightful thoughts and additions to our understanding of the theory of change.

(College of Policing, 2021). In such circumstances, the individual may use the explanation that they were bringing the weapon to the knife bin to justify possession. Furthermore, there is a risk of theft or attempted theft and so having a knife bin could also be a cause for concern about public safety (College of Policing, 2021).

Evidence base

Descriptive overview

There is no systematic review or meta-analysis on the effectiveness of knife surrender initiatives, therefore we must interpret the results of primary research cautiously. There are no high-quality evaluations of knife surrender initiatives, or weapon amnesties, in the UK. The existing evidence from the UK literature is that knife surrender initiatives are not effective in reducing violence. There may be a significant number of weapons surrendered and initial declines in violence, but the effects are not sustained. However, we need a rigorous evaluation to better understand the effectiveness of knife surrender initiatives.

Sethi et al. (2010) outline that in evaluations of knife amnesties in London and Glasgow the observed desirable effects of the intervention were not sustained. In London, the evaluation found initial declines in knife-related offences five weeks following the intervention, but the rate had returned to pre-intervention levels after eight weeks (Eades et al., 2007; Metropolitan Police, 2006; Sethi et al., 2010). Similarly, in Glasgow, the number of individuals presenting to emergency departments with serious stab wounds declined up to 10-months post intervention but returned to pre-intervention levels after one year (Sethi et al., 2010).

Assessment of the evidence rating

As there was no systematic review or meta-analysis on the effectiveness of knife surrender initiatives, we could not conduct an assessment of the evidence rating.

Impact

Summary impact measure

There is currently no meta-analysis on the effectiveness of knife surrender initiatives, and as such, no mean effect size for the impact on the involvement of children and young people in crime and violence. Therefore, the current technical report cannot provide a headline impact estimate.

Implementation and cost analysis

There is currently no evidence on the implementation or cost of knife surrender initiatives. One could estimate that knife surrender initiatives would be low cost, due to the simplicity of the intervention (e.g., a weapons bin in a supermarket recycling centre) and lack of personnel required. However, if the intervention is not effective or sustained knife surrender initiatives may not be very cost-effective.

Possible barriers to successful implementation of knife surrender initiatives may include: not choosing the right geographical location for the intervention; not choosing the right location for the collection bin (for example a location without CCTV); or not targeting the right weapons. For example, a knife surrender initiative needs to be implemented in an area where there is a problem with knife-related offences, or the intervention may not be effective. As Wieshmann et al. (2021) highlight in relation to violence in London, a highly-localised approach is essential to understanding and responding to violence, including violence involving knives. Similarly, if a collection bin is placed in the reception area of a police station, immediately next to a monitored reception desk, this may not encourage individuals to come forth and surrender a weapon due to fears they will be identified or possibly reprimanded for other suspected offences. Finally, in general, a weapon amnesty needs to target the right weapon. There are many examples of gun amnesties in the USA, but a gun amnesty may not be as effective in the UK where guns are not as readily accessible.

Findings from the UK

Evaluations of knife surrender initiatives have taken place in several boroughs in London (e.g., Croydon, Southwark, and Hillingdon) and also in Strathclyde, Glasgow (see Eades et al., 2007 for overview). Generally, evaluations report a substantial number of weapons being surrendered however, as the following paragraphs outline the benefit of removing these weapons from circulation were not sustained in the long-term. During the national knife surrender initiative for five weeks starting in May 2006, 89,864 knives were surrendered. As Eades et al. (2007, p. 27) point out, if every household has just one kitchen knife this is just 0.0041 percent of the knives available for crime. Yet, a kitchen knife may not be a desirable or direct replacement for a knife surrendered in a weapon amnesty and evaluations may not categorise the type of weapons/knives collected.

Bleetman et al. (1997) conducted an evaluation of 'Operation Blade' in Strathclyde, Glasgow. This intervention was implemented in response to a rise in the numbers of individuals who were presenting to emergency departments with injuries sustained from an assault, particularly injuries from knives or stab wounds. The intervention targeted young people and specifically, young people's intention to carry knives (Bleetman et al., 1997). Operation Blade began in 1993 and alongside a knife surrender

initiative, also included “an intensified stop and search campaign”, additional safety measures in nightclubs and bars (e.g., closing a 2am instead of 3am; CCTV cameras, improved street lighting, training of stewards, and metal detectors), and talks with retailers who sell knives and secondary school students (Bleetman et al., 1997; p. 153). The evaluation compared the number of victims of assaults by examining records from the emergency department at Glasgow Royal Infirmary hospital. Data for the pre-intervention timepoint was collected in January 1993 and for the post-intervention, data from January 1994 was examined. Bleetman et al. (1997) found that there was a decrease in the number of patients in emergency departments for assault related injuries during the months that Operation Blade was implemented, but the impact was not sustained at the post-intervention timepoint. Specifically, in January 1993 there were 282 victims of assault who attended the emergency department, but in January 1994 there were 290.

What do we need to know? What don't we know?

Knife surrender initiatives are often implemented by police forces in the UK, but police data shows that these are of limited effectiveness, especially in the long-term (McNeill & Wheller, 2019; Metropolitan Police, 2006). Further research and evaluation studies, especially those using mixed methods designs, are needed to better understand how knife surrender initiatives may be effective. For example, we need to understand the motivations for surrendering a knife in a knife surrender initiative and what other additional intervention components are needed to prevent knife crime.

There have been evaluations of knife surrender initiatives but there is currently no systematic review and meta-analysis of the effectiveness of these interventions. The majority of evaluations on weapon amnesties in general have been conducted in the USA, thus, the findings of such a review may not be readily transferable to the UK context.

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