

Street crime and teenagers



ESRC SCHOOL BRIEFINGS

Street crime and teenagers - what can research tell us?

Knife crime and other types of street violence are in the headlines nearly every day. Are the media stirring up anxiety unnecessarily? In this series we look at three studies, two about the present and one historical. There are both overlaps and contradictions to be found in these findings, as well as parallels and contrasts with Victorian times.

The facts

Statistics from the British Crime Survey show that crimes involving knives have remained stable over the past decade – around six to seven per cent of all crime. In London the Metropolitan Police's most recent survey showed that knife crime had actually dropped over the past two years, from 12,122 to 10,220 incidents.

That is only part of the story for young people. As *The Guardian* reported in May 2008, knife crime affects young people disproportionately. Teenagers between 17 and 20 are the most likely victims, and there has been an increase in violent crimes committed by 15 and 16 year olds

Gun crime is also decreasing nationally, down 14 per cent in 2006-07. But nine young people lost their lives in shootings in 2007, including 11 year old Rhys Jones.



Further information

<http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/may/13/uk-crime.boris>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2055866.knife-crime-is-a-fact-of-life-for-teenagers.html>



The issues

Teenagers are arming themselves for protection, according to newspaper reports, but also for status. A 17 year old boy told *The Telegraph*: "It used to be that you only worried about getting into a fight with someone, but now you worry about someone pulling a knife on you. So it's catching, isn't it? I reckon that for a lot of people my age, it's not really about violence, it's just the cool thing to do."

David Lammy MP, the Minister of State for Higher Education and Intellectual Property, is worried about the link between knives and status. Lammy, described as Britain's most senior black MP, wrote in the *New Statesman*: "In the warped world of gang culture, carrying a weapon has come to be associated with being a man. Rather than being seen as a risk, the knife confers 'respect'".

He writes of the need for male role models and the pressures of consumerism. "In a 'bling' culture, criminality becomes a short cut to symbols of wealth and power..." he says.

(18 August 2008)

In 2002, *The Observer* estimated that about 30,000 young people were in gangs.

What do gang members themselves have to say about street crime? Are we making assumptions that do not stand up to scrutiny? How does street crime today differ from in the past, and how have attitudes to it changed? Research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) helps to illuminate such questions.

STATISTICS

- **11.3 million** crimes were committed in 2006-07. This is a fall of eight million since 1995
- Crimes involving firearms have increased in recent years
- **Two in three** people believe that crime nationally has increased in the last two years (even though it hasn't)
- Theft and handling, burglaries and criminal damage account for **three quarters** of all crimes
- Sexual offences, violence against the person and robbery account for less than **one quarter**

(*Britain at a Glance* 2008)

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Street fighting men

Gangs may not be as well organised or cohesive as people think. Research from Manchester University suggests they may be very different from their stereotyped image. The gangs studied in an anonymous city by Judith Aldridge and Juanjo Medina were ethnically mixed and had no stable leadership.



In the wake of successful police operations targeted at drug gangs it appeared that there was coordinated drug selling. Members sold mostly cannabis, but operated as individuals. The use of drugs, mainly cannabis, was widespread. The researchers hope their findings will help point the way to more effective responses to gang culture.

School failure was a common thread connecting members of gangs, which tended to evolve from adolescent friendship groups and to dissipate with landmarks of adulthood, such as parenthood or employment.

Most members were exposed to violence, but the researchers found little evidence for the common view that gang violence was related to drug markets. Instead, most violence was personal, and related to friends, romantic relationships and family. Although members spoke of gang loyalty, "we found that jealousy and debt motivated a considerable degree

of within-gang conflict". There was not much evidence of violent ethnic conflicts. Despite common perceptions, gangs were not dominated by boys from ethnic minorities – but gangs in areas with large black populations were more likely to be involved in gun violence. Additionally these gangs received more media, policy and police attention – a situation that brought in extra resources, but reinforced stereotypes.

The use of violence was viewed differently in different parts of the city. For instance, in one area, the masculinity of physical fights was valued, and resorting to guns was seen as 'cowardly'.

Overall, the researchers say the image of the gangster as trigger happy and keen to protect a tough reputation "contrasted with evidence showing that the gun was not the only way to resolve issues on the streets."

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Violence in street crime

The character of street crimes is changing. Academics have traditionally seen British street robberies as being carried out by calculating career robbers. More recent research shows that in the 21st century such crimes are “haphazard, essentially amateur excursions”. Behind this change is an emerging street culture in Britain similar to that in urban United State of America.

Professor Trevor Bennett and his team of researchers at the University of Glamorgan interviewed offenders in prisons and young offenders' institutions. They investigated a variety of violent offences, and looked in particular at the role played by street culture.

Few of the offenders interviewed said they needed money for basic subsistence. Most wanted it to support “what might be described as a criminal lifestyle”, write Wright, Brookman and Bennett in the *British Journal of Criminology* (2006), “Wherein the pursuit of illicit action generated an ongoing need for ‘fast cash’ that realistically could only be satisfied through crime”.

Some offenders also wanted to be able to show off expensive items, such as cars. “This was not so much for what the car *did* but for what it *said* to others,” the researchers comment.

Sometimes cash itself was the fashion item. One interviewee said: “I just love money. It’s like, I feel big when I got money, like when I haven’t got money, it feels like ****.”

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Sometimes street robbery is about the excitement of the fight, the fun of overpowering someone else. “It wasn’t like, for money – I was more addicted to robbing than I was to drugs,” said an offender.

Other reasons for street robbery were revenge and ‘debt collecting’, for instance if drug dealers are owed money. Offenders often wanted to project themselves as someone not to be messed with. It could also take the form of a rite of passage.

The research concluded that street robbers decide to commit their offences in a social and psychological terrain, containing few realistic alternatives. This is why their behaviour can appear irrational. (They often net little cash and risk long prison sentences.) Desperation, the research showed, led to a mindset in which individuals are too focused on meeting

the immediate need – be it to keep the party going, restore personal honour, dissipate anger or exact informal justice – to maximise reward or to think clearly about the possibility of threatened sanctions.



STATISTICS

- During the research 120 offenders were interviewed. Eighty nine were male and thirty one were female
- The majority were aged 26 plus
- The majority were white with ten per cent defining themselves as black, 12 per cent as mixed race and one per cent Asian.
- Young men aged between 16 to 24 have the highest risk of being a victim of crime – 13 per cent (British Crime Survey 2007-08)

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The right to fight?

There is nothing new about street fighting as a way to display manliness. In Victorian times, say researchers from Edge Hill University, society tolerated or even condoned such one-on-one violence much more than it does today. However, attitudes began to change by the turn of the century.

Dr John Archer and his colleagues who set out to examine working class male-on-male violence and working class notions of masculinity, found there were deeply embedded beliefs about men's right to fight. 'Manly' or 'English' fights, fought between two men according to codes of honour, were dismissed or treated leniently in the courts, even if someone died. However, if a losing fighter drew a knife (not uncommon), the magistrates were tougher. So-called fair fights often degenerated into stabbings.

"Considerable evidence suggests that the notion of the fair fight was in reality, if not quite a fiction, then certainly a contest in which the rules were frequently broken", say the researchers.

Most male violence was fuelled by alcohol. For unemployed men living in poverty in overcrowded slums, fighting was a way to gain status and self-esteem. Cornermen, as they were known, often fought to assert their right to stand on a street corner. They went looking for fights in the hope of gaining a reputation for hardness.

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In certain parts of town, police ignored street violence. "Here they left roughs to fight other roughs," say the researchers.

One contrast with the present day is that those engaging in violent behaviour were somewhat older. Today the most violent group is in their late teens, while in the 1870s-90s more than 75 per cent of men charged with assaulting police were over 20. However, between 1860 and 1900 the age of men prosecuted for common assault got younger.

Newspaper reports showed that from the late 1860s onwards, there was growing criticism of the police for their use of force. In cases which came before the courts, 54 per cent could

be described as unprovoked police assaults on the public; 31 per cent arose during arrests and 15 per cent took place in custody. A surprising 40 per cent of the victims were women. The researchers believe that Liverpool police assumed them to be prostitutes, whom they felt able to assault with little fear of prosecution.

Although a child-murder with 'eerie parallels' to the Jamie Bulger case did not provoke a moral panic, the first rail murder (London, July 1864) featured in the press for the following five months. "The murder of a gentleman in a First Class compartment ... suddenly made every rail traveller feel vulnerable to attack".

... Turn over

Questions to think about

Below are a number of questions which can be used in conjunction with the research discussed throughout this series. These are designed to provoke debate within the classroom and stimulate discussion.

1. Is knife crime increasing? How can statistics that appear to contradict each other be explained?
2. The studies from the University of Glamorgan and from Manchester University are not entirely in agreement. How do their findings differ? How can these differences be explained? What is their significance?
3. How has the nature and public view of street violence changed since Victorian times? Why might this be the case? What has been consistent?
4. Where do girls fit into the picture? (You will have to look at the reports themselves to find the evidence, especially Aldridge et al.)
5. How can patterns related to race be studied without stereotyping?
6. These studies point to a number of solutions. (Again, look at the reports themselves, especially Aldridge et al and Bennett et al) What would you suggest? Why? How has the evidence in these studies helped you to think of these ideas?



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