

Should all knives with pointed ends be banned?



Britain's government is considering it, along with other steps to curb fatal stabbings

RONAN KANDA had just visited a friend after school to buy a PlayStation controller. As he left the house, headphones on, the 16-year-old probably had no idea that he was being followed by two other teenagers, armed with a ninja sword and a machete, who had mistaken him for their intended target. Yards before he reached his home, they stabbed him to death.

Ronan's murder in Wolverhampton in June 2022 was a tragedy, but sadly not a rarity. He was one of 243 people killed with knives in England and Wales in the year to March 2023, 32 of them children. After a drop during the pandemic, knife crime has been rising again (see chart). Its salience has increased, too, in the wake of the murder of three young girls in a dance class in Southport in July and a campaign led by Idris Elba, an actor (pictured).

On February 19th Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, announced "Ronan's Law", a package of reforms to clamp down on knife sales, as part of a plan to halve knife crime within a decade. While stricter laws are welcome, achieving the target will also require getting to the root of why so many young Britons feel the need to carry a knife in the first place.

Britain is hardly the worst-afflicted country when it comes to knife crime. Many poorer countries have far more stabbings per head. America does, too, though it has a much higher homicide rate and is more preoccupied with guns. But Britain is the country that worries about knife crime most. That is probably because it has a particular problem among young people.

In the year to March 2024 more than 500 children were admitted to hospital in England and Wales with knife injuries. Although that is not quite as high as the pre-pandemic peak, it was 9% up on the previous year. One survey found that 60% of young Londoners worry about their safety, and a quarter see carrying a knife as a good way to protect themselves. Another that 2% of 13- to 17-year-olds, equivalent to 87,000 teenage children across the country, say they have carried a knife.

International comparisons are hard due to limited data, and because trends are shaped by changes in the law, police capacity and the use of stop-and-search. But experts agree that the scourge of knife-based violence among children is a peculiarly British problem. Journalists visiting from elsewhere are perplexed by it, says Patrick Green of the Ben Kinsella Trust, a charity. "My experience having worked abroad is that the level of fear among young people in London and other English cities is off the charts."

Ms Cooper's plan is to clamp down on supply. The perpetrators of the Wolverhampton and Southport attacks found it all too easy to obtain knives from online retailers. Under the new rules, there will be stricter age-verification processes and longer sentences for those found to have sold knives to children; retailers will be required to report suspicious bulk purchases to the police. Much will depend on enforcement. In September Ms Cooper banned the sale of "zombie" knives, which are long and serrated. Investigations have found they are still easily available.

Some, including Mr Elba, want ministers to take the bolder step of phasing out or restricting the sale of all pointed knives. That idea was proposed last year in a paper by Graham Farrell, a crime scientist at Leeds University. Though zombie knives attract much of the attention, Mr Farrell points out that most homicides are committed with kitchen knives, which will remain easy to access and are more dangerous than they need to be. "You don't need a lethal knife to dice a carrot," he says.

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