

# Knife Crime: briefing paper

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## Key messages

- Knife crime is important both because of the risk of people being harmed and because of the damage to society that routine knife carrying signifies
- Knife crime affects all ages and all ethnicities. However, a disproportionate number of homicide victims are from ethnic minorities
- Homicides appear to be increasing for males aged 18 to 24
- Percentage increases in hospital episodes following knife assault have been highest for the 15 to 19 year age group
- Overall (all age) levels of hospital episodes seem to be returning to numbers not seen since the mid -2000s
- Knives are most commonly used in the context of assault with injury or of robbery rather than attempted or actual homicide. These two areas had the largest increases in recent years
- Cautions and convictions for knife possession for under 25s are increasing, especially for ethnic minority groups
- Although stop and search levels have fallen in recent years, it remains particularly focused on ethnic minorities, with black people nine and a half times as likely to be stopped and searched as white people

This paper outlines what available data says to answer the questions:

- Is knife crime in its various forms more common than it used to be?
- Are the consequences of knife crime more serious than they used to be?
- Who appears to be committing and who are the victims of knife crime and is this changing?

It takes a national (England /England & Wales) rather than a local or regional perspective. It appears that different areas have different experiences, with rural areas perhaps experiencing knife crime linked to drug sales along county lines.

## 1. Why is knife crime an important issue?

'Knife crime' covers a range of issues with different attendant concerns. There are concerns about the processes involved such as knife carrying, the outcomes such as death or injury and the wider community harm arising from a more 'weaponised' culture.

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News reports of increasing numbers of young people being stabbed to death are a concern to many, particularly to parents who may worry about risks to their children. Non-fatal injuries and assaults involving knives are also a cause for concern. Parents and carers need to be able to understand the degree of risk that their children face in order to be able to respond appropriately.

Second, the increased use of knives in other crimes such as robberies is also a concern as the presence of a knife in such circumstances increases the likelihood of serious injury.

Third, if more young people are carrying knives to protect themselves, even if they are not used, this increases the risk of normal conflicts escalating into more serious incidents. Otherwise law-abiding young people who carry knives risk becoming criminals.

Also, a society where knife carrying is seen as a normal practice by young people may in itself be harmful to relationships and communities.

Politicians and commentators have suggested various means of combating knife crime. For any proposed solutions to work we need to understand what is happening.

## 2. How do we define the problem and what are others saying about it?

The focus of this paper is on knife crime involving young people aged under 25 as victims or perpetrators. Knife crime in this sense covers homicides, assaults, use of knives in wider crime and the possession of knives.

Of course, assaults and homicides are committed by adults of all ages against older adults too. Wider patterns can provide a useful context where data on under 25s is limited.

Various theories have been proposed to explain the reported increase. Links have been suggested to school exclusions and to the numbers of police officers. Solutions have been proposed such as reducing the threshold needed for police to conduct a stop and search. What was a stop and search pilot in seven police forces was rolled out in August 2019 to all 43 forces in England and Wales so that police officers no longer need to have reasonable suspicion to search people for weapons.

## 3. Where do we find the relevant data?

There are several key data sets, not all of which fit neatly together. Some cover victims, some perpetrators. Some are about people of all ages, while others allow a focus on young people.

For victims who are killed there is ONS mortality data by cause and for those who are injured there is health service data on consultant episodes by cause, specifically ICD 10 code X99 'assault by sharp object'.

<https://files.digital.nhs.uk/56/99A563/hosp-epis-stat-admi-ext-cau-2017-18-tab.xlsx>

For crime data there is ONS data on policing. The 'recorded knife or sharp instrument offences' data are submitted via a special collection, which includes the offences of attempted murder; threats to kill; assault with injury and assault with intent to cause serious harm; robbery; rape; and sexual assault. An offence is recorded as involving a knife or sharp instrument when the weapon is present during the offence or the threat is believed to be real. The weapon does not necessarily have to be used.

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/policeforceareadatatables/yearendingmarch2019/policeforceareatablesyeendingmarch2019.xlsx>

Police also record “possession of an article with a blade or point” offences.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2019>

The Crime Survey of 10 to 15-year-olds also publishes data on knife carrying.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/compendium/focusonviolentcrimeandsexualoffences/yearendingmarch2016/offencesinvolvingtheuseofweapons>

It is fair to say that offence data, while useful, is not a perfect barometer of incidence. It is generally accepted that a police focus on a particular type of crime can lead to an increase in reported numbers. For example, more use of stop and search can result in more recorded offences of possession, which may or may not indicate more knife carrying by the public. The offences figures tend to be less stable than the figures reported in the public Crime Survey which is a survey of people’s experience of crime. For example, for 2018 the police recorded a 19% rise in violent offences overall while the Crime Survey suggested no overall increase in violent offences.

The Ministry of Justice also produces data on knife and offensive weapon offences that were formally dealt with by the by the Criminal Justice System (CJS). This also gives information on verdicts and sentencing. This MOJ data include the offences of possession or threatening with an offensive weapon or possession of an article with a blade or point. These figures do not include murders or assaults that may have involved knives or offensive weapons.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/808496/Knife\\_and\\_Offensive\\_Weapon\\_Sentencing\\_Pub\\_Q1\\_2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/808496/Knife_and_Offensive_Weapon_Sentencing_Pub_Q1_2019.pdf)

## 4. What does the evidence tell us?

### Homicides

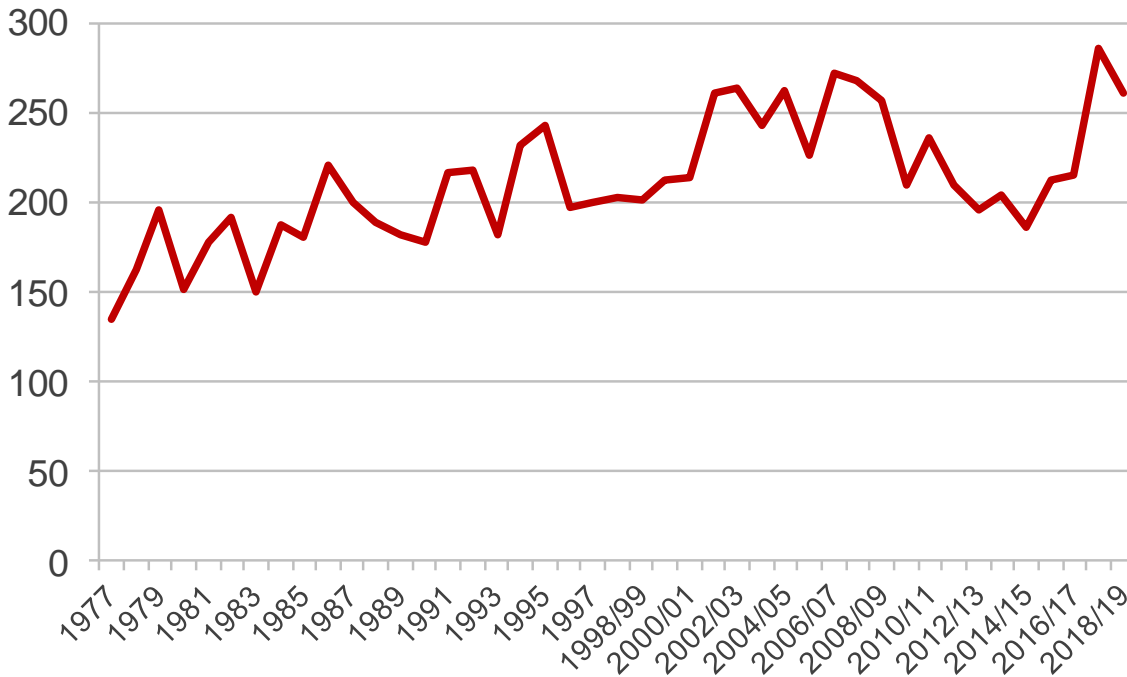
#### All ages

Most of the published data is based on all ages.

Thirty-nine per cent of all homicides in the year ending March 2019 involved a knife or sharp instrument, the same proportion as the previous year.

Since 1979 the number of homicides by sharp instrument has usually been above the 180 mark with a slow upward trend, falling off from 2008/9 and rising steeply in 17/18.

Figure 1: Number of homicides by sharp instrument 1977 to 2018/19, England and Wales



Sources: House of Commons Briefing Paper Number SN4304 *Knife crime in England and Wales* – Allen and Audickas, November 2018 and ONS *Crime in England & Wales 2019*

The number of homicides where a knife or sharp instrument was involved decreased by 9% in the year ending March 2019 year to 260 offences in England and Wales. However, the year to March 2018 was a peak year when the 285 recorded homicides by knife or sharp instrument was the highest number since the Home Office Homicide Index began in 1946.

The most recent reduction in such offences was driven by falls seen in London, down from 110 to 67 homicides involving a knife or sharp instrument in the year ending March 2019, but still higher than 56 recorded in London in the year ending March 2017.

The police also record the ‘ethnic appearance’ of all homicide victims. Combined data for 2013/14 to 2015/16 suggests that two thirds of victims were white, with ethnic minorities over-represented.

Figure 2: Number of homicides by sharp instrument by ‘ethnic appearance’ of victim, 2013/14 to 2015/16, England and Wales

	White	Black	Asian	Other	Unknown	Total
number	404	112	53	20	14	603
%	67%	19%	9%	3%	2%	100%

Source: MOJ, Race and the Criminal Justice System, victims’ tables 2016

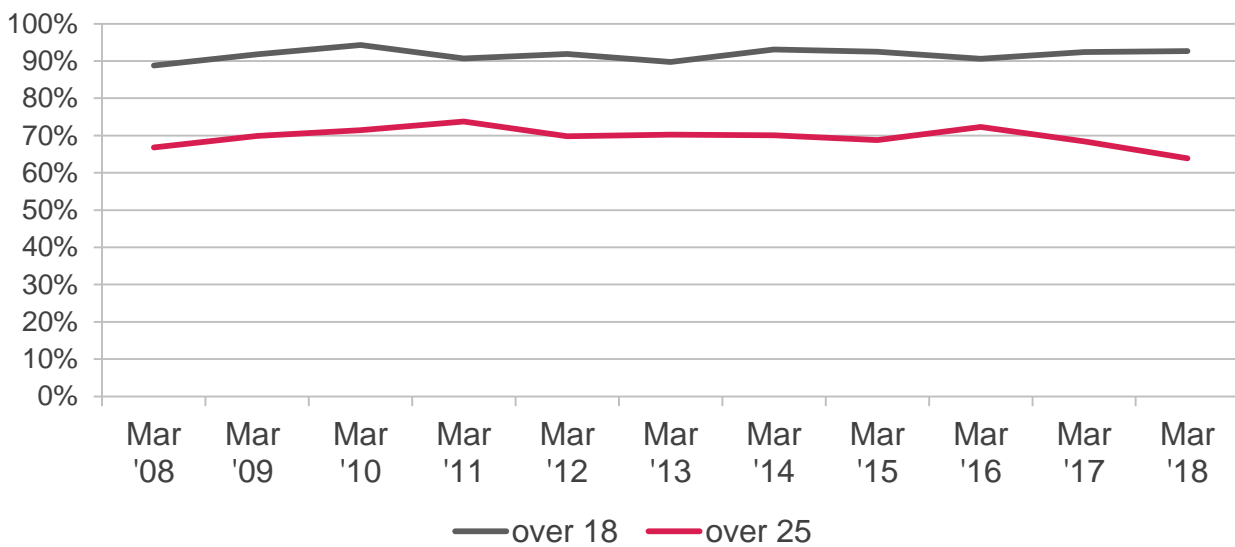
## Young People

ONS data is available for age and sex of homicide victims, based on based on the Homicide Index recorded by the Home Office.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/appendixtableshomicideinenglandandwales/current/homicideappendixtables201718finalv5corrected.xls>.

An important point to note is that young people are in the minority of victims of homicide by a sharp instrument. Over 90% of victims are aged 18 or over and typically over two thirds are aged 25 plus.

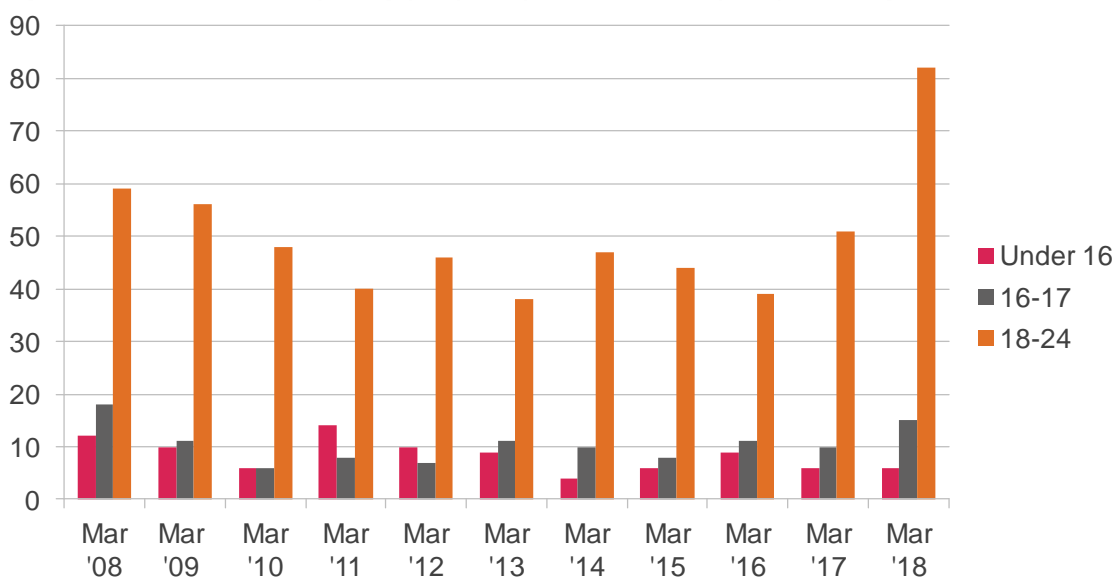
**Figure 3: Percentage of knife or sharp object homicide victims accounted for by adults, England and Wales**



Source: ONS *Crime in England & Wales 2019* Appendix Table 5

Figure three looks at the under 25s in more detail.

**Figure 4: Homicides of young people by knife or sharp object, England and Wales**



Source: ONS *Crime in England & Wales 2019* Appendix Table 5

We see that there was a particular spike in year to March 18, especially for the 18 to 24 age group. However, for 18 to 24-year-olds the average for the three most recent years (April 2015 to March 2018) was 57. This is a modest increase on the average of 54 homicides between April 07 and March 2010.

For under-18s, the three-year average number of homicides by knife or sharp object in England and Wales actually fell from 21 to 19 in the same period. It seems that we are right to be worried about the recent spike in the 18 to 24 age group, but there is not yet evidence of a sustained national increase in killings of under 18s.

In most years, over 80% of victims aged under 25 are male.

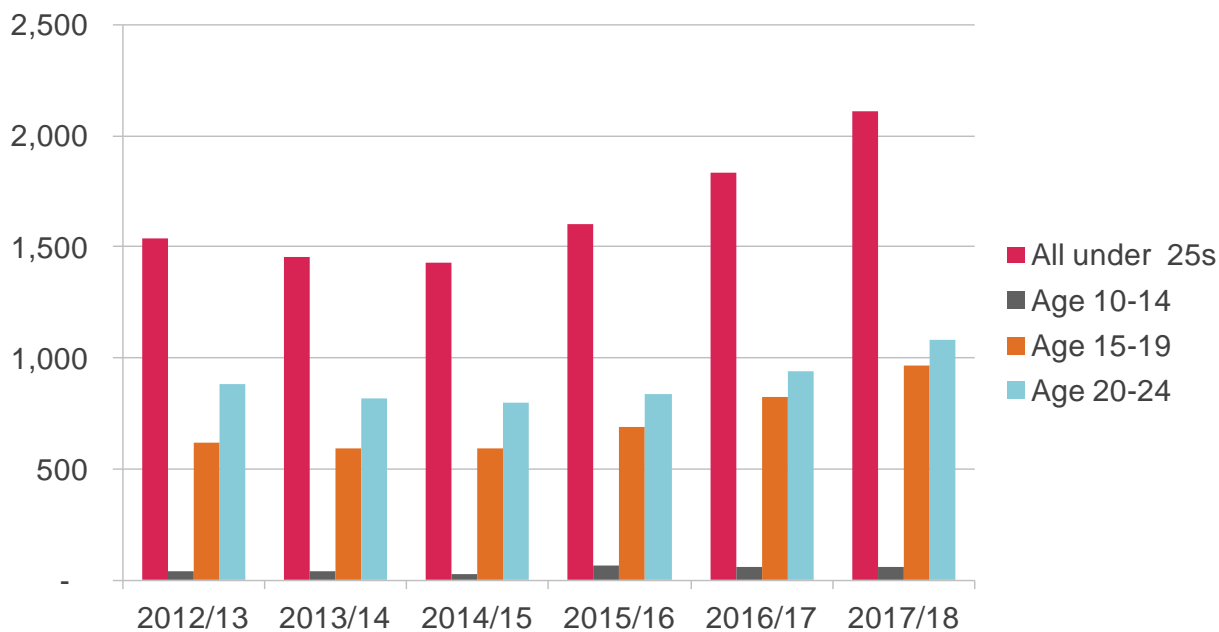
### Key Points

- Overall homicides involving a knife or sharp instrument appear to be rising for all ages. However, the vast majority of victims are over 25 years old.
- Victims are typically male.
- While two thirds of victims are white, ethnic minorities are overrepresented amongst homicide victims.
- The number of 18 to 24-year-olds killed has increased, but there is no clear evidence of a sudden increase in the knife killings of under 18s.

### Hospital Episodes

There has been a 37% increase since 2012/13 in hospital admissions/episodes for under-25s following assault by a sharp object, which in 2017/18 exceeded 2,000. Percentage increases have been highest for the 15 to 19 year age group. Young people aged 10 to 19 accounted for more than 1,000 of these admissions.

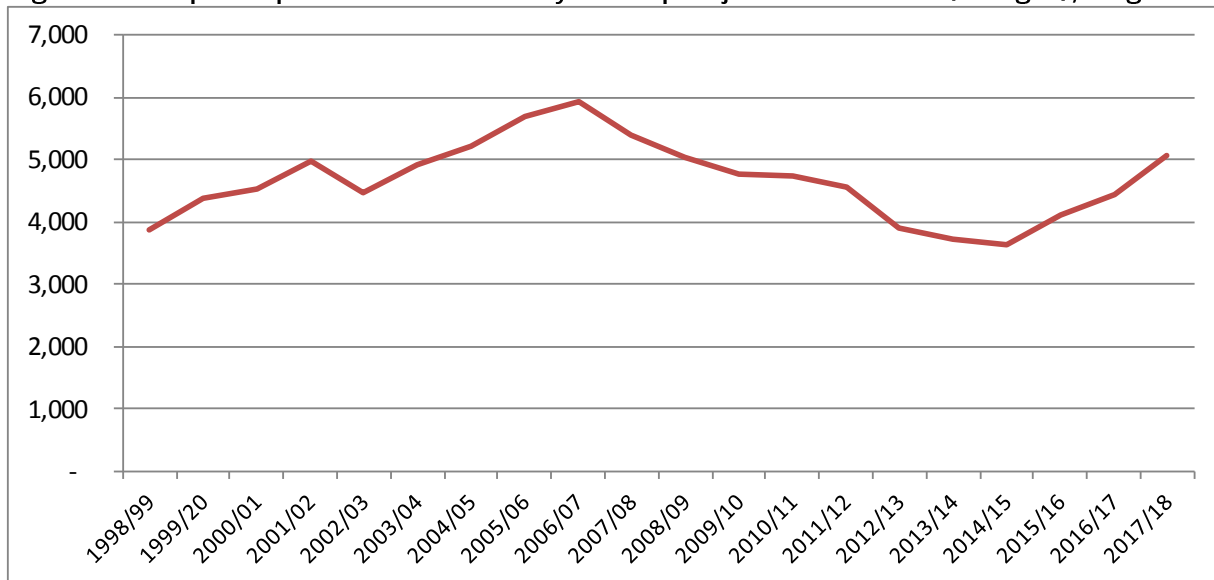
Figure 5: Hospital episodes for assault by a sharp object, England



Source: NHS Digital (Hospital Episode Statistics) - under 10s are included in the total.

Before 2012 published data was less age specific.

Figure 6: Hospital episodes for assault by a sharp object since 1998 (all ages), England



Source: NHS Digital (Hospital Episode Statistics)

Over the longer term, data for all ages is less dramatic. It appears that 2013 onwards was a particular dip and that levels for all ages were recently still below the numbers seen in the mid-2000s, although we seem to be approaching similar overall levels once more.

### Key Points

- There have been many more hospital admissions/episodes for under 25-year-olds following assault by a sharp object over the past few years.
- Young people aged 15 to 19 have been particularly affected.
- While current numbers are not unprecedented, they do represent a rise over the previous five years.
- Taken alongside the earlier homicide figures, it appears that young people generally are experiencing more non-fatal knife assaults that require hospital care, and that over 18s are increasingly likely to die from their injuries.

### Other Selected Offences (all ages)<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that most assaults do not involve a weapon. In the year ending March 2018, the Crime Survey for England and Wales reported that a weapon of any kind was used in 19% of violent incidents, and that knives and other stabbing implements were used in 6% of all violent incidents. Children aged 10 to 15 reported in the Crime Survey that 3% of violent incidents involved a 'stabbing implement' (e.g. a knife or screwdriver).

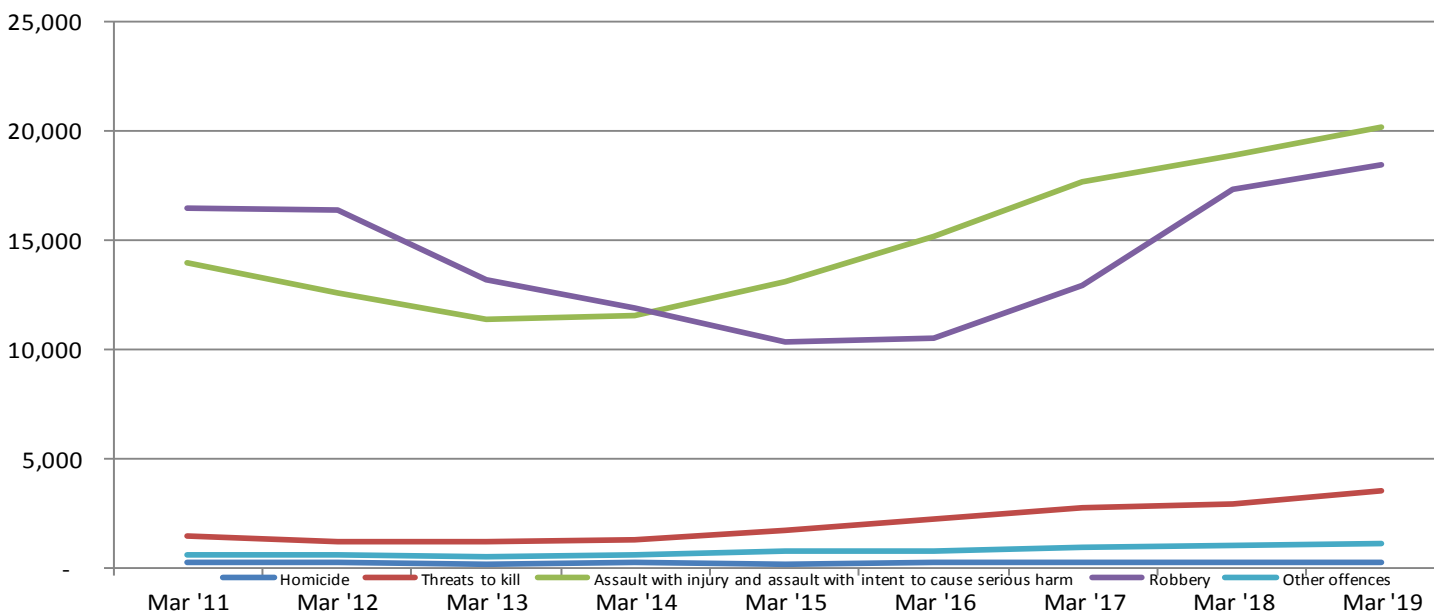
<sup>1</sup> Time series figures quoted exclude Greater Manchester Police because of previous undercounting in Greater Manchester Police (GMP) data

In the year ending March 2019, police recorded 47,136 selected serious offences involving a knife in England and Wales. These were broken down as follows, with assault and robbery the two most common offences of those covered.

Selected Offence	Apr '18 to Mar '19	%
Assault with injury and assault with intent to cause serious harm	20,182	46%
Robbery	18,462	42%
Threats to kill	3,541	8%
Rape	517	1%
Attempted murder	405	1%
Homicide	250	1%
Sexual assault	159	0%
<b>Total selected offences including homicide</b>	<b>43,516</b>	<b>100%</b>
<i>Total selected offences inc Greater Manchester Police</i>	<i>47,136</i>	

Source: ONS *Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2019* Table 4

Figure 7: Selected Offences involving knife or sharp object over time, England and Wales



Source: ONS *Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2019* Table 4

Viewed over time, robbery and assault appear to have increased in recent years, as has the number of threats to kill. They are the main drivers for increasing headline knife crime figures.



### Key Points

- Violent incidents only rarely involve knives.
- While assault and threats to kill account for over half of the selected offences involving a knife or sharp object, the steepest rise appears has been in the use of knives in the context of robbery.

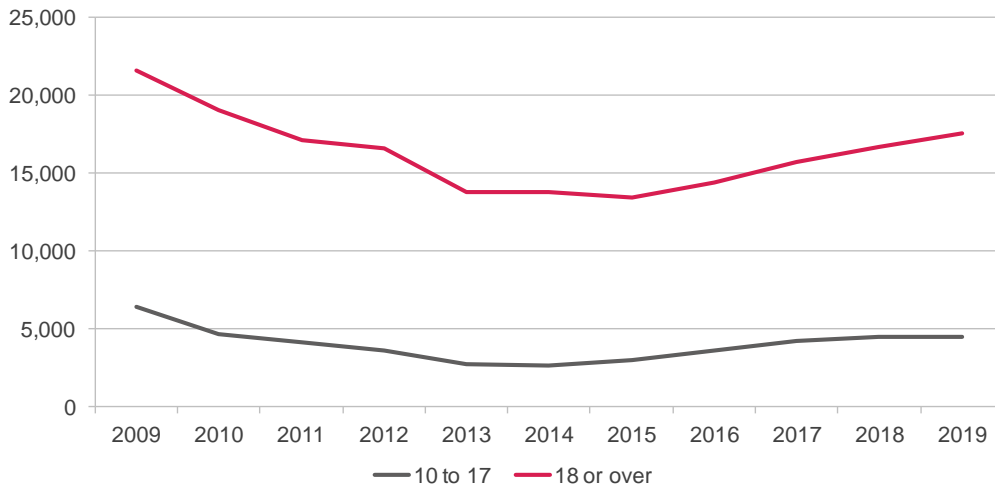
### Knife Possession

The offence “possession of an article with a blade or point” rose by 21%, to 22,169 offences in the year ending March 2019. This rise is consistent with increases seen over the last six years and is the highest figure since the year ending March 2009, the earliest point for which these offences were separately identifiable. The official statistics note that the reported figure can be influenced by increases in targeted police action in relation to knife crime.

It should be noted that most of these were adults. One in five (4,451) was under the age of 18.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) 2019 figures cover cautions and convictions for possession of a knife or offensive weapon. This includes offences that involved threatening with such a weapon. The MoJ figures show that the criminal justice system formally dealt with the highest number of knife and offensive weapon offences since 2010. The recorded offences are: possession of an article with a blade or point, possession of an offensive weapon and threatening with a knife or offensive weapon.

**Figure 8: Knife and offensive weapon offences resulting in a caution or conviction by broad age band, England and Wales**

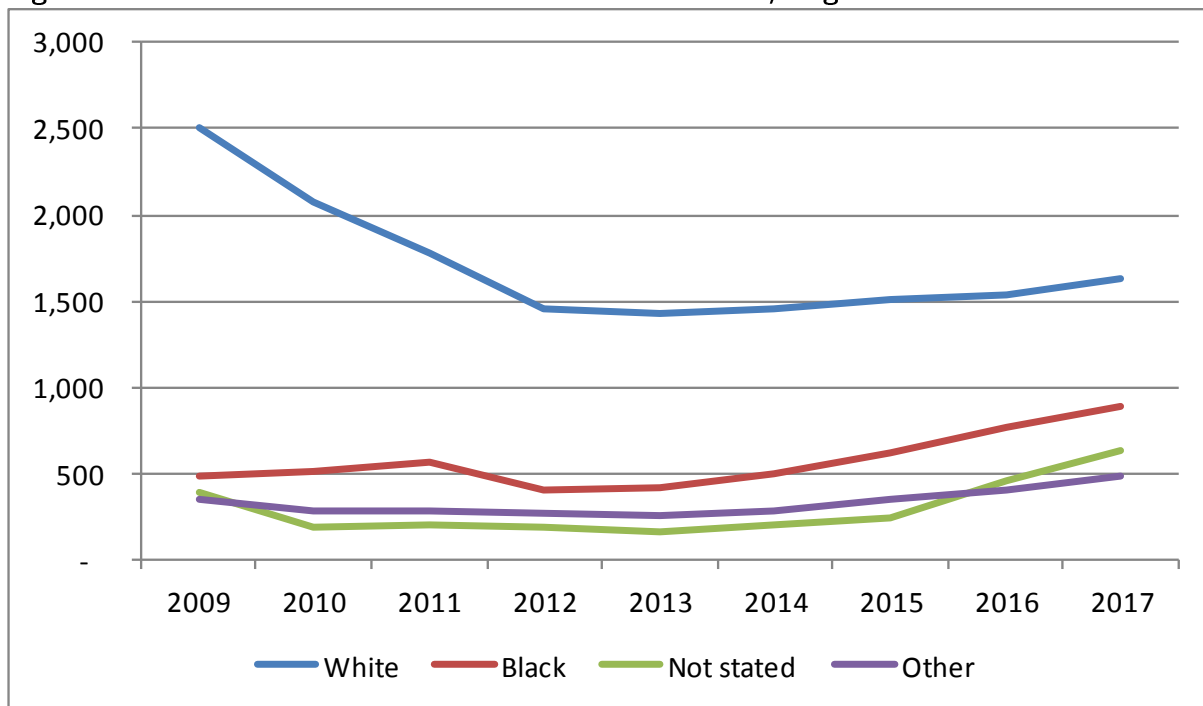


Source: MOJ *Knife and Offensive Weapon Sentencing*

In the year ending March 2019, for just under three quarters (72%) of offenders this was their first knife or offensive weapon possession offence. The MOJ also notes that “*The proportion of offenders for whom this is their first knife or offensive weapon possession offence has been decreasing and is now at its lowest level since the series began in the year ending March 2009 (80%)*”. The proportion of first-time knife and offensive weapon offenders for juveniles (10 to 18s) decreased from 92% to 83% between the year ending March 2009 and the year ending March 2019. As a result, the courts are more likely to see a larger proportion of repeat offenders than previously.

In August 2019, the BBC published data based on a Freedom of Information request on knife possession. Data from 38 forces out of 39 in England suggested that 1,509 such offences involving women were recorded in 2018 and that numbers involving women were rising by 10% a year. It was also reported that almost a quarter of recorded offences involved girls under the age of 18. Given that only around 20% of cautions and convictions are for under-18s of both genders this precise figure seems unlikely, however it does point to girls becoming more involved.

**Figure 9: Convictions for Knife Possession in Under 25s, England and Wales**



Source: MOJ, *Outcomes by Offence 2007 to 2018: Pivot Table Analytical Tool for England and Wales*

NB this chart is based on one for the three offences covered in figure 5, ‘possession of an article with a blade or point’.

While 45% of under-25s cautioned or convicted are ‘white’, MOJ data suggests that an increasing number of young people from ethnic minorities are being cautioned or convicted. It is unclear if this reflects a change in the numbers of young people in ethnic minorities carrying knives or is a consequence of police activity. Certainly, the recorded decline in the numbers of white young people carrying knives looks improbable, so the data may not reflect real patterns of knife carrying by ethnic group over time.

### Crime Survey of 10 to 15-year-olds

The picture from the Crime Survey is of stability over time. In the year ending March 2016, 6.2% of 10 to 15-year-olds and 4.2% of 16 to 29-year-olds reported that they knew someone who carried a knife for their own protection. When asked if they had personally carried a knife for their own protection in the previous 12 months 0.3% of 10 to 15-year-olds, and 0.7% of 16 to 29-year-olds said that they had. However, this data is now three years old.

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A more recent set of figures from a Freedom of Information request by 5 News published in August 2019 claimed that a total of 1,144 knife possession offences in schools, where the suspect was a child, were recorded in England, Scotland and Wales in 2018. It was suggested that the number of such offences more than doubled over five years.

See: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/knife-crime-schools-children-blades-machetes-samurai-sword-teachers-a9075621.html>.

## Stop and Search

The overall stop and search rate per 1,000 people fell from 25 in 2009/10 to 5 in 2017/18. Stop and search rates for black people fell by 75% from 117 to 29 per 1,000 while the stop and search rate for white people went down from 19 per 1,000 in 2009/10 to 3 per 1,000 people in 2017/18 – a drop of 84%.

Black people were nine and a half times more likely to be stopped and searched as white people in 2017/18; the previous year they were just over 8 times as likely, and in 2014/15 they were just over 4 times as likely.

### *Key Points*

- Knife possession conviction data is in part a product of police activity and not always a reliable indicator of actual rates of carrying.
- 80% of convictions for “possession of an article with a blade or point” relate to adults aged 18 or over.
- The picture from previous crime surveys is of stable low levels of carrying amongst children and young people
- Possession convictions for both under and over 18-year-olds have been rising since 2015.
- An increasing proportion of convictions of under 25-year-olds for knife possession involve young people from ethnic minorities.
- Stop and search levels (for all ages) have been falling over the past 10 years. However, in 2017/18 black people were nine and a half times more likely to be stopped and searched as white people. This is a higher level of disparity than was previously the case.
- The impact and targeting of new police powers of stop and search have yet to be seen.

## London

### London homicides

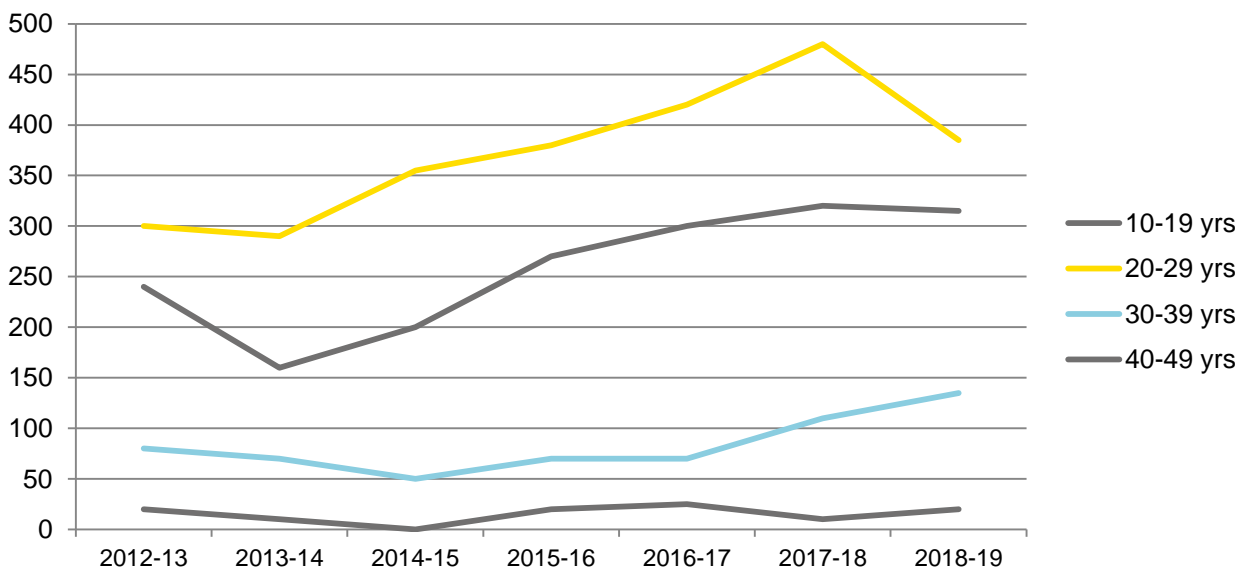
London has one of the highest homicide rates outside of Manchester and Merseyside at a rate of 18.4 per million in 2017/18 (for all causes and all ages).

As of 12 September 2019, the press had reported that 19 teenagers had been fatally stabbed in London in 2019. To this must be added older young people such as Shakira Mercedes, aged 23, who was stabbed to death in Chalk Farm while trying to stop an argument.

### London consultant episodes

For London we see a steady rise in hospital admissions for 10 to 19-year-olds due to stabbings. For 20 to 29-year-olds it appears to have fallen back more recently but is still showing a dramatic rise overall. The overall pattern is not out of line with national data.

Figure 10: Consultant Episodes for London LA residents where the external cause was assault with sharp object



Source: Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), NHS Digital (taken from data rounded to the nearest five per cell)

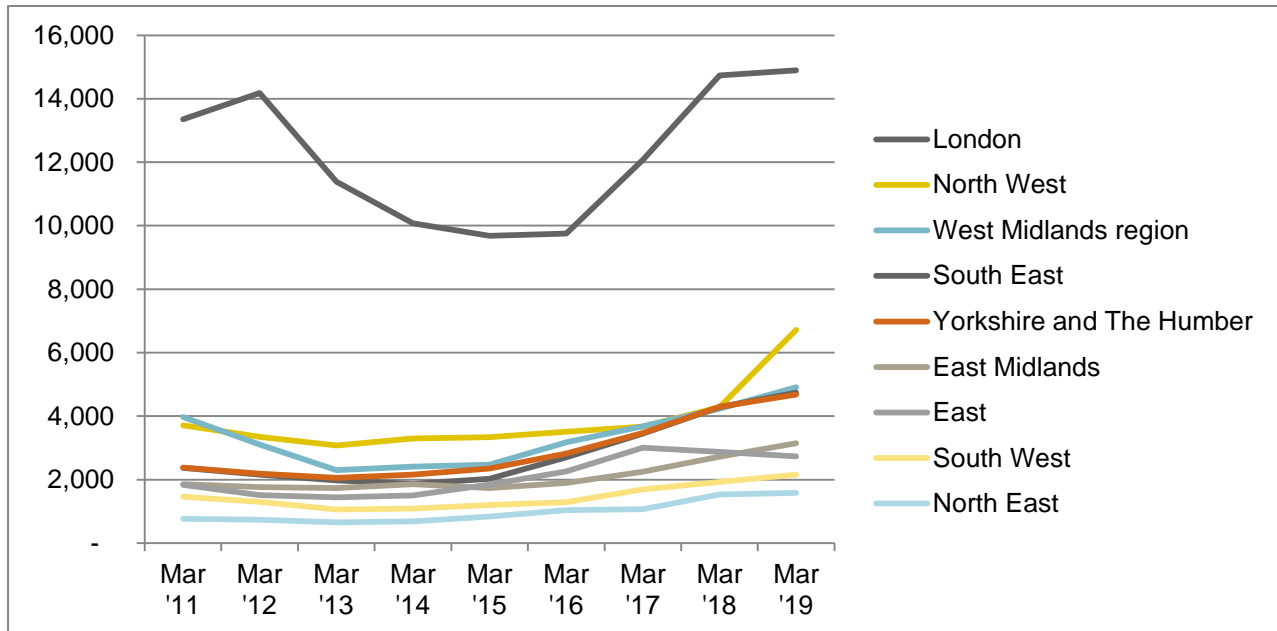
### Offences

Knife crime is more common in large cities, particularly in London.

In London in 2018-19, there were 169 knife offences per 100,000 people. The next highest was the North West, with 93 knife offences per 100,000 population, and Yorkshire and the Humber at 86.

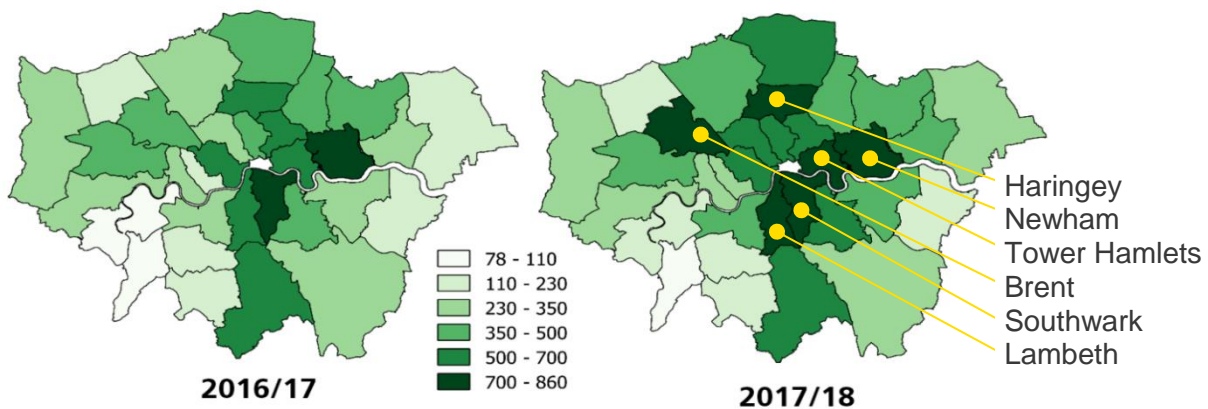
As an area containing the largest police force and the highest levels of knife crime London dominates the figures for selected offences involving knives. Knife crime in London appears to be becoming more widespread.

Figure 11: Knife and sharp instrument offences recorded by the police for selected offences, by police force area 2010/11 to 2018/19



Source: ONS Crime in England & Wales, year ending March 2019 - PFA tables Table P5 (NB the North West has recording issues for earlier years)

Figure 12: Change in number of sharp instrument offences by London borough



Source: Metropolitan Police Service Year-end crime statistics 2017/18

## Stop and Search

In London, stop and search was in 2018 already used more often than in other places. The Metropolitan Police in London had the highest overall rate of stop and search, at 16 incidents for every 1,000 people. All other forces had fewer than 7 per thousand in 2017/18.

The disparity of stop and search rates between ethnic groups was not as great in London as in other areas. The biggest difference in stop and search rates between Black and White people was in

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Dorset, where Black people were 17 times more likely to be stopped and searched than White people; this was followed by West Mercia, where Black people were 15 times more likely to be stopped and searched than White people. For the Metropolitan police Black people were 4.4 times more likely to be stopped and searched.

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## Summary

To return to our original questions:

- Is knife crime in its various forms more common than it used to be?
- Are the consequences of knife crime more serious than they used to be?
- Who appears to be committing and who are the victims of knife crime and is this changing?

Injuries from knife crime are becoming more common than they were in recent years.

More young victims are receiving hospital care than in recent years. There have been more hospital admissions/episodes for under 25-year-olds and young people aged 15 to 19 have been particularly affected. The number of 18 to 24-year-olds killed has increased.

Four out of five of those cautioned, reprimanded or convicted for carrying a knife in England and Wales are aged over 18. Most victims of knife crime are also adults.

For victims of knife crime aged under 25, 80% are male.

It appears likely that carrying knives is becoming more common for young people, although some of the increase in convictions may be driven by policing priorities. Possession convictions for both under and over 18-year-olds have been rising since 2015. It is claimed that the number of possession offences involving women is rising overall, but there is not yet any solid data on this in relation to young women and girls. Nor is there recent self-reported data from young people.

An increasing proportion of convictions of under 25-year-olds for knife possession involve young people from ethnic minorities. About half of those convicted are white young people (54% of those where ethnicity is stated, 45% overall). The increase in ethnic minorities is happening in the context of wide disparities in the use of stop and search between ethnic groups, so the increase for black and ethnic minority young people may overstate changes in the levels of carrying knives within those groups.

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