

# Impacts of knife crime



Britain is in the grip of a knife crime epidemic. This is the impression one gets from the media: every week seems to bring new stories of stabbing and murder among city youth. But why are these youngsters engaging in such activity? This quote suggests that young people who carry knives do so ' protection', status and peer pressure. The media also plays a part by reinforcing the idea that everyone else is carrying a weapon. Finally, the quote claims socially excluded young people from dysfunctional families are more likely to use knives. The first part this essay will first give an overview of the labelling approach and social construction theory, it will then go on to consider whether young people are in fact engaging in knife crime because of the above reasons, or whether it is simply a consequence of the labelling process.

The labelling theory devotes little effort in explaining why certain individuals begin to engage in deviance. Rather, it stresses the importance of the process through which society defines acts as deviant and the role of negative social reactions in influencing individuals to engage in subsequent acts. The labelling theorists shift their attention away from individuals and their actions and toward the dynamic of social definition that particular acts or actors are deviant.

The first labelling theorist was Frank Tannenbaum (1938), he suggested the person who is labelled, subsequently becomes the thing he is being described as. Whether that label be given by those who would punish, or by those who would reform. In either case the emphasis is upon the conduct that is being disapproved of. The harder the criminal justice system works to reform the evil, the greater the evil will grow and the harder it will become to

suppress the bad behaviour. He claimed the way out was through a refusal to 'dramatize the evil'. The less said about it the better. The more said about something else, still better.

Taylor et al (1973) reinforced the labelling theory by suggesting that the way a stop will be put to deviant behaviour is: 'to create a society in which the facts of human diversity, whether personal, organic or social, are not subjected to the power to criminalize'.

Sociologist Howard Becker (1963), recognised deviance is not a quality that lies in the behaviour itself but in the interaction between the person who commits an act, and those who respond to it. A good way to demonstrate this point is by referring to the study of 'opiate use' by the sociologist Alfred Ray Lindesmith, his findings demonstrated how a person becomes aware of their addiction. In essence it is not the drug that makes the person an addict, the addiction is a result of social definition. When others label them as addicts, then the person too comes to define himself as an addict. In other words behaviour is not inherently deviant or normal but is defined and labelled that way. So how does the labelling process work?

Erikson (1975), the founder of the labelling theory, describes two main stages to the labelling process. The first stage involves 'primary deviance', which is the initial criminal act, after which a person may be labelled as deviant or criminal, but does not yet accept this role. So the person does not view himself as a criminal. It is this lack of viewing that separates primary deviance from the next stage, second deviance.

Secondary deviance involves a “ status degradation ceremony” This begins by a formal confrontation between the deviant and the officials, as in the criminal trial; this is then followed by an announcement of the verdict, and finally the deviant is assigned with a special role, like a prisoner which redefines his position in society. According to Tannenbaum (1938), formal proceedings signify the “ dramatization of evil”, whereby the act is publically announced and defined as immoral. News of the formal sanction will then spread across the community leading to others also labelling him as ‘ deviant’. The individual finally accepts the criminal label; their self concept is changed from ‘ normal’ to ‘ deviant’. According to Lemert, ‘ This becomes a mean of defence, attack, or adaption to the problems caused by societal reaction to primary deviation”. This process can also take place in a more subtle fashion as well. For example, the family of deviant may become withdrawn and distance themselves from him in disappointment, regardless of whether a formal charge has occurred.

Accordingly, the labelling theory suggests: if the individual accepts this negative ‘ criminal’ label that has been applied, they are then more likely to continue engaging in the behaviour that the label was initially meant to control. In other words the label leads the deviant individual to follow a self-fulfilling prophecy conforming to ascribed label, causing them to lead deviant careers.

For example, if a person is caught carrying a knife, but is not apprehended or labelled as deviant, that person is more likely to forgo such behaviour in the future. However, if the person is apprehended and labelled as a “ criminal”, then the person is subsequently more likely to change his identity as a rest

of the exclusion felt by the individual from “ normal routines” or ‘ conventional opportunities’, and increased contact with the deviant groups.

Having explained the theory, this essay will now interlink the labelling theory with the quote. The quote itself suggests “ most” young people carry knives for: protection, status and peer pressure. The perceived need for protection is compounded by the sense, reinforced by the media coverage of stabbings, that everyone is carrying a weapon, as well as experience of victimisation. In terms of socially excluded young people from dysfunctional families are more likely to engage in knife use.

For young people, the transition from childhood to adult can be rather confusing, their adult identity is not yet developed and so they often become bewildered as to their own position within society. George Herbert Mead claimed an individual develops a sense of self through how others perceive them, he coined this as the “ looking glass self”. He suggested as children develop, they become more aware of their own social position and others around them, and subsequently become concerned about the demands and expectations of others and of the larger society. To demonstrate this point, he used a basketball game as an example, to show children, like basketball players, must take into account the roles of all players, as well as consider their own role.[8]

This symbolic interaction to the study of deviance focuses on the process by which the wider social audience creates deviance and deviants by defining the acts and actors that way. The problem with defining young people as either “ knife carriers” or “ knife users” is that the term “ knife crime”

encompasses a very broad range of offences, and makes no distinction between actual carrying and using. Furthermore, knife crime statistics are equally as difficult to quantify due to lack of clarity. The offences recorded involve 'sharp instruments' these might actually refer to screwdrivers, broken bottles or glass, not a knife. Similarly offences listed as "threatening another person with a weapon" might involve sticks, rocks or other objects as well as knives. Furthermore certain types of knife may be carried legally if the carrier has a good reason, for example if it is work related, or for religious purposes. So there is some confusion as to who should be labelled when the definition itself is so broad, a clearer definition is required in order to prevent sensationalised use of the term.

If deviance is therefore just a label, where does the label come from? And how does the label come to be applied to specific behaviour and particular individuals? According to the sociologist Howard Becker(1963), moral entrepreneurs are often ones who create the rules about what constitutes deviant or conventional behaviour. He believes that moral entrepreneurs use their own perspectives on what they believe is "right" or "wrong" to establish the rules by which they expect the rest of society to live, usually for their own political agendas. Furthermore, it has been suggested that these rules as to what is "right" or "wrong" are not randomly distributed across the social structure, but are instead more likely to apply to the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the poor. Because of existing stereotypes, which portray criminals as members of lower classes, minorities, urban dwellers, and young adults, individuals who belong to such groups are more likely than others to be labelled delinquent. So the labelling process is a clear case of

double standard, one rule for the rich and one for the poor. A perfect example to show this inadequacy is the recent MP expense row, those in power were stealing from the rest of society, yet their power enabled them to put the issues of youth violence, weapon use and gangs at the fore front, sending out sensationalised messages of a 'broken society to exploit their own agendas. So the crime of the powerful is somewhat ignored by shifting societies focus on crimes of the middle and lower class.

So is the quote correct in assuming knife users are generally from dysfunctional families? A dysfunctional family is one who has very few values or discipline within the household. An interesting theory to incorporate here is the control theory; this is concerned not with why people commit crime, but why so many refrain from doing so. It suggests those children who grow up with parents who exercise fair and consistent discipline are less likely to offend, and more likely to stay committed to conventional definitions of 'right' or 'wrong' behaviour. Those children who typically engage in knife crime or any other crime for that matter are said to come from broken homes, where they have not experienced love or care. Linking this back to the labelling theory, which suggests the powerless, low class are more likely to lead deviant careers, because they lack bonds with society and law. Subsequently, young people who have dysfunctional families within these communities will more likely conform to stereotypes they face. More so, if their parents informally label them as deviant which is very likely in cases of minorities from lower class; because they engage in more objective deviance. This appraisal from the parent will influence their further delinquency.

The quote also suggests the mass media also plays a part in one's decision to carry a knife, but is this true? Does the media's public labelling have an impact on a young person's decision to carry a knife around for 'protection'? The media is one of the most persuasive features of society. The messages and information society receives through the media plays a huge impact on influencing their opinions and understanding. It sends out an image of the world as unrealistically clear-cut and understandable. The media messages are in fact cleverly selected and edited, in order to offer identifiable values, interest and normative expectations. Stanley Cohen researched the social reaction of the Mods and Rockers disturbance in 1964; he claimed the media created a 'moral panic' by labelling them as 'folk devils' and exaggeration the initial events. The original incident simply became an opportunity to exploit and enhance the social status of the 'moral entrepreneurs'.

In terms of knife crime or any other crime for that matter, the media is able to cultivate in their audience a belief that the larger social environment is dangerous and frightening, for example, when the mail screams that " Shock figures reveal no part of Britain is safe as knife violence spreads everywhere", " Thugs committing 350 knife assaults EVERYDAY, as blade menace spreads to rural areas", " Britain on alert for deadly new knife with exploding tip that freezes victim's organs", these are just a few examples to demonstrate the media's exaggeration. In the last headline, the knife was only sold in America, designed to kill sharks and bears, so no risk was being posed in Britain. But these types of sensationalised reports enhance social control, because the frightened audience are easily manipulated and easily



accept what the media presents, and knife crime becomes wider and threatening than it actually is.

The media has its good elements too; it helps raise knife crime awareness and also brings to the forefront campaigns against knife crime. The bad news is that the huge publicity devoted to raising awareness has the perverse effect of normalising it. The crime reduction charity Nacro, for example, argued: the suggestion that it is in any sense the norm to carry weapons is likely to increase the number of young people who do so, simply because they fear attack and wish to have the means to protect and defend themselves. Furthermore the Mothers against Murder and aggression Wales found the way knife crime is portrayed in the news gives out the message that all teenagers are armed, which is a frightening concept, " Almost everyone carrying a knife does so because they feel they have to protect themselves as everyone else is doing so". So the media, like the labelling theory, labels certain groups of people, in this case young people, without any proper justification. Furthermore headlines such as " war on young thugs" contributes to the concept that for some young people there is a war being waged against them and they be fighting back. Furthermore the negative connotations of youths, when the vast majority are law-abiding, can add their sense of being under attack. As a consequence these labelled youths may begin to believe stereotypical beliefs surrounding them, or they may think that these beliefs exist based on their learned perception of what people think about criminals; fearing rejection, they may withdraw from interaction with conventional peers.

Goffman (1963) suggests labelling can cause the interaction between “normal” people and stigmatized youth to be uneasy and embarrassing. These awkward experiences are felt by those who bear the stigma as well as those who do not. According to Goffman (1963 “ the very anticipation of such contacts can lead normals and the stigmatized to arrange life so as to avoid them”. Therefore non labelled adolescents and labelled adolescents may tend to avoid one another in order to avoid uncomfortable interaction dynamics.

Feeling isolated from the mainstream of society, and being locked within their ‘ deviant role, they may seek others similarly labelled to form deviant subcultures. The deviant subculture will represent a source of social support in which deviant activities are accepted. A social shelter will be provided by the subculture away from those who react negatively towards the deviant status; it will offer alternative values, habits, interests and attitudes. So if an individual is labelled as deviant from society, then that labelled person is increasingly likely to become involved in social groups that consist of social deviants and unconventional others. Tannenbaum and Becker highlight the role of deviant networks in explaining how public labelling can increase the likelihood of deviance. “ A final step in the career of a deviant is movement into an organised deviant group”. The deviant group provides opportunities that encourage, support and facilitate deviant behaviour. These deviant subcultures are made up of leaders and followers, solidarity of intention, clarity of purpose. These characteristics may seem positive in an adult world, even necessary for achieving adult identity and self esteem. However this hierarchy proves to be negative in terms of delinquent groups. Those at the

top of the hierarchy, the leaders are often given a prestige status, one which would not be given in the mainstream society.

With regards to knife crime, these leaders of the gangs side step the risk of being caught carrying a knife, by pressuring the younger member of the gangs to carry them, some as young as seven, this is often referred to as “ golf caddy”. This often leads to an ‘ arm race’ among young people who feel increasingly threatened by peers carrying blades and so carry knives to protect themselves. So as the quote suggested, protection is rightfully a number one motive for knife carriers. Furthermore, young people will carry knives, ‘ out of respect, maybe trying to make a name for themselves on the street’ and gain ‘ respect’, so the status which they lack from mainstream society is obtainable within the subculture,

To conclude, having gone through the factors within the quote, it seemingly appears that the quote is incorrect. The factors listed within the quote are simply all a consequence of the labelling theory. Society itself is quick to judge and put a label on everything, it was not so long so ago when gun crime was the cause of concern, and now it is knife crime. The term knife crime itself needs a clearer definition, so a distinction can be made between knife use and knife carrying. Furthermore, those who enjoy the power to label need to put an end to class biasness, as the powerless appear disproportionately in official statistics on deviance, which gives an inaccurate account of knife crime. Moving on to the factors themselves, ‘ status’ is something young people crave in order to develop their own adult identity. Once officially labelled through a “ status degradation ceremony” the individual’s criminal status becomes their master status. The ‘ peer pressure’

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elements falls into the equation once the individual has united with deviant subcultures, as peer pressure is part of the gang culture. The media also plays a big part, by publically labelling certain subcultures as delinquent. So all the factors form one vicious circle, which an individual will have to go through once labelled, This could be avoided, if the courts refused to 'dramatise the evil' by implementing a system whereby minor crimes would not involve formal sentencing and the " status degradation ceremony" that goes with it. Instead a rehabilitative therapy and out of court settlement could be introduced in order to give young offenders the opportunity to reform and integrate back into society, not excluding them further.