Knife crime imagery and messaging: Effective intervention tools or ineffective sensitisers?

Experimental and eye-tracking findings

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Introduction

*Media coverage of knife crime is increasing
*News media focus on knife crime stories
*Met Comm Cressida Dick blamed 'social media' for Knife crime rise

- Many police forces are reducing knife imagery in public facing work
- Sadiq Khan – heavy criticism for failing to tackle knife crime, and using knife imagery in London Met media releases

Media uses imagery to 'promote' stories
BUT
Knife Crime interventions also use imagery

Sensationalise:

Exciting

Dangerous

Introduction

Experience threat – adrenal response
Attribute either positive or negative emotion
Can generate fear or excitement

Previous research has shown mixed results:

*Cogan et al (2021) – images of surrendered knives increased worry
*Behavioural Insights Team – intervention videos did not increase ˙ ˙ ˙˙
to report knife carrying, but ex-offender video increased worry

What is the effect of knife imagery ?

Introduction

Social media and intervention images include accompanying text
- Factual: Giving detail of consequences of knife crime
- Policed: Outlining police activity around knife crime
- Normalising: Describes knife crime as non-normal behaviour

Research Questions:
1. Do real knife images impact young people's perceptions of knife crime more than stylised images or neutral images?
2. What is the effect of different informational anti-knife messaging on young people's perceptions of knife crime?
3. Does knife imagery engender greater fear or excitement responses?

Method

Eyetracker

Yr 10 from Schools in SY and TV

13 Young People from Youth Organisations

Real knife

Stylised knife

Neutral image

Factual

Policed

Normalised

Random Allocation

Questions:

Perceptions of knife crime

Attitudes to knife crime
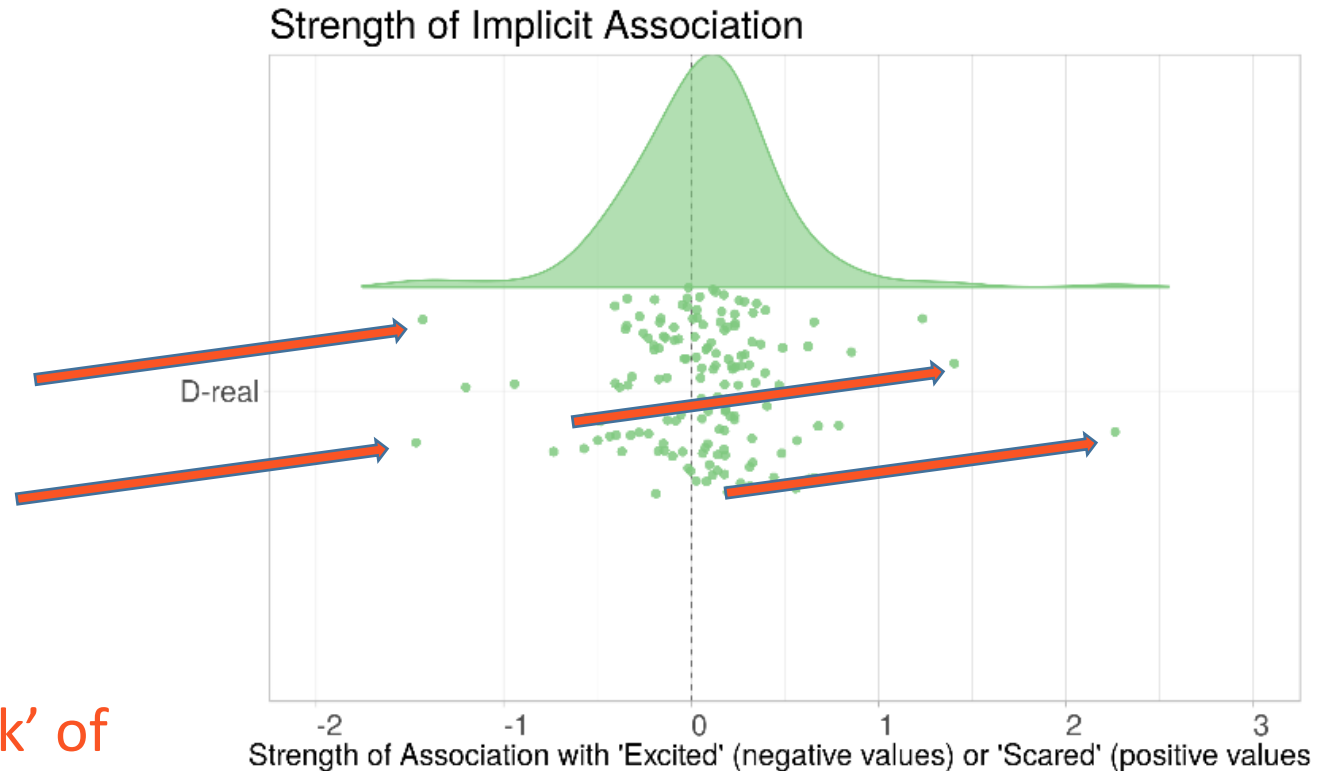
Demographics

Findings: Overall

- Unexpectedly - No differences were found between either the knife messaging or image types on perceptions of knife crime or worries about knife crime.

- Real knives didn't draw visual focus any more than other images

- Suggests most young people are not sensitised by knife images or affected by knife crime related messaging

Findings: Implicit Association Test (IAT)

- Young people more likely to feel **scared** than feel excited seeing images of real knives, but not for stylised knives.

- Some young people are strongly excited or scared by knife images

These young people may be 'most at risk' of knife carrying defensively or aggressively

Strength of Implicit Association

D-real

-2   -1   0   1   2   3

Strength of Association with 'Excited' (negative values) or 'Scared' (positive values)

Findings: Messaging

Anti-knife messaging can affect how young people view policing of knife crime policing

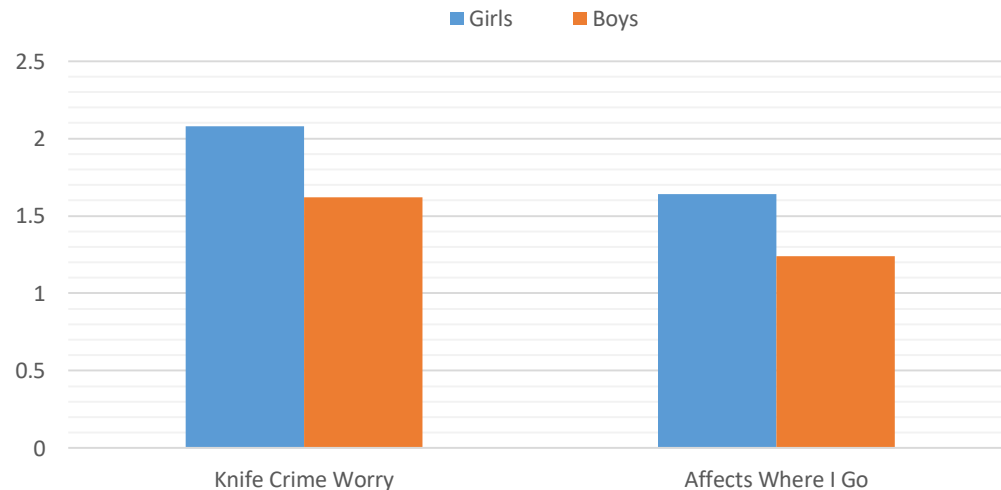Messaging about police anti-knife activity generates more positive perceptions

Eye-tracking showed reduced reading time of policing messages than other types of messaging

How well do you think the police deal with knife crime?
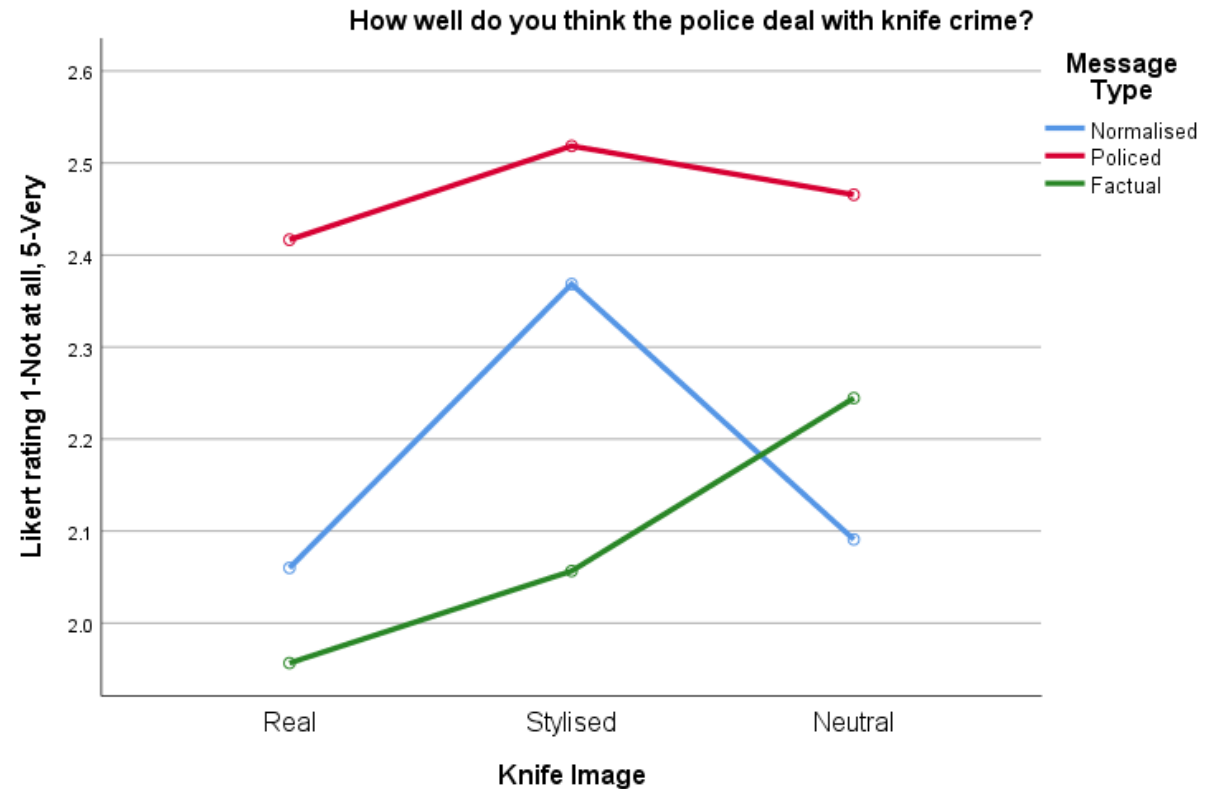
Findings: Demographic differences

- Girls are more worried about knife crime than boys and see it as a more serious issue, affecting where they go in their local areas.

- Young black people rating knife carrying as more normal than young people of other ethnicities.

Gender differences for knife crime worry

Knife carrying is normal
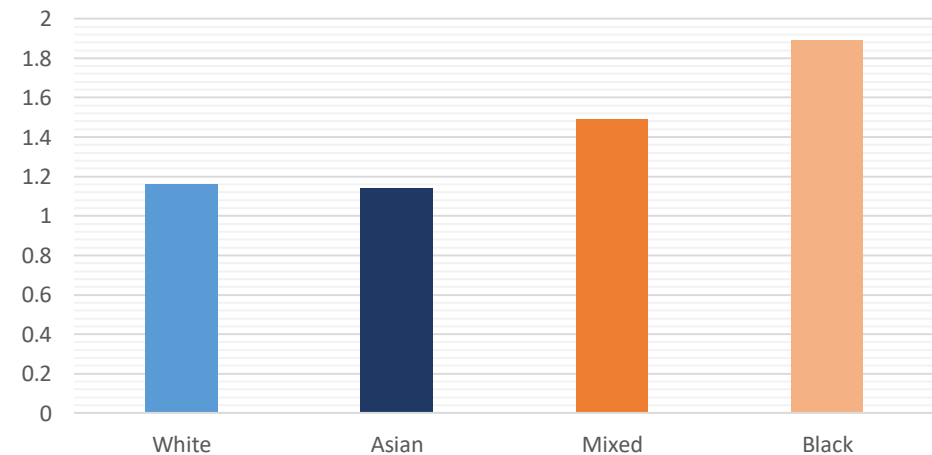
What it means

We want actionable intelligence from this study

Four Main Questions
1. Do we need to put in images of knives at all?
2. Do we need to worry if we put in images of knives?
3. How do we best get our message across?
4. How do we keep our messages culturally relevant?

Do we need to put in images of knives at all?

Are our messages less impactful if we don't include knives?

- Didn't effect the message
- Probably not necessary!

Do we need to worry if we put in images of knives?

Knives are occasionally featured in social media posts

- Some participants were scared / excited
- Majority Unaffected
- Protection motivation

- If they don't help the message, why add them?
- Especially if they may be sensitising those more at risk

How do we best get our message across?

- Best received message was police action
- Emphasis on what we **DO**

- We still need consequences and de-normalising
- How do we make them appealing or relevant?
- Balance between showing action and over emphasising the problem

How do we keep our messages culturally relevant?

We are not teenagers

- Police and partners are naturally detached from knife carrying young people.
- Police and partners are naturally detached from fears of young people.
- Different attitudes towards knives amongst different ethnicities.
- One possible solution: co-design.

Conclusions

- Knife images do not appear to be affecting most young people, however a small number are experiencing greater fear or excitement
- We should be cautious about our use of imagery until these affects are better known
- Future research should:
  - Explore physiological and emotional responses to knife stimuli for those who express greater fear or excitement responses
  - Explore further how police messaging can be used effectively
  - Explore 'normality' perceptions and how to change them
- Anti-knife interventions should:
  - Take a more gendered approach - providing mechanisms for addressing girls worries
  - Highlight the non-normality of knife carrying, particularly where knife carrying is more common
  - Make use of policing activity information to help reduce worry and improve perceptions of the police

Thank you for listening

Any questions?

- All email questions should be sent to Charlotte Coleman (c.coleman@shu.ac.uk), Mike Parker (Michael.parker@southyorks.pnn.police.uk), and Owen Miller (owen.miller@thamesvalley.police.uk)

- Link to the published report N8 Policing Research Partnership | Knife Crime Imagery - N8 Policing Research Partnership (n8prp.org.uk)