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Carrying on in 2019 : A follow-up report about a generation of young people and their personal safety

Our new report summarises recent findings from large opportunity samples of secondary-aged young people surveyed in schools from local authorities across England between 2000 and 2018.

In 1996, we produced a report (Balding *et al.*, 1996) explaining what we knew about young people and carrying weapons, in the wake of the murders by stabbing of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and of Philip Lawrence in 1995. In 2018, stabbings of and by young people are again in the news, and we have revisited the issue with the current generation of young people for this report.

The 1996 findings are largely duplicated in this 2019 report, but we have been able to extend our analysis in a number of ways.

The Schools Health Education Unit

SHEU provides a range of services to those involved in the planning, providing and commissioning of health and education programmes. The Schools Health Education Unit is part of SHEU.

Most of the work we do concerns the collection of robust baseline data about young people's health-related behaviour through surveys in schools using the Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ), which has been evolving and developing since 1977.

The Questionnaire

The primary and secondary versions of the HRBQ have been used in 14,894 separate school surveys, some schools repeating surveys of their pupils on many occasions, so that approaching

two million pupils (1,788,369) between the ages of 9 and 16+ have taken part in the surveys from across the UK.

Pupils complete an anonymous questionnaire with teacher supervision and support, mostly online but also sometimes using paper booklets. Schools receive a report comparing their results with the overall local findings. Local authorities usually commission the surveys, and the Council will receive a report of the aggregate findings and other analysis.

The resulting baseline data identify and confirm priorities for health needs assessment, intervention programmes, and health education planning.

The SHEU databanks

This continuous survey activity builds up large data sets going back many years. These are unique in being very large, deep and long-lasting. We have asked about carrying weapons for protection through the last two decades, but some local commissioners have sought to improve their understanding of the issue by asking slightly different questions, and some surveys omit the issue completely. This adds some variability, which is unhelpful when trying to generalise about trends or patterns in the figures, but it is not prohibitive. We also have confidence that our data sets can reflect the levels and trends in behaviours going on nationally. The detailed evidence for this conclusion is presented in our annual reports, the most recent of which is *Young People into 2018* (Balding & Regis, 2018).

Sample

The source of the findings in this report is the archive of aggregate survey data from our work for local authorities over the last few years. Only the secondary-phase samples are used in this report. The composition of the 2017 sample was as below:

Overall numbers in the 2017 sample

Sample / Yr.	2017
Schools	1,199
Primary pupils	62,870
Secondary pupils	68,090
All pupils	134,216
Secondary only:	
M 12-13 y*	13,653
F 12-13 y*	13,608
M 14-15 y*	12,513
F 14-15 y*	12,360

In many cases in the analysis below, we reach back into the previous decade of reports. All the sample sizes are appended and the full descriptions of each sample is to be found in the respective annual reports.

The 'opportunity' nature of the samples, and the local variability of wording and context, make them less easy to work with than is ideal, but they are a rich resource for research.

Method and preliminary analysis

There are two questions of main interest to us: one about carrying weapons, and one about being the victim of crime. The weapons question is used in two main forms:

General question

1 Do you or your friends carry weapons or other things for protection when going out?

- Please choose the nearest answer
- No 0
 - Not sure 1
 - Fairly sure 2
 - Certain 3

If so, what weapons or other things are they?

Please write

Personal question

2 Do you carry weapons or other things for protection when going out?

Please choose the nearest answer

- Never 0
- Sometimes 1
- Usually 2
- Always 3

If so, what weapons or other things are they?

Please write

Figure 1. Two main versions of the question

6% of pupils aged 12-15y in 2018 were 'fairly sure' or 'certain' that they or their friends carry weapons or other items for protection.

In the related question, asked in different parts of the country, 8% of pupils aged 12-15y in 2018 said they at least 'sometimes' carry weapons or other items for protection.

The pictures we gain from responses from these questions are not, in fact, hugely different.

The chart below shows levels of positive responses for each question over the last decade:

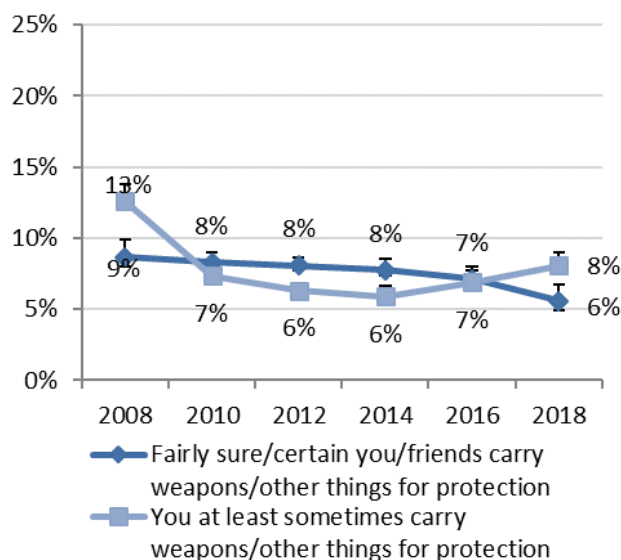


Figure 2. Carrying seen in the two main versions of the question from a selection of districts across England, ages 12-13 and 14-15yo, 2008-2018 (N=113,055).

These figures are rather lower than we saw in 1996, when about 1/3 of Year 10 males reported that they carried something for protection - possibly a defensive spray, but 20% said they carried a weapon.

What are they carrying? [pupils who carry a weapon only]

As seen above, the open text boxes ask what they carry. The most common response when

the prompt offers ‘weapons or other things’ is a mobile phone. When we restrict the responses to weapons, there are five main classes of weapons that we see. The figures in the table below are percentages of those giving a positive response, that is, of those saying that they do carry weapons.

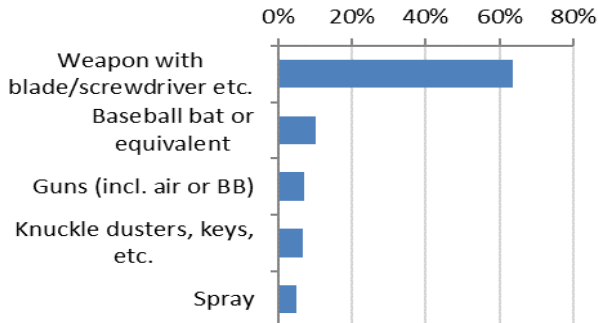


Figure 3 Top five items carried by pupils who carry weapons or other things for protection (2012-2018, N=3,419).

Knives and other stabbing or cutting tools are overwhelmingly the most common class of weapon mentioned, reported by 64% of those carrying a weapon. This would be about 10% of all Year 10 males; in 1996, about 20% of Year 10 males reported ever carrying a weapon a blade.

Guns are reported by 7% of those carrying a weapon, that is, about 1% of the whole sample. We do know that some young people carry guns on occasion, but we are also challenged to wonder if their answers are sincere – is this just bravado, even in the context of an anonymous questionnaire, privately completed?

Region

We see is a notable discrepancy in the personal question for one region in England.

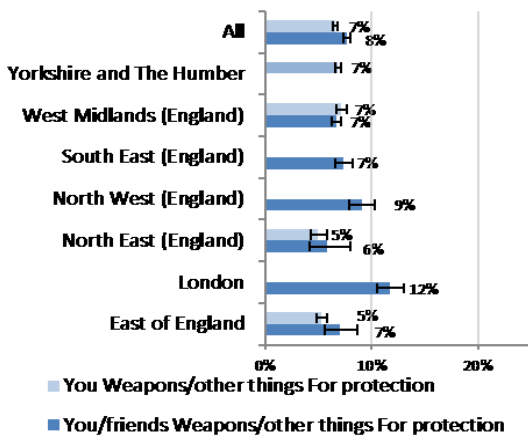


Figure 4. Two main versions of the question for Year 8 and Year 10 - a selection of districts across England grouped by region over 2012-2018 (N=72,987).

7% of pupils across the whole sample (last column) said they at least sometimes carry something for protection. Students in London surveys using the personal version of the question showed slightly higher levels of carrying protection than students from other regions: 12%.

Age and sex

We also explored differences by age and sex:

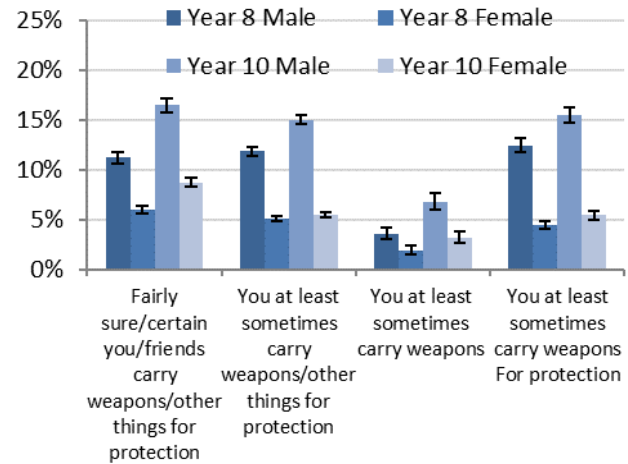


Figure 5. Percentage of pupils carrying weapons etc. by question type by year group by sex (2002-2018, N=201,134).

These are rather consistent. Year 10 males were most likely to report carrying weapons or other things for protection (or knowing someone who does); Year 8 girls were least likely to do so.

Victims of violence or aggression

8% of pupils in 2018 said that they were the victim of violence or aggression in the last 12 months.

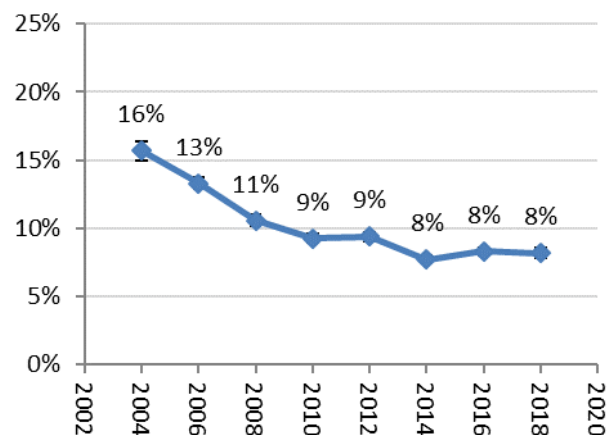


Figure 6. Victims of violence or aggression in the last 12 months – a selection of districts across England, 2004-2018 (N=210,452).

The proportion of pupils in Year 8 and Year 10 who report being the victim of violence or aggression in the last 12 months has been

declining between 2004 and 2014, but seems to have levelled off at a new lower level since then.

There is always the suspicion, given the origins of the data, that trends like these represent not a change among English pupils but a change in the nature of the SHEU samples. However, we have direct evidence that this is not the case here.

We carry out a yearly survey with one area of East England who ask a slightly different question 'Have you been the victim of crime in the last 12 months?', which is shown below. The proportion of pupils in Years 7-11 who report being victims of crime in this area has declined to a new low level, and shows very much the same pattern as in the previous chart.

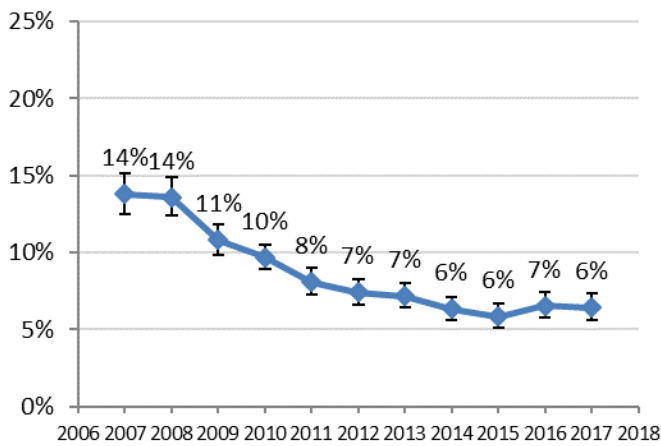


Figure 7. Percentage of pupils who were victims of crime in the last 12 months in one area in SE England (Years 7-11) 2007-2017 (N=40,928).

Links

Are there associations between the responses on one safety question and another? It is the characteristic of social science that 'everything is correlated', but how and to what extent is always interesting and can be important.

We were first interested in exploring the link between carrying and being the victim of crime. The chart below shows the incidence of being a victim by reports of carrying protection.

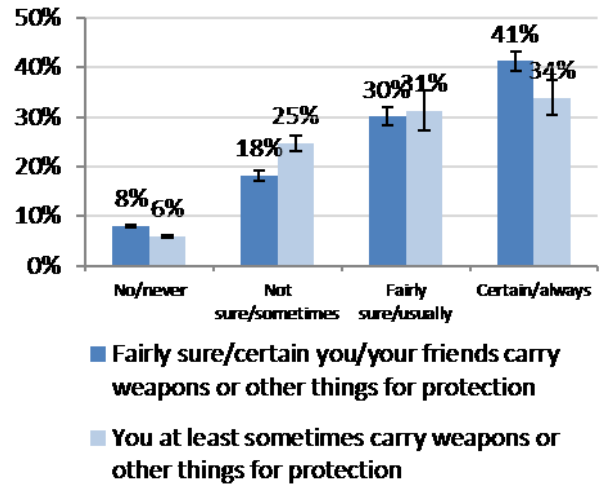


Figure 8. Percentage of pupils who have been the victim of violence or aggression in the last 12 months by whether they/their friends carry weapons or other things for protection (N= 107,091).

27% of pupils who at least sometimes carry weapons or other things for protection said that they have been the victim of violence or aggression within the last 12 months, compared with 6% of pupils who never carry weapons or other things for protection. Similarly, 36% of pupils who are fairly sure/certain that they/their friends carry weapons/other things for protection said that they were the victim of violence/aggression in the last 12 months, compared with 8% of pupils who said they/their friends never carry anything for protection.

Links between safety questions and other topics: Emotional wellbeing

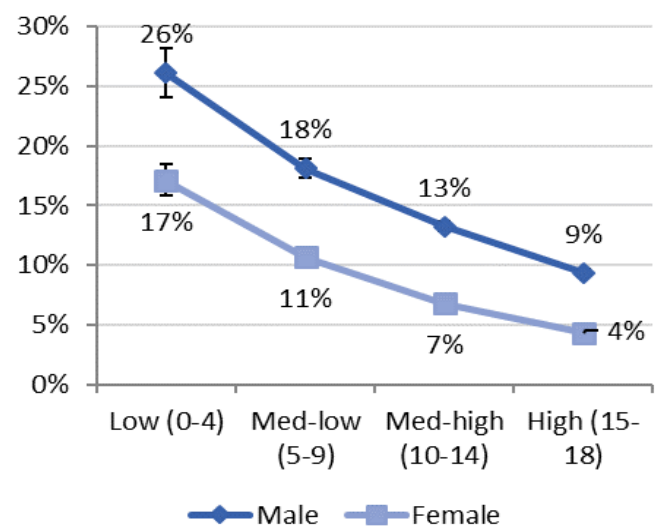


Figure 9. Percentage of pupils who carry a weapon or something else for protection at least sometimes by sex and by self-esteem score (2002-2016, N=72,287).

There seems to be a relationship between self-esteem and reporting of carrying weapons/other

things for protection (see Figure 9); 23% of boys in the lower half of the self-esteem scale said that they carry a weapon or something else for protection at least sometimes, compared with 13% of boys in the upper half of the scale.

Figure 10. Percentage of pupils who have been the victim of violence or aggression in the last 12 months by esteem score (2004-2018, N=146,913).

Pupils with lower resilience (not shown) and lower self-esteem (Figure 10) were more likely to report being the victim of violence or aggression within the last 12 months; 19% of boys at the lower half of the esteem scale said they were victims compared with 11% of boys in the upper half.

Bullying

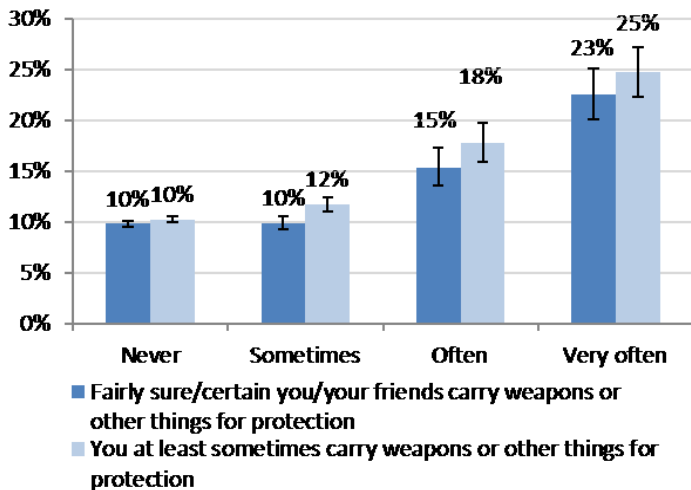


Figure 11. Percentage of pupils carrying weapons/other things for protection, by frequency of fear of going to school because of bullying (2002-2018, N=56,788).

23% of pupils who are 'very often' afraid of going to school because of bullying reported that they are 'fairly sure' or 'certain' that they or their friends at carry weapons or other things for protection; this compares with 10% of the pupils who are never afraid.

We see the same pattern for the parallel question: 25% of pupils who are 'very often' afraid of going to school because of bullying reported that they at least sometimes carry weapons or other things for protection; this compares with 10% of the pupils who are never afraid.

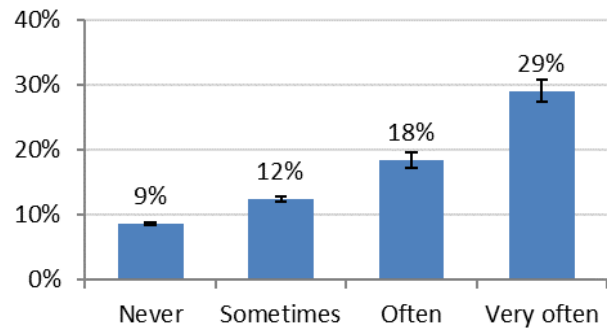


Figure 12. Percentage of pupils who report being the victim of violence or aggression within the last 12 months, by frequency of fear of going to school because of bullying (2004-2018, N=125,076).

Similarly, 29% of pupils who are 'very often' afraid of going to school because of bullying reported being the victim of violence or aggression in the last 12 months; this compares with 9% of the pupils who are never afraid.

The complete list of associations found for the safety questions were:

- Carrying something for protection by self and/or friends is associated with:
 - Having no adults they can trust
 - Higher frequency of fear of going to school because of bullying
 - Lower self-esteem
 - Poorer perceptions of school
 - Dissatisfaction with life
- Being the victim of violence or aggression in the area where they live is associated with:
 - Having no adults they can trust
 - Higher frequency of fear of going to school because of bullying
 - Lower resilience scores
 - Lower self-esteem
 - Lower wellbeing scores

Perceptions of school

Figure 13 shows the results of comparing pupils who at least sometimes carry weapons/other things for protection against a pupil perception score. This score is derived from their levels of agreement to each of a list of positive statements relating to their experience of school (e.g. 'The school cares whether I am happy or not'; 'The school prepares me for when I leave this school' etc.).

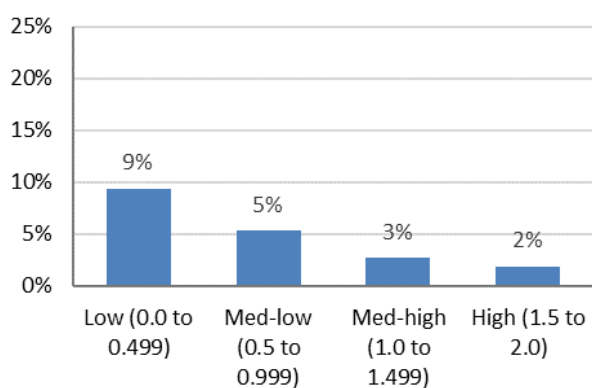


Figure 13. Pupils who at least sometimes carry weapons or other things for protection by pupil perception score (pupils in Years 8 & 10, 2017 data set, N=3,570)

There is a marked excess of carrying weapons among those students who have poorer perceptions of school.

Replication of 1996 findings

We can confirm some of the associations first found in 1996, although the question about income that gave the report its title has been dropped by nearly all our clients since then. We have retained a related question about having a paid job during term-time, and that does show a link with 'carrying'.

We haven't reported all the 2017 replication analysis in the current report, as it doesn't really advance our understanding, but we have given it on our website:

<http://www.sheu.org.uk/content/page/carrying-2019>

The full report can also be downloaded from that page.

Conclusion

The evidence from these figures is that carrying weapons, including knives, is overall less prevalent now than 20 years ago, but many of the same patterns and connections are present, suggesting that the same drivers and processes are still operating.

The multiple connections also suggest that the factors and processes that produce knife crime are complex, and any policy responses may need to be equally complex.

References

- Balding, J.W., Regis, D., Wise, A., Bish, D. & Muirden, J. (1996). *Cash & Carry? Young people, their friends and offensive weapons*. Exeter: University of Exeter, 82pp. Retrieved February 9, 2018, from: <http://sheu.org.uk/content/page/report-weapons>
- Balding, A.D. & Regis, D. (2018). *Young People into 2018*. Exeter: SHEU. Retrieved February 9, 2018, from: <http://sheu.org.uk/content/young-people-2018>

Education and Health

The journal, published by SHEU since 1983, is aimed at those involved with education and health who are concerned with the health and wellbeing of young people. Readership is worldwide and in the UK include: primary; secondary and further education teachers; university staff and health-care professionals working in education and health settings. The journal is online and open access, continues the proud tradition of independent publishing and offers an eclectic mix of articles.

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