

UK “knife crime” hysteria used to push repressive police measures

Thomas Scripps
3 April 2019

Conservative Home Secretary Sajid Javid has handed UK police increased stop and search powers on the pretext of fighting the rise in knife crime.

The new powers follow a “knife crime summit” held at Downing Street Monday, overseen by Prime Minister Theresa May. They make it easier for officers to search anyone they choose within a certain area under a “section 60” check.

Whereas previously “section 60” stops had to be authorised by a more senior officer, a police inspector can now give approval. The threshold of suspicion is lowered, from reasonable belief that violence “will” occur to reasonable belief that violence “may” occur.

No one should accept the rationale that such measures are essential to tackle knife crime. Forty people had been stabbed to death in the UK by March this year. In the 12 months ending March 2018, 285 people across the country were killed in knife attacks, following consecutive rises in 2015, 2016 and 2017. These figures have generated immense media coverage and government attention, but there are definite and opposed class interests at work in the “national conversation” on knife crime.

Behind these statistics are hundreds of grieving families and friends looking for answers. But none will be found in the screaming banner headlines of the right-wing press or draconian statements of the government. These forces are seeking to exploit the pain and confusion of the mostly working-class communities affected to push a law and order campaign with terrible implications for those same neighbourhoods.

The *Daily Mail* writes, “A knife to the heart of Britain: Shocking scale of youth knife crime is revealed,” while the *Telegraph* asserts, “The knife-crime epidemic in Wild West Britain means we need to talk about ID cards again.”

The evidence does not support the apocalyptic claims of the Conservative press. Last year saw the highest number

of knife homicides recorded since 1946. However, the average knife homicide rate for 2001 to 2008 was significantly higher than the years 2014-2018. Hospital admissions for knife assaults have increased since 2014, but the peak was around the years 2006-2007. Police records for knife crime only go back to 2011.

Overall violent crime has fallen significantly since the 1990s, according to crime surveys and hospital admissions.

Another claim made repeatedly in the media is that knife crime is bound up with a surge in gang membership and violence. Again there are clear instances of new and destructive gang activity, centred around the illegal drugs trade.

The statistics, however, do not come close to confirming that “gang warfare” has become “embedded in our culture,” as the *Telegraph* claims. In 2016, according to the Metropolitan Police, known gang members were responsible for 24 percent of stabbings where the victim was under 25, and 7 percent of all knife offences. In 2017, just one in every 500 violent crimes recorded by the Met was classified as gang-related. Gangs are believed to be responsible for only 15 percent of murders committed in London since 2010.

The right-wing media is using highly emotive events to construct a false narrative with reactionary political objectives. The impression given is of feral bands of young working class, mainly black, men running riot in London. This is used to justify calls for ever more violent and authoritarian methods of policing, already including the more aggressive use of “stop and search” powers, harsher sentencing, a more widespread use of taser stun guns and the introduction of ID cards.

The drumbeat for harsher stop and search measures has been relentless, with the *Daily Mail* leading the way. Recent headlines include “Beat gang violence with more stop and search,” “Police MUST use more stop and

search to stop gangs” and “Stop and search should be used in schools.”

Last August, the right-wing Centre for Social Justice think tank, co-founded by former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith, published a report making the same argument and demanding “a zero tolerance approach.” Former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair lent his weight in an interview, saying he always believed police should have access to stop and search powers and called on May to hold an emergency national security Cobra committee meeting on knife crime and “do whatever it takes.”

There is zero evidence that stop and search does anything to reduce violent crime. A College of Policing study of Metropolitan Police boroughs looking at 10 years of data from 2004-14 found that it had no effect. Its real purpose is to help the police intimidate working class youth.

Calls for stricter sentencing conveniently ignore the fact that sentences for knife crimes have steadily lengthened since 2008—alongside an increase in offences. The home secretary nonetheless introduced a raft of knife crime prevention orders in February, requiring low standards of proof to secure up to two years’ detention.

Human rights group Liberty, the Runnymede Trust and the Children’s Society warned that these measures raised “profound human rights concerns,” being likely to be “based on assumptions and stereotypes relating to where a person lives, where they go to school or who they are friends with—all of which may be crude proxies for race or socio-economic status.”

Repression is to be increased, with Tasers being deployed by police in far greater numbers. Chief Commissioner Cressida Dick cited the rise in knife crime to justify handing 1,800 extra stun guns to London’s Metropolitan Police in 2017. The Police Federation called for the move to be followed by other police forces. Earlier this month, Kent police quadrupled the number of officers equipped with Tasers to 1,500.

These are dangerous developments. The 285 people stabbed to death in the worst year for knife homicides on record were matched by 283 people killed following contact with police that same year, according to the Independent Office for Police Conduct. Calls for stricter policing have nothing to do with reducing violence, but with increasing the state’s capacity for dishing it out.

The Labour Party has played a crucial role, with Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott and Mayor of London Sadiq Khan backing the use of stop and search. While making some criticisms of racial profiling, Abbott

affirmed last November “Our officers need more resources to keep us safe. Evidenced based stops will always be a vital tool in fighting crime...” Last year, Khan demanded a “significant increase” in “targeted” stop and searches and said he wanted police to feel “confident” to carry them out.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is positioning Labour as a party of law and order. In a speech last month, he complained, “Since 2010, we’ve seen 21,000 police officers taken off our streets...” Labour’s manifesto commits to funding 10,000 more police officers.

The underlying cause of knife crime is not a lack of police, but the social devastation wrought by austerity. Where Corbyn does mention this, he carefully avoids the fact that Labour councils everywhere are imposing cuts after being instructed by himself and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell to set “legal” budgets.

Young people have seen a catastrophic fall in their living conditions over the past decade. More than one in four children are growing up in households suffering the effects of poverty. Over 760 youth centres have been closed since 2012, equating to 4,500 lost youth workers. Permanent exclusions from overstretched schools increased by 56 percent between 2013-14 and 2016-17. The statistics of worsening mental health problems among young people give a glimpse of the huge psychological impact of these conditions. It is this toxic brew of social circumstances which produces tragic acts of violence.

The ruling class are using fevered reports of violence borne out of austerity and social decay to impose ever more draconian repression in defence of the capitalist system. In opposition, workers and youth must fight for the only serious solution to all social ills: the establishment of a genuinely humane, socialist society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact