

Knife Seizure Imagery Project - Final Report –

Nicola Cogan^{1,2}, Chin-Van Y. Chau¹, Simon C. Hunter⁴, Kirsten Russell^{1,5}, Will Linden⁵, Damien Williams¹, Nicola Swinson¹, Petya Eckler¹, Lee Knifton^{2,3}, Vicki Jordan¹.

¹School of Psychological Sciences and Health, University of Strathclyde.

²Centre for Health Policy, University of Strathclyde.

³Mental Health Foundation Scotland.

⁴Glasgow Caledonian University

⁵Scottish Violence Reduction Unit

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Executive Summary

- The urgency to reduce knife crime and knife carrying has remained a primary issue for policy makers and police authorities across Scotland.
- Young people, particularly those living in the most deprived areas, have been identified as those most at risk of being exposed to higher levels of knife crime and assault related sharp-force injuries.
- Sharing images of recovered/seized knives in police campaigns and across media outlets (e.g., newspapers, online articles and social media) has been one strategy used to help deter knife carrying.
- The intention behind the use of knife seizure images is to warn the public of the dangers of knives and to show the success of police efforts in seizing weapons off the streets.
- However, little empirical research has been conducted to explore whether the use of knife seizure images is an effective deterrent.
- The aim of this study was to explore the views of young people living in areas of high and low rates of knife crime areas across Glasgow, to gain their perspectives concerning the use of knife seizure images as a crime-deterrent.
- Between January 2021 and April 2021, a group of 20 young people were invited to take part in online interviews. They were split into two equal groups, those living in higher or in lower areas of knife crime around Glasgow (determined by the Scottish Indicator of Multiple Deprivation).
- A collection of knife images obtained from published articles by the UK news media and from stock images produced by No Knives Better Lives were shown to the participants.
- The qualitative data stemming from the interviews using photo elicitation methodology was audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using an inductive thematic approach. Three main themes were created to illustrate the findings.
- Theme 1: Negative reactions towards images of seized knives: Both groups believed that knife images provoked negative emotions relating to fear, anger and anxiety. Those from high crime rate areas were more likely to feel 'normalised' towards knives, whilst those from lower crime rate areas were more likely to feel influenced by the media representation of knives.

- Theme 2: Images of knives may encourage rather than deter knife carrying: Both groups were concerned that showing interesting or unique looking images of knives might encourage knife carrying. However, they also felt that the knife images could also make some viewers feel distressed or upset, especially those with previous experiences of knife crime.
- Theme 3: Reinforcement of existing beliefs, stereotypes and stigma: Both groups felt that the media were likely to have other motives for their use of knife imagery (e.g., provoking or scaring viewers). Not providing accurate information about how the knives were seized/ recovered was also thought to increase levels of stigmatisation and negative stereotypes against certain groups and areas.
- This project is an important insight into young people's thoughts and feelings on knife seizure images as a crime deterrent. It indicates that there is significant negative reactions and an increased sense of fear in response to knife seizure imagery.
- Potential consequences of showing these knives included: the encouragement of knife carrying (e.g., for protection) and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, stigma and prejudice against young people living in deprived areas who may be most at risk of exposure to knife related crime.
- This research highlights the importance of understanding young people's perspectives and experiences of knife carrying and crime.
- Given our study is qualitative and relatively small-scale, it is not possible to make generalisations.
- Engaging with young people and other key stakeholder groups will contribute towards enhancing our understanding on the perceived risks, worries, needs and expectations about the reasons for knife carrying.
- This practice will provide a solid foundation for developing long term solutions to effectively tackle knife carrying and crime; there is a need for further research utilising a multi-method, longitudinal approach involving young people at all stages of the research process.

Background

This report presents the findings from a qualitative research project which took place between September 2020 and July 2021. The aims of the project was to explore young people's thoughts and feelings about the use of knife-seizure images as a method of crime-deterrent. The report provides some background on these issues before reporting on the main results. Three main themes and accompanying sub-themes were generated from one to one interviews with young people in Glasgow, Scotland. The findings are discussed in relation to existing research before drawing conclusions on implications for future research and practice.

The present study

Tackling knife crime has remained a primary issue for policy makers and police authorities across Scotland (Silvestri, Oldfield, Squires, & Grimshaw, 2009). The term 'knife crime' involves a range of offenses, including possession of a knife and knife-related violence but also the presence of knives in robberies, sexual violence and criminal damage (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018). Since 2005, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU) has been responsible for the significant progress in reducing knife crime across Scotland. As such, from 2010 to 2020, a 29% decrease of police-reported knife crimes was recorded in Scotland. However, a 6% rise in crimes of handing an offensive weapon from the 2018-2020 has triggered renewed concerns about knife crime across the country (ONS, 2020).

Among the many violence-reduction initiatives implemented throughout the UK, one police-led deterrent is the sharing of recovered/seized knife images which are commonly used in anti-knives campaigns and by media outlets (e.g., newspapers, online articles and social media). The purpose of this strategy is to warn the public of the dangers of knives and to show the success of police efforts in seizing weapons off the streets (Russell, 2021). However, knife-deterrence programmes such as No Knives Better Lives (NKBL) have raised concerns about how these images could potentially *increase* levels of fear among the public. Another concern is that these images could encourage further discrimination against areas of high crime and strengthen negative beliefs about criminal stereotypes.

In Scotland, areas with the highest crime rates are also often the most disadvantaged. Social problems commonly encountered by young people living in deprived areas, include educational disadvantage, the stigma of poverty, increased adverse childhood experiences; these factors can also present risks to both exposure and engagement in knife crime (Coid et al., 2021; Haylock et al., 2020; Scottish Trauma Audit Group Annual Report, 2016). It is important to understand how an individual's environment can nurture different ideas about knife carrying and crime, and whether this impacts on the effectiveness of knife-detering initiatives such as knife seizure images.

The media's depictions of crime can also influence how members of the public perceive crime. One example includes the over-representation of violent crimes in news media which may lead to an overestimation of crime, thus misleading the public about safety concerns (Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006). This raises another societal consequence of how media narratives of crime may also exacerbate criminal stereotypes of people and places. It is important to examine whether images of seized knives may contribute towards the stigmatisation of young people through reinforcing negative perceptions about areas where knives are reportedly seized (Rogan, 2021).

Among the many crime deterrents used across the country, fear-based deterrent methods (e.g. scare tactics) have been found to be ineffective and instead increase fear of victimisation (Foster, 2013; Youth Justice Board, 2010). Despite this, there is no existing research on the impact of knife-seizure images as a deterrent method. Thus, the current research explored how young people view these images using interviews with photo-elicitation methodology, where questions are guided by images, to encourage discussions about their thoughts and feelings concerning the knife images. The aims of the current study were as follows:

1. To explore if young people viewed knife seizure images as an effective deterrent against knife crime.
2. To compare the views of young people living in areas of high knife crime with those living in low areas of knife crime in Glasgow, Scotland, in order to identify if there were any differences in how they perceived the use of such images as a crime deterrent.

Methods

A qualitative study using photo elicitation methodology involving one to one online interviews with young people was adopted.

Participants

A group of 20 young people living in different areas of Glasgow took part in the study. Each participant had to meet the following criteria to take part: (1) aged 18-25; (2) currently living in an area of high recorded rates of crime within Glasgow (Canal Council Ward area with SIMD score - community sample) or in areas with low recorded rates of crime (comparative sample); (3) Lived in the area for at least 6 months; (4) Could speak English well and were able to provide informed consent for participation. Young people with direct experiences of being a victim of knife crime or had been involved in knife carrying/ crime were excluded from the study. Participants were primarily recruited online where a poster was shared across social media networks (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) and third sector agencies (e.g., SVRU, One Community and Love Milton). Of the 20 participants recruited for the study, 14 identified as female, 5 were male and 1 was non-binary. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25, with the mean age being 21. Regarding ethnicity, 17 identified as White Scottish/British, 1 Other White Background, 1 Mixed Ethnic Group and 1 Caribbean/Black.

Full breakdown of demographic information about the participating young people is given in Appendix C.

Interview Schedule

The interview questions were developed from a review of relevant research and were designed to address the specific aims of the study. The images were used to encourage discussion about the following topics: (1) feelings about knife seizure images; (2) thoughts about areas of high knife crime; (3) aims of using knife seizure images; (4) police and media engagement with these images; and (5) the effects of images in influencing likelihood of knife carrying.

The full interview schedule used for the interviews is given in Appendix A.

Procedure

Young people who expressed their interest in the study first contacted the researcher via email and were sent further information about the project. They were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study and then provided electronic written consent. Participants were then invited to take part in a semi-structured interview via the online platform Zoom. The series of knife images used throughout the interviews were obtained from published articles by UK news media (with appropriate permissions) and from stock images produced by the No Knives Better Lives (<https://noknivesbetterlives.com/>). The images used in the interviews are listed in Appendix D.

All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full verbatim. The interviews were conducted between January 2021 and April 2021.

Analysis

The data was analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and was followed by a comparative analysis where group based differences are identified in the key themes (Fram, 2013). Data saturation was achieved after the lead researcher and co-researchers cross checked the preliminary themes. The final analysis found three main themes largely present within all 20 interviews and associated sub-themes that highlighted group-level differences. Extracts from the interviews were used to represent different aspects of the themes and pseudonyms were allocated to all participant to maintain confidentiality.

Results

Three main themes (with associated sub-themes in brackets) were created:

Theme 1: Young people's negative reactions towards images of seized knives (the role of lived experiences versus media portrayals)

The young people in both groups reacted to the knife images with varying levels of negative emotions. The most common expressions included: "*scary*", "*uneasy*" and "*intimidating*". Both groups also shared similarities regarding their initial thoughts to the images, pointing out how accessible and obtainable knives were for people wanting to use them as weapons, "*everyone has knives at home*" (Ivy).

A notable difference between the two groups was in how the young people gained their knowledge and awareness of knife carrying. In the comparative group, the media served as the main source of information about knife crime. These included beliefs about criminal stereotypes and specific areas which the media often associated with crime, including “gangs” and “a scheme or something... council housing”. The media’s selective use of certain knife images was also thought to “glamorise” or “scare monger” the viewer:

“As soon as I think of knife crime, violence and gangs, I think of men and young men, and I think that’s just from what I’ve seen on TV and the news and what I read in the paper.” (Amy)

In contrast, the young people in the community group tended to draw upon their personal experiences from living in an area prominent for knife crime. They appeared to have developed an intimate understanding of the realities of knife carrying and crime, sharing details about how knife carrying was believed to be a “part of the area” where they lived. As a result, the community participants described how exposure to knife crimes and violence “normalised” them to knives. It was also insinuated that it was also insinuated that most of the young people were possibly “desensitised” to knives as they viewed them as everyday objects and were not as reactive to them as weapons:

“I think most people have seen these things in their life. It’s not a shocking thing. There’s not different weapons to kill and different weapons to cut your chicken. They’re the same.” (Cassie)

Theme 2: Images of knives may encourage use rather than act as deterrent (culture of fear)

There was a notable difference between how the young people in both groups described their own impressions of the knife seizure images and how they perceived the images may affect others. All 20 participants claimed they would personally opposed to carrying knives due fear of harming others and the risk of consequences:

*“I just know that I could get caught and that could f**k up my whole life. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t let that happen... The stakes are too high for me.”* (Skye)

When asked about the effect of using knife seizure images, the young people shared a collective concern about the images potentially influencing others to carry knives. This was directed towards the use of more distinctive or unique knives that were thought to “sensationalise” knives. As a result, it was thought that these images could possibly motivate people already considering the idea of committing knife crime rather than deterring them:

“I think partially they kind of want the publicity to be like ‘this is a bad thing’, but in doing so, they kind of make it seem, you know, a little bit more thrilling... ‘Look at this cool, pretty image of this knife that was like used’.” (Susan)

The final concern discussed by the young people was the emotional distress caused by the knife images, particularly for those with prior experiences with knives. The young people believed that the images could stimulate increased levels of fear among the public, making them “*constantly paranoid*”, which could have negative effects on people’s mental well-being. A consequence of this included inspiring people to carrying knives for defensive purposes, which was contradictory to the intended purpose of deterring knife crime:

“It’s going to lead to more people carrying knives cause then they have a sort of feeling that they need to protect themselves.” (Isaac)

Theme 3: Reinforcement of pre-existing negative beliefs, stigma and stereotypes (context, narrative and consequences)

The young people in the study highlighted two important factors which influenced how they viewed the knife images; the context and source of the images (e.g. police and media). The general consensus was that knife images were used with the intention to remind the public of the severity of knife crime and to “*raise awareness of the different types of weapons that are being used*”. However, most of the young people believed there to be differences between how the media and police portrayed the knife images, which contradicted their perceived purpose.

Most young people across both groups believed that the police would likely use the knife seizure images responsibly to deter knife crime, although 3 participants from the community groups expressed concerns about “*trusting the police*”. On the other hand, the media was thought to have an ulterior motive, with participants suggesting reasons including “*click-bait*” and to increase the public’s attention. A concern about the media was the deliberate usage of specific knife images that were thought to be most “*provoking*” in order to “*exaggerate the truth*” and manipulate the stories about knife crime.

“I think that media portrayals can affect a narrative in such a big way. They can completely change public perceptions of someone, and they would maybe use these for their political agenda” (Cassie).

Providing accurate context and information surrounding the seized knives was also considered an important factor to how the young people viewed the images. Six out of 10 community group participants explained that a lack of contextualisation regarding the social problems driving knife carrying (e.g. poverty, peer-pressure and protection) contributed towards the general public making “*false impressions*” about the severity of knife crime in current society.

“The sort of contradictions in today’s society that leads to this situation where knife crime tends to happen... You should try to explain the socio-economic context... Cause otherwise, you’re just titillating your audience with graphic images and telling everyone ‘Oh look how dangerous society is’ you know” (Max).

Consequently, the community group shared how their communities were likely to be subjected to increased stigmatisation. Using knife seizure images without explanation could possibly exaggerate the risks to safety posed in a certain area and further “*tarnish*” its reputation. In relation to this, 9 of the 10 young people in the comparative group admitted that the knife images would influence their beliefs about the perceived safety of the certain areas around Glasgow. The images were thought to “*add an extra*

layer of fear” to areas where negative perceptions and reputations were already established.

Discussion

This study was the first of its kind to examine young people’s perceptions of knife seizure imagery. The findings suggested that young people living in areas of high (community sample) and low (comparative sample) levels of recorded crime reacted negatively towards the images and believed that they would more likely encourage knife carrying than act as a deterrent. Young people living in areas of high crime often referenced their own lived experiences when describing their knife crime/ knife carrying knowledge. They described how knife carrying was normalised, particularly as a form of protection. Some participants also commented that local knowledge about crime was readily shared throughout the community. In comparison, young people living in areas of low crime tended to draw upon the media representation of crime-where the images used were thought to sensationalise knives and contributed towards building a sense of fear among the public.

Most of the participants from low crime areas also admitted that seeing images of knives seized in high crime areas would likely have adverse effects on their attitudes about those who live in that community. This finding suggests that these knife images could facilitate increased stigmatisation about who is likely to carry a knife as well as the areas that already have a negative reputation due to frequency of recorded knife crime. Providing accurate context about how the knives were seized by police was considered important for raising awareness of the factors which can influence crime and to reduce stigma.

Young people also expressed concerns about who (e.g., police, media) and why (e.g., to increase views of media stories, provoke a reaction, political agenda) such images are used. These findings highlight the importance of considering the narrative, source, and context in which such images are used. Challenging negative stereotypes, which can influence judgments about knife crime and young people and indirectly affect policy-making about youth crime (Greene, Duke, & Woody, 2017), is essential in raising awareness about knife crime

Strengths and Limitations

While a strength of the current research is the rich and in-depth information that was gathered, a limitation is the inability to generalise the findings. There was also an under-representation of young people who were male and from across a range of ethnic groups.

Recommendations

- Knife seizure images can be stigmatising and so discussing with the communities themselves how they can best be used may be important in establishing a more effective way forward.
- Research on how school-aged children view knife seizure images is crucial, given that such images have been used in knife-prevention campaigns across schools in the UK.
- Future work should consider people directly involved with knife crime (as perpetrator and/or victim) and the utilisation of a longitudinal, participatory approach involving young people in all stages of the research process. This which would help increase community engagement in research aiming to inform intervention programme development, particularly in areas of high knife crime.

Conclusion

This project is an important insight into young people's thoughts and feelings in relations to the use of knife seizure images as a crime deterrent. Knife seizure images may provoke negative reactions and increase a sense of fear among members of the public. This could potentially encourage knife carrying (e.g., for protection) and reinforce negative stereotypes and pre-conceived beliefs about who is likely to carry a knife. This research highlights the importance of understanding young people's perspectives and experiences of knife crime. Engaging with young people and other key stakeholder groups will contribute towards furthering our understanding on the perceived risks, worries, needs and expectations about the reasons for knife carrying. This practice will provide the basis for establishing long-term solutions to effectively tackle knife crime and carrying across the country.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all the young people who took part in the current study for their time and thoughtful contributions to the research. We would also like to thank NKBLs for helping with recruitment and providing the stock images for use with the interviews.

Outputs and Impacts

Cogan, N., Chau, Y. C., Russell, K., Linden, W., Swinson, N., Eckler, P., Hunter, S. C. (2021, September 8). Are images of seized knives an effective crime deterrent? A comparative thematic analysis of young people's views within the Scottish context. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/ma6g2>

The research was shortlisted as part of the Strathclyde Images of Research Competition 2021. The submission has been displayed nationally, including the Glasgow Science Museum.

Cogan, N., Chau, C. V., Russell, K., Linden, W., Eckler, P., Swinson, N., & Hunter, S. C. (2021). Are images of seized knives an effective crime deterrent? Views of young people within the Scottish context. 22nd Annual Conference of European Society of Criminology (2021).

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Appendix A: Interview schedule.

Name of department: School of Psychological Sciences and Health

Title of the study: Are images of seized knives an effective crime deterrent? A comparative thematic analysis of young people's views within the Scottish context.

Showing SET 1 images of seized knives

SECTION 1:

- 1) What are your thoughts and feelings about crime involving knives?
- 2) Could you tell me if you've seen these kinds of images before?
- 3) How does seeing these images make you feel?

Prompts - What do you think when you see images like these?

SECTION 2:

- 4) What do you think about the area you currently live in? Safety? Violence? Frequency of knife/ weapon use?
- 5) Would seeing these images change how you think about the area that they were seized from? (e.g. areas of high crime rates or low crime rates)

Prompts - How have your thoughts changed? Positive? Negative? None?

- 6) Would you be more or less likely to visit these areas after seeing these images?
- 7) After seeing an image like this, would it affect how you think about the people who live in that area? Why? How?

SECTION 3:

- 8) Why do you think the Police use these images?
- 9) Why do you think the media would show these images?

SECTION 4:

- 10) Do you think that the use of these (knife) images is a good or a bad thing?
- 11) Do you think the police and media should use/show these images more, less or the same? Why? What difference do you think it might make?
- 12) What effect do you think these images may have on the viewers?

Showing SET 2 images from No Knives Better Lives

SECTION 5: How participants feel when they see alternative images.

13) Could you tell me if you've seen these kinds of images before?

14) How does seeing these images make you feel?

Prompts - What do you think when you see images like these?

SECTION 6:

15) In comparison to the first set of images, do you think that the use of this imagery is a good or a bad thing?

16) In comparison to the first set of images, do you think the police and media should use/show these images more, less or the same? Why? What difference do you think it might make?

17) In comparison to the first set of images, what effect do you think these images may have on the viewers?

SECTION 7:

18) Considering both sets of images, do you think that seeing images like these would make a difference to whether you yourself might carry a knife? What about other people?

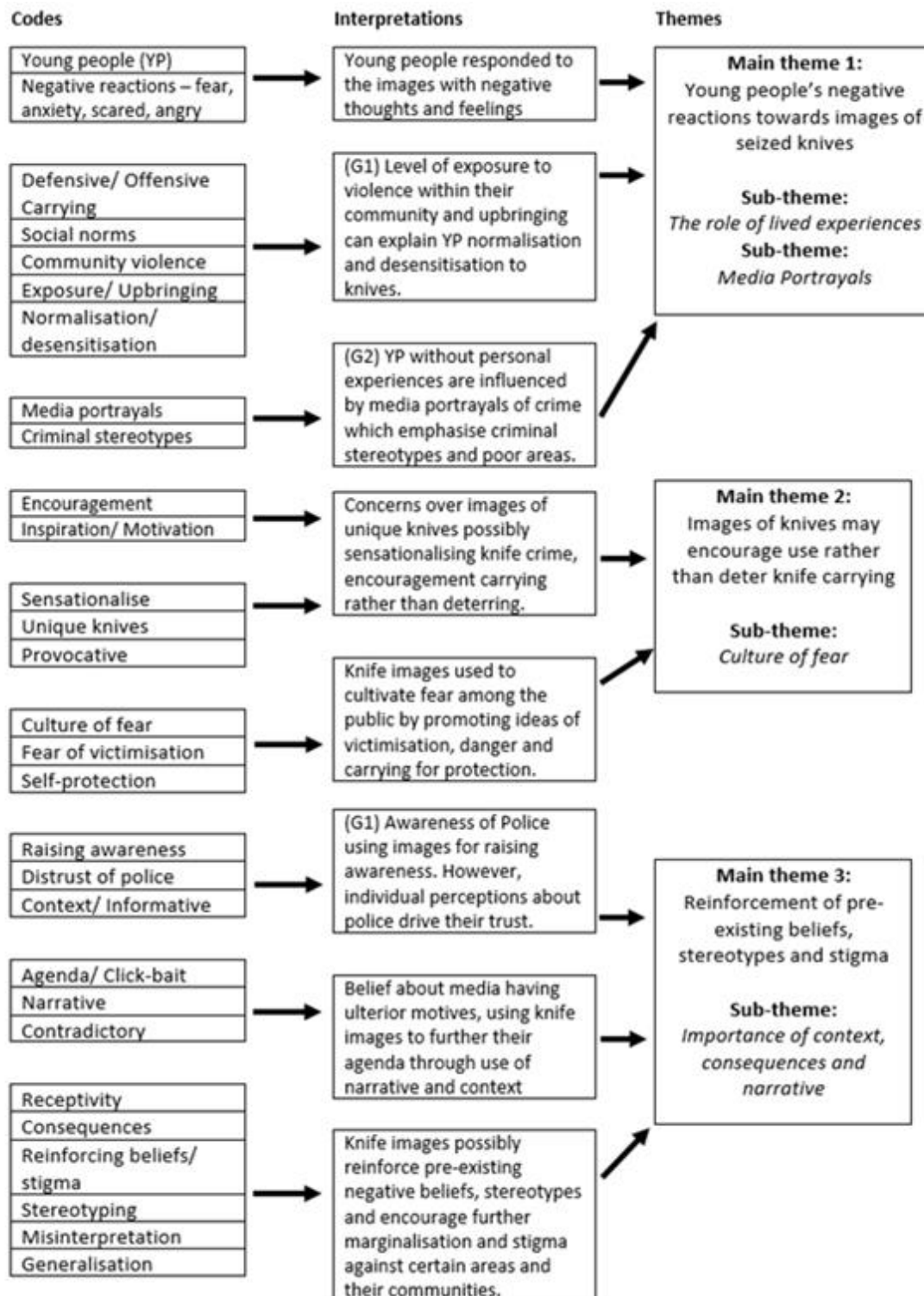
Prompts - Deterring? Encouraging? Why?

19) Do you have any more comments or final thoughts on the images of seized knives that you would like to add?

Thank you. End.

Appendix B: Thematic Tables.

Schematic diagram of themes for community (G1) and comparative groups (G2)



Appendix C: Participant demographics

Table 1:

Participant characteristics

| Group 1: Community Sample | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------|------------|-------------------------|
| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Ethnicity |
| Isaac | Male | 19 | White Scottish/ British |
| Sarah | Female | 23 | White Scottish/ British |
| Tina | Female | 24 | White Scottish/ British |
| Emily | Female | 20 | White Scottish/ British |
| James | Male | 22 | White Scottish/ British |
| Cassie | Female | 21 | White Scottish/ British |
| Max | Male | 19 | White Scottish/ British |
| Ivy | Female | 18 | Caribbean/ Black |
| Skye | Non-binary | 25 | White Scottish/ British |
| May | Female | 20 | White Scottish/ British |
| Group 2: Comparative Sample | | | |
| Lina | Female | 23 | Other White background |
| Eden | Female | 21 | White Scottish/ British |
| Rachael | Female | 23 | White Scottish/ British |
| Amy | Female | 21 | White Scottish/ British |
| Megan | Female | 21 | White Scottish/ British |
| Susan | Female | 22 | Mixed Ethnic Group |
| Abbie | Female | 24 | White Scottish/ British |
| Hannah | Female | 23 | White Scottish/ British |
| Shaun | Male | 22 | White Scottish/ British |
| Ryan | Male | 23 | White Scottish/ British |

Appendix D: Knife Seizure Images used for Interview



SET 2 – Stock Images by No Knives Better Lives



Images not to be used without permission due to copyright