

A SHARP LOOK AT THE PROBLEMS OF STABBING WEAPONS

Literature review on the carrying, possession and use of stabbing weapons by young people, their risk factors and motives, (the effects of) interventions and opportunities for policy and approach

SUMMARY

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Summary

This summary takes stock of the research into the carrying, possession and use of stabbing weapons by young people, their risk factors and motives and (the effects of) interventions and opportunities for the future. The first section looks back at the reason for the research, the research questions and the methodology, the second section answers the research questions.

Background, research questions and methodology

During the year 2019, the media writes more and more about violent incidents. Because (very) young people are involved in these violent incidents and knives are often used, concerns arise among policymakers. This has led to the Action Plan on Weapons and Youth (hereinafter referred to as: the Action Plan) that was introduced in November 2020. The objective of the Action Plan was to reduce the possession and use of weapons – particularly stabbing weapons – among young people. To achieve this goal, local and national preventive, proactive and repressive actions were implemented over a period of two years. The Action Plan was evaluated in 2023. An important conclusion is that the Action Plan was drawn up and implemented so quickly that insufficient research was done into the target group, how the target group obtains weapons and how the target group can be reached to bring about behavioural change. In addition, no mapping has been made of which measures have been proven to be effective and existing policy has not been tested for effectiveness. All in all, this has led to the actions from the Action Plan having too broad an approach, as a result of which the target group has not been sufficiently reached to bring about behavioural change. Municipalities have questioned whether some actions have had an effect or have even had the opposite effect and could lead to more possession, carrying and use

of stabbing weapons by young people. Based on this, it was recommended to do more research into what the target group looks like, what the motives are for carrying a stabbing weapon, how the target group can be reached and what are promising or successful (elements of) interventions. Politicians and scientists from the Netherlands and abroad support this recommendation, because it is the only way to tackle knife problems. This study aims to comply with that recommendation, so that the results can be used for the approach that will be recalibrated in 2024. Specifically, this study answered four research questions:

1. Who carry, possess and/or use a stabbing weapon; What is the target audience?
2. What are the underlying reasons – risk factors and motives – for the target group to carry, possess and/or use a stabbing weapon?
3. Which interventions are carried in the country and abroad to reach the target group, which of these interventions appear to be effective in achieving behavioural change and what are the active components within these effective interventions?
4. What conditions need to be created to be able to implement the effective interventions?

In order to answer these research questions, a thorough literature review was conducted. Search terms were used to search the Web of Science (WoS) and Google Scholar databases to search for relevant publications in Dutch and English.

Answering the research questions

This section provides answers to the research questions, and we conclude this summary with a number of recommendations from and reflections by the researchers.

Target group, risk factors and motives

This section provides answers to the questions of who own, carry and/or use a stabbing weapon and what risk factors and motives underlie this. Regarding knife problems, it is necessary to make a distinction between young people who own, carry and use a stabbing weapon. The choice to do so is influenced by personal and social circumstances and developments. These can be categorized into

family, school, neighbourhood and friend domains. As a result, knife problems should not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon.

Few prevalence studies have been conducted on the possession of stabbing weapons. However, the population that carries a stabbing weapon appears to be much larger than the population that actually uses it. The stabbing weapons that young people – especially boys – own, carry and use include kitchen knives, pocketknives, box cutters, switchblades and stilettos.

Young people who own a stabbing weapon (and do not carry it outside the home) do so because they enjoy collecting them, for example. Another motive for the possession of stabbing weapons is feeling unsafe at home, on the street and/or at school. Despite the feelings of insecurity, this target group decides not to carry the stabbing weapons outside. The stabbing weapon-carrying youths do this to be able to protect themselves if necessary. Several factors influence feelings of insecurity and therefore the choice to own or carry a stabbing weapon. This is often based on negative life experiences, like being a victim or witness of bullying, (domestic) violence or crime. Feelings of insecurity also grow because young people hear, read and see a lot in (social) media about violence and conflicts regardless of whether or not a stabbing weapon has been used. This feeds the idea that many others on the street and/or at school are armed. A final factor that increases feelings of insecurity is a lack of trust in institutions. This manifests itself, for example, in the sensation that the police fail to protect their citizens or protect them poorly. The young people who carry a stabbing weapon feel less defenceless and are more likely to dare to confront them. This augments the risk of (repeated) victimization or perpetration, which further increases the sensation of insecurity and creates a vicious circle.

The foregoing refers to young people who generally comply with the laws and regulations. However, there are also criminally active young people. They often grow up in a vulnerable home situation like poverty. As a result, the parents experience stress and play a role that is not supportive and stimulating. As a result, the attachment between parent and child is insufficient. Other factors that contribute to this are: having a parent with a criminal past, being part of a large family with little parental supervision and having parents who are incompetent of upbringing. This home situation has a major influence on behaviour at school because it more often leads to truancy, obtaining a low basic qualification or even dropping out of school. As a result, young people are more likely to take to the streets. Who they associate with there largely determines their behaviour. One possibility is for them to become part of a criminal youth group, where they are offered a place to experience protection, fun and respect, which gives them

a sense of belonging. Within such groups, carrying a stabbing or other type of weapon is part of the group identity. By carrying one, an individual shows that they know the street culture and accept the street values. It is also a status symbol. Criminal youth groups are often guilty of various forms of crime but are particularly active in drug trafficking. Because these young people are aware that members of other criminal youth groups often carry stabbing or other weapons, they carry them too for self-protection. The young people in criminal youth groups often have difficulty regulating their emotions, are often strongly anti-police and more likely to suffer from behavioural disorders and hyperactivity. Compared to young people who usually comply with the laws and regulations, the criminally active young people (whether they are part of a criminal youth group or not) are the ones most guilty of using stabbing weapons by committing crime, intimidating (warning or threatening) others and/or injuring others.

Other risk factors that increase the likelihood of owning, carrying and using a stabbing weapon include personality traits (being impulsive, having low self-control and self-confidence, accepting violence and street values and being mildly intellectually disabled), alcohol and drug use, struggling with mental health problems, watching violent television and movies and playing violent games. Alcohol and drug use also affect the level of impulsivity and lack of self-control.

Interventions and active components

This section provides an overview of preventive and repressive programmes and interventions that have been launched in the country and abroad over the years. Some of them have been evaluated and active components have emerged.

Primary preventive programs and interventions

Primary preventive programs and interventions aim to reach the entire population or a specific group to prevent them from becoming involved in crime and/or possessing, carrying or using a stabbing weapon.

- **Zero tolerance policy:** The purpose of this policy is to deter the possession, carrying or use of a stabbing weapon. However, it fails to do so. This is because it is impossible for the police to catch everyone with a stabbing weapon.
- **Preventive body searches:** Within a designated security risk area, the police may search citizens. Although it can lead to stabbing weapons being found and confiscated, this only has a short-term effect. There is no long-

term effect because the intervention does not address the underlying risk factors for someone carrying a stabbing weapon. Partly due to the wide availability of stabbing weapons, the persons from whom the stabbing weapon has been confiscated will soon carry another. The intervention can also be counterproductive, if the searched persons believe that it is done based on their ethnicity. As a result, trust in the police is wearing. The results of the search may also increase citizens' subjective feelings of insecurity. In the municipality of Rotterdam, a pilot has been started in which only those who have already been involved in weapon incidents and who are expected to carry a weapon again in the future can be searched. This is not a primary, but a tertiary preventive intervention. Future research should show whether the new method prevents the adverse effects of the old method, so that it can be an effective intervention.

- **Weapon hand-in campaign:** During the campaign, young people are given the opportunity to hand in a stabbing weapon, without this having penal consequences. This intervention does not reduce the problem of stabbing weapons. There are two reasons for this. First, carrying a stabbing weapon is part of the equipment of criminally active young people on the street. In view of potential confrontations, they will not surrender their stabbing weapons. Second, the disclosure of the number of stabbing weapons handed in can give young people who usually comply with the laws and regulations the idea that many others carry a stabbing weapon. Due to a growing sensation of insecurity, they may then also choose to carry a stabbing weapon. In that case, the intervention will have the opposite effect.
- **Police presence and the use of weapon detection systems in schools:** The aim of these interventions is to increase students' sense of safety. At the same time, feelings of insecurity are growing, because security personnel are present, and students have the idea that there is a (major) stabbing weapon problem. In addition, some may feel stigmatized if they sense they are being submitted to a check because of their ethnicity.
- **Education in schools:** In schools, experience experts provide education about the dangers and risks. First, it is questionable whether this reaches the entire target group, because the criminal youths who own, carry or use a stabbing weapon are often not at school. Second, the deterrent purpose of education is often counterproductive. Third, the quality of the person providing the education – and whether they know how to reach the students – seems to be decisive. In-depth research should show which target group education should focus on and what circumstances and con-

ditions should be present to ensure effective education through the correct application of *altercasting* instead of increasing participants' feelings of insecurity.

- **Nationwide awareness campaigns:** Campaigns should help to raise awareness among young people of the potential negative consequences of owning, carrying and using a stabbing weapon and trigger them to stop. However, simply increasing knowledge and thus awareness about the potential negative consequences does not lead to behavioural change. In fact, such interventions often turn out to have the opposite effect. The (frequent) consumption of the information provided leads to an overestimation of the risks and an increase in feelings of fear and insecurity (incorrect application of *altercasting*). A national awareness campaign can be effective, provided that a reliable source conveys reliable information and the campaign focuses on the right target group, offers action perspectives and is part of a broad (integrated) prevention approach in which various experts in prevention work together.
- **Inspections in the hotel and food service industry:** Preventive checks can be carried out in entertainment centres to reduce the number of people carrying stabbing weapons. In-depth research is needed to determine whether a control in this industry is effective to reduce the possession, carrying and use of stabbing weapons. In addition, it is also necessary to examine what these inspections do to visitors' feelings of insecurity.

Secondary preventive programs and interventions

In the United Kingdom, a public health approach has been launched several times, such as the *Scottish Reduction Unit*, the *Tackling Knives and Serious Youth Violence Action Programme* and the *Serious Violence Strategy*. Within these approaches, secondary preventive programmes and interventions have been implemented. Such programmes and interventions include a smaller target group than the primary preventive programmes and interventions mentioned earlier, namely only young people who are at risk of ending up in crime. The overarching goal of the following interventions is to reduce risk factors to young people are exposed to and to strengthen protective factors:

- **Deploying positive role models:** People with status and legitimacy try to keep at-risk young people on the right path by offering them support in various domains. A positive role model such as a (former) top athlete can be successful, but not enough is known about the exact influence of a former prisoner.

- **Preschool Programs:** The goal of these programs is to prevent involvement in crime later in life by improving the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of at-risk children in the early years of life. Such programmes succeed in this, especially when support is also offered to parents and within families across domains.
- **Family interventions:** Such interventions – like nurse visitation programmes and early parent training – aim to improve the quality of the relationship between parent(s) and child. To achieve this goal, it is important for the intervention to start in early childhood. The interventions are mainly applied to families with a weak socio-economic position because these are often families where the parent(s) are incapable or unable to raise their children adequately. In addition to the interventions focused on changing the children’s knowledge, attitude and behaviour, the parent(s) gain insight into different parenting techniques, for example. These interventions have the desired effect.
- **In-school programs:** The goal of school programs is to improve the social, emotional and communicative competencies of at-risk students, teach conflict-avoidance behaviour and teach skills that augment the likelihood of a successful future. By focusing on at-risk students, such programs have a positive effect.
- **Tackling hot spots and hot groups:** Police figures and knowledge of professionals can show that troublemaking and criminal behaviour can be attributed to specific locations or groups. Interventions can be used in a targeted manner. This has a short-term effect, because the troubles and criminal behaviour stops, however it is just temporary. Such interventions do not focus on the risk factors underlying the troublemaking and criminal behaviour. As a result, sooner or later it will come back.

Tertiary preventive programs and interventions

Tertiary preventive programmes and interventions focus on young people who have already committed a criminal offence, with the aim of preventing recidivism.

- **Family interventions:** Tertiary preventive family interventions are more intensive than secondary ones. A lot of attention is paid to multisystem therapy (MST). Multiple professionals perform multiple treatment techniques, such as cognitive behavioural therapy and family therapy. The aim is to identify the risk factors, to intervene across domains and to

strengthen protective factors. The intervention succeeds in this. Young people interact less with deviant peers and the quality of the relationship between parent(s) and child as well as the parent(s)' parenting skills improve. All in all, this leads to behavioural change.

- **Assigning mentors:** By providing advice and support to young people, mentors should ensure that recidivism is prevented. Although the intervention succeeds in reducing the number of crimes committed by juveniles, little research has been done on how it affects the possession, carrying and use of a stabbing weapon.
- **Top X approach:** The aim of this intervention is to prevent recidivism, bring about behavioural change and prevent siblings from ending up in crime. So far, the approach has not succeeded in reducing the risk of recidivism more than that of young people who are not part of the Top X approach. First, this may be because the target group is too difficult to reach, partly due to the seriousness of the multiple problems they are facing. Second, the approach is not always carried out as conceived at the front end. If the approach is implemented as intended and effect research is carried out, something can be said with more certainty about its effectiveness.
- **Intervention interview:** In addition to the Rotterdam pilot discussed earlier, which may be of interest as a tertiary preventive intervention, the same applies to an intervention in which hospitals play an important role. The target group of the intervention concerns young people who enter hospital because of injuries from stabbing incidents. These can be both non-criminal and criminal youths. Especially for criminal youth, it is a difficult target group to approach, but this way they become more accessible. In-depth research should show whether such an intervention is effective.

The active components of secondary and tertiary preventive interventions are as follows:

Active components of secondary preventive interventions

1. The target group consists of at-risk young people who have not yet progressed through in crime.
2. The intensity of the intervention is tailored to the risk of recidivism. The training sessions must also continue to cover the correct time span and should not be shortened.

3. During the intervention, the young people will be worked with individually.
4. The intervention also focuses on the family and other domains (multisystem therapy).
5. Agreements are made about what is desirable and undesirable behaviour.
6. Leisure activities are done in groups.
7. The use of positive role models.

Active components of tertiary preventive interventions

1. The target group consists of young people who have already committed a criminal offence, with the aim of preventing recidivism.
2. Participation is more often mandatory, and the interventions are often more structured.
3. Agreements are made about what is desirable and undesirable behaviour.
4. During the intervention, the young people will be worked with individually.
5. The intervention also focuses on the family and other domains (multisystem therapy).
6. The intervention aligns with the young person's risks, needs and responsiveness (the Risk-Need-Responsivity model).
7. The intensity of the intervention is tailored to the risk of recidivism.

A difference between the secondary and tertiary preventive interventions is the target group and therefore the intensity. The target group of tertiary preventive interventions is heavier and thus the intensity is higher.

In addition to the above-mentioned preventive interventions, there are unconditional repressive interventions, such as stricter legislation or stricter penalties. These interventions are intended to have a deterrent impact by having a preventive effect. Such interventions do not lead to (the desired) behavioural change and often even have the opposite effect. By punishing young people, the underlying risk factors are not addressed, but rather reinforced. For young people who are part of a criminal youth group, their in-group status is also increased, which makes leaving it even more difficult.

Recommendations and reflections by the researchers

All in all, the foregoing offers sufficient starting points for the future. Primary, secondary and tertiary preventive interventions appear to be the most effective and promising in bringing about behavioural change. A crucial condition for effective interventions is that it becomes clear which risk factors are present for each individual. Ideally, this is done as early as possible in a child's life by means of early detection. Although this often happens from the moment a child or young person is in primary or secondary school, research argues that early detection should start at the child health centre.

To gain insight into the risk factors, integral cooperation is necessary. Collaboration is required between organisations that are active in different sectors, so that they each have knowledge about possible risk factors from different angles. This knowledge must be shared in confidence, in accordance with the conditions of the privacy legislation. When secondary and tertiary preventive interventions are then initiated and reduce risk factors, strengthen protective factors and provide opportunities for the future, this leads to behavioural change. Effective interventions that will then be carried out elsewhere should copy the original model as much as possible. Adjustments run the risk that the intervention will not have the same effect.

While the above relates to young people who are at risk of ending up in crime or have already committed a criminal offence, another large target group consists of young people who carry a stabbing weapon because of feelings of insecurity. For them, it is important for interventions to be developed to reduce their anxiety. Victim support can play a role in this, but also can safe places be created for young people to turn to with their concerns, report anonymously and receive support. In-depth research can contribute to the correct design and implementation of a safe off- and/or online environment for young people. The effective secondary and tertiary preventive interventions mentioned – which relate to the at-risk or criminal youth – will also reduce the feelings of insecurity of this anxious and fearful target group in the long term.

Colophon

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summary

This research stems from the needs of the Ministry of Justice and Security and was supervised by the CCV. The responsibility for the content of the study lies with the authors.

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