



Evaluation of the use of knives in art to educate and engage

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Contents

Key Points	3
Background	3
Experiment	3
Artwork and Eagle	4
Overall Opinions on Knife Crime	5
Reaction to the stimuli	6
Self-directed opinions of knife carrying	7
Other-directed opinions of knife carrying	8
Fear of knife carrying	9
Normative attitudes towards knife carrying	9
Take-home messages	11
Summary of Qualitative Results	12
Effect on Young People	12
Awareness or anxiety?	12
Relief.....	13
Changes in Lifestyle.....	13
Impact of Art	14
Positive	14
Negative	14
Influencing Factors	14
Previous Exposure	14
Media	15
Cities	15
Peer discussion	16
Spoken to Friends.....	16
Spoken to Parents	16
Conclusion	16

Key Points

- The Knife Eagle did not have many significant effects on young people, positive or negative, compared to artwork about knife carrying that did not feature images of knives.
- Overall, young people do not view carrying knives as normal.
- Young people were overall neutral on both the artwork and Knife Eagle, with few strong positive or negative opinions.
- Very few young people said seeing the eagle or the artwork would make them want to use a knife or made them more afraid of knife carrying.
- The Knife Eagle was slightly more positively rated in terms of a positive experience and memorability.
- Anxiety around knife crime was expressed in qualitative interviews from students who saw the artwork or The Knife Eagle, indicating that anxiety can result from these kinds of presentations regardless of the materials used to support them.
- It was difficult to tell the difference between awareness and taking sensible precautions, and anxiety in interviews.
- It is unclear what benefit the Knife Eagle had, but it did not seem to have any negative impacts either.

Background

The Knife Eagle emerged from a community art competition organised by the Kent and Medway Violence Reduction Unit. The final sculpture is made of confiscated or surrendered knives, sculpted by Lee Whitehead. The Knife Eagle follows in the tradition of other art pieces made of surrendered knives, the most famous being the Knife Angel from the British Ironwork Centre.

The intention of these art works is to encourage conversation and consideration about knife crime and its impacts. The ultimate goal is to reduce knife carrying, and therefore knife crime.

Up to this point there has been no reliable research into whether these works of art achieve this goal. There is also a concern that seeing so many confiscated knives may actually cause fear and anxiety, the desire for protection, and therefore possibly even increase knife carrying.

Kent and Medway VRU worked with South Yorkshire VRU and Sheffield Hallam University to plan an experiment to investigate whether the Knife Eagle, and other sculptures like it, do spark conversation and thought, or if they instead encourage fear, anxiety and, in the worse case scenario, increased desire to carry a knife.

Experiment

Young people in schools in Kent and Medway's area were invited to a Young Person's Community Safety Conference. The day included many speeches and activities concerning young people's safety. All young people attended a "Community knife awareness project". Half of the young people saw pictures of posters at this time. The posters had been developed by other young people, and crucially whilst they were about knife crime they did not include pictures of knives. The other half saw the Knife Eagle. All young people were then given a survey. This generated a lot of quantitative data on the opinions and feelings of young people.

Some young people were also invited to take part in further interviews with two of the researchers. These interviews were to look more in depth at the young people's opinions, and also investigate what effect the sculpture or pictures had had a few weeks after they had been seen.



Figure 1. Example of artwork (left) and the Knife Eagle (right)



Artwork and Eagle

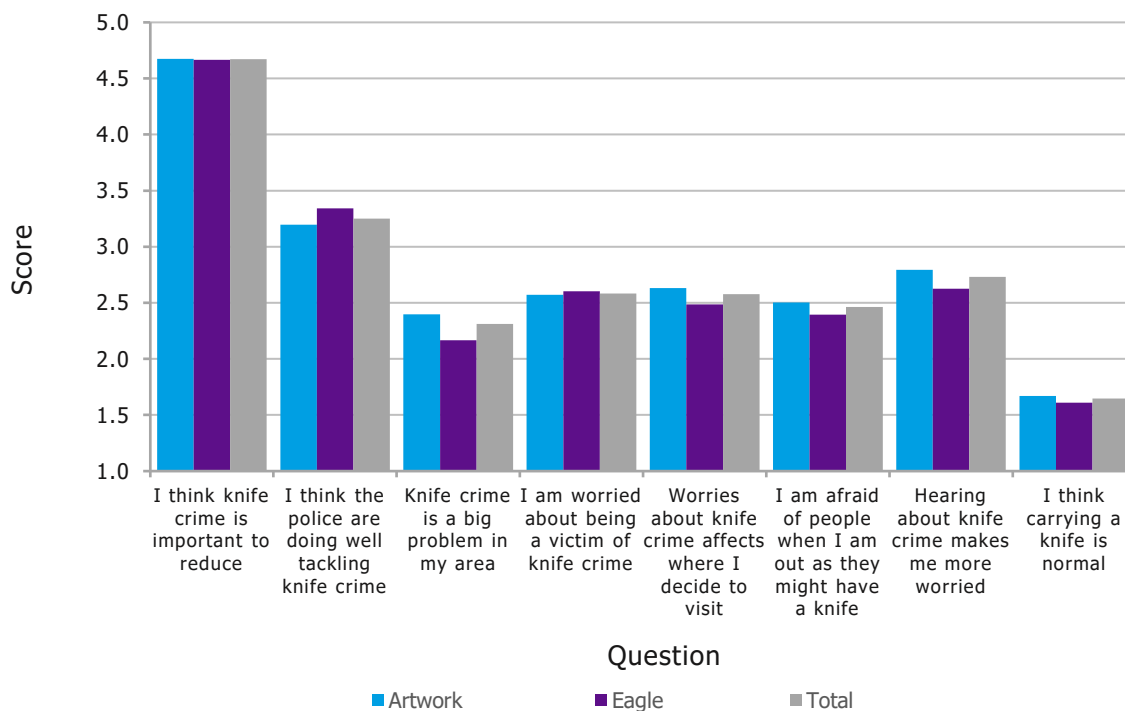
There were no significant differences between conditions (artwork or eagle) for most measures. For questions 2 and 4 we included all measures in a factor reduction, which takes a large number of questions and reduces them down to a few "factors". None of these factors were significantly different between conditions.

There was a significant effect, but with only a small effect size, for positive attitudes towards the Knife Eagle. This suggests the Knife Eagle is slightly more appealing as an activist work of art than the artwork.

Overall Opinions on Knife Crime

The first section of the survey, labelled question 2 because demographic details were collected beforehand, asked questions about the young people's opinion of knife crime. A score of 5 indicates high agreement, a score of 1 indicates low agreement.

Figure 2 – Overall opinions of knife crime



We can see from Figure 1 that young people are supportive of the need to reduce knife crime overall (Average: 4.7). This is perhaps to be expected, but the implication is that if our strategies are correct, young people are supportive of our work to reduce knife crime.

Young people were also more in agreement than not (average score: 3.3) that the police are doing well in tackling knife crime. This suggests overall tentative support for the police's activity, but this is only just above the halfway point of 3.0, and there were many young people who are not sure if the people are doing well (29.8% neutral response).

We see a strong opinion against "I think carrying a knife is normal" (average score: 1.7), indicating most young people disagreed with this statement. There were only 14 young people (out of 450 who answered) who indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

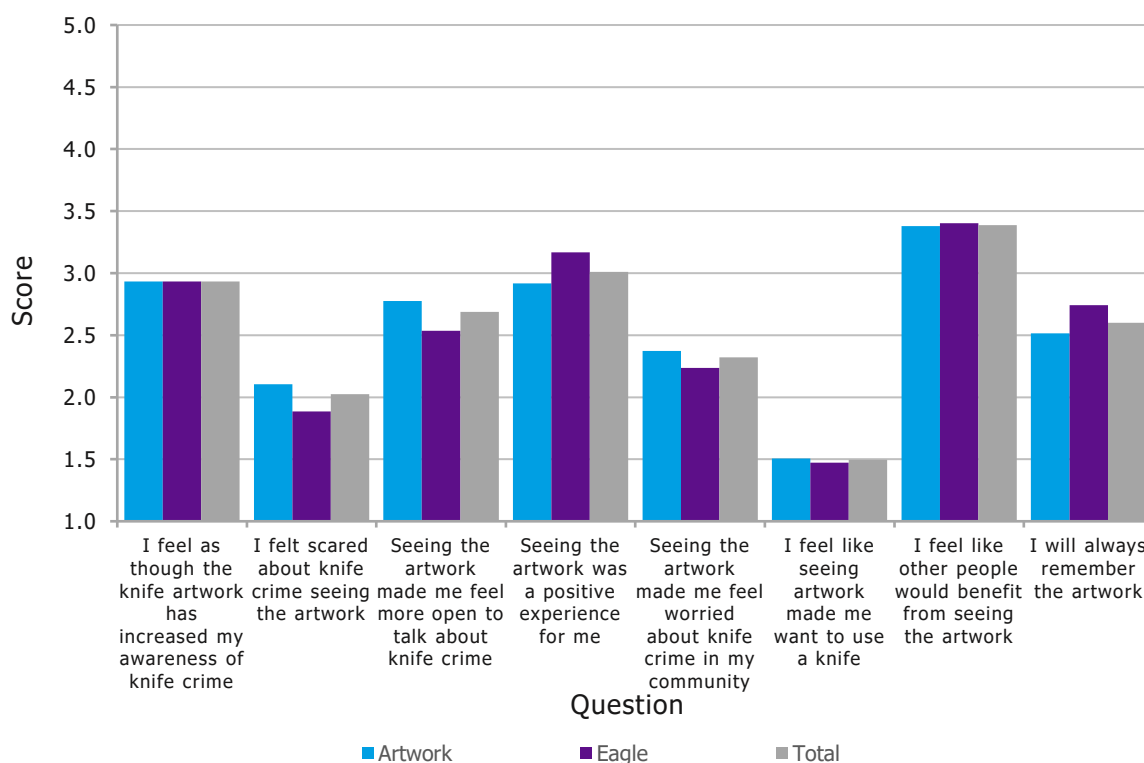
The remainder of questions in question 2 have an average score of 2.3 to 2.7, indicating mild disagreement with the statements overall. The spread of responses to these questions mean that some young people do think, for instance, that knife crime is a big problem in their area (8.4% strongly agree or agree), that they are worried about being a victim of knife crime (22.3% strongly agree or agree), that worries about knife crime affect where they decide to visit (23.6% strongly agree or agree) and that they are afraid of people when they are out as they might have a knife (17.6% strongly agree or agree). This still represents a fifth to a quarter of young people worried about knife crime in Kent.

There were few notable differences between conditions, as supported by the statistical analysis. Some small differences do include that young people who saw the eagle disagreed with the statement "knife crime is a big problem in my area" (average score: 2.2) slightly more than those in the artwork condition (2.4), suggesting something about the delivery slightly increased feelings of safety.

Reaction to the stimuli

The survey asked 8 questions about the impact the artwork or eagle had on them.

Figure 3- Reaction to the stimuli



Based on average scores, the artwork and eagle (combined in this graph) did not have a large impact on the young people who saw it. For instance, young people scored an average of 2.9 for feeling as though the artwork/eagle had increased their awareness of knife crime, with 43.1% of respondents putting a neutral response.

The artwork and eagle did not make the majority of young people scared about knife crime either, with an average score of 2.0. Only 11 young people out of the 453 who responded to this question strongly agreed or agreed with the statement (2.4%).

There is a slight difference between the artwork and the eagle condition on this measure. The average score for young people was 1.9, indicating that they were not more scared of knife crime due to seeing the eagle. For the artwork, the result was slightly higher at 2.1, still indicating they were not more scared.

The Knife Eagle was also slightly more memorable than the artwork, with an average score of 2.7 for "I will always remember the artwork", compared to 2.5 for young people in the artwork group. Nonetheless both presentations seem only moderately memorable according to self reports.

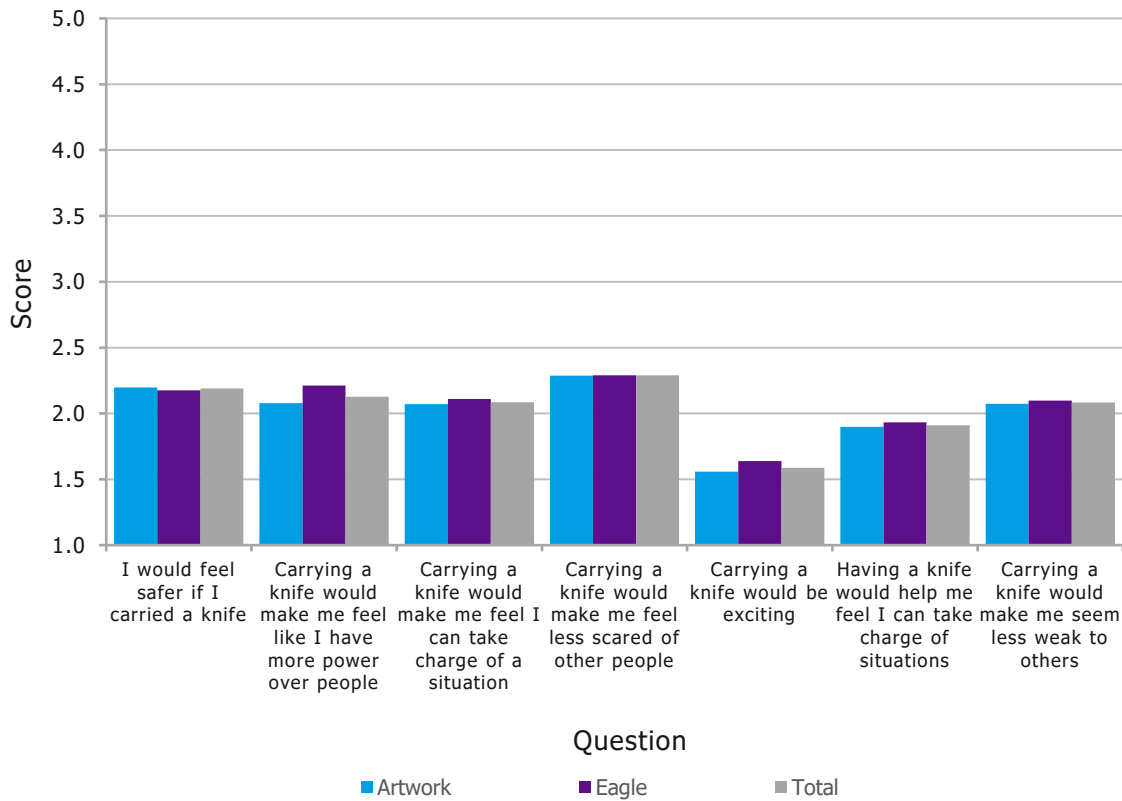
"I feel like seeing the artwork made me want to use a knife" had an average score of 1.5 in both conditions, indicating strong disagreement with the statement. 10 young people overall strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, out of 450 who answered, of which only 2 were in the Eagle condition.

Interestingly, young people in both conditions were slightly above neutral for agreeing with the statement "I feel like other people would benefit from seeing the artwork/eagle", with an average score of 3.4. This was the highest result for this question set. Young people seem to think they did not personally benefit from it, but that others would.

Self-directed opinions of knife carrying

The survey asked young people 7 questions about their views of knives as it relates to them, their safety, their self-image and their agency.

Figure 4 - Self-directed opinions of knife carrying



We can see that the majority of young people have a negative view of knives, with the highest average score being for “carrying a knife would make me feel less scared of other people”, at 2.3. However, this still represents 30% of young people strongly agreeing or agreeing that carrying a knife would make them feel less scared, indicating there is some endorsement of the defensive motivation to carry a knife.

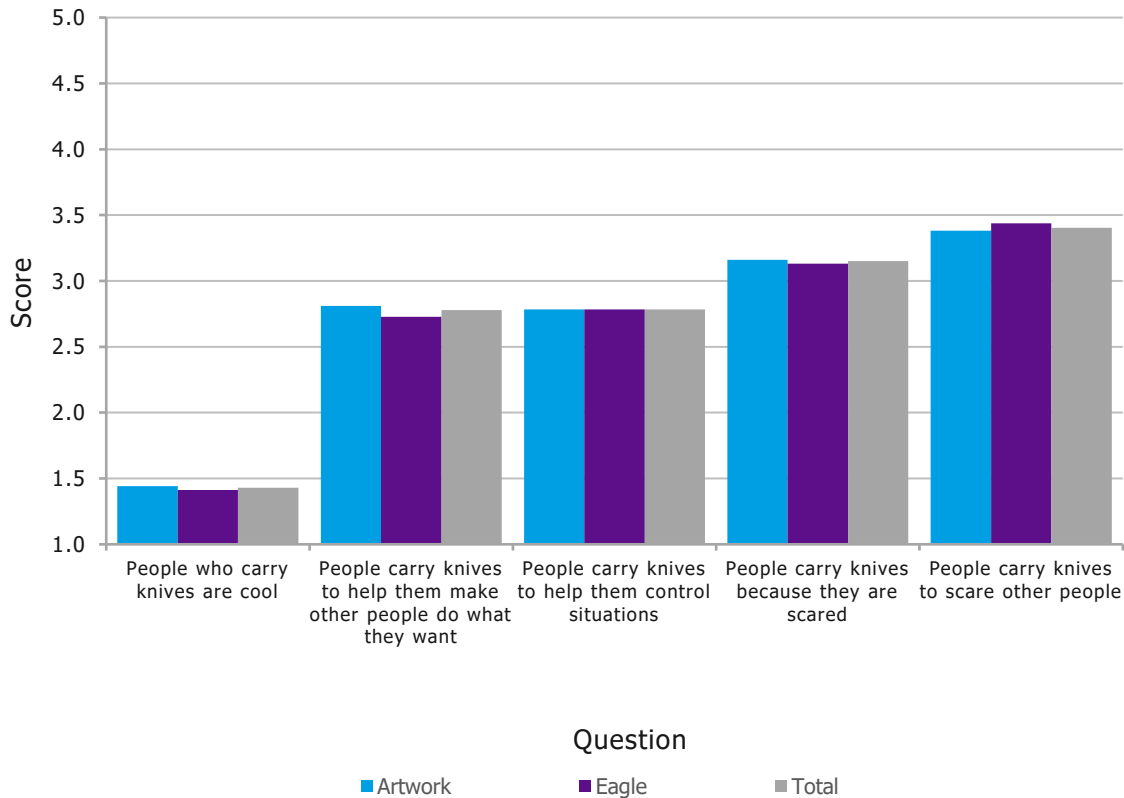
The lowest average score was for “carrying a knife would be exciting”, at 1.6. 9% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

These results indicate that young people, overall, do not have a defensive motivation to carry knife, nor do they think they are glamorous or “exciting.” This does not rule out this motivation for individuals.

Other-directed opinions of knife carrying

The survey asked 5 questions to young people about their views on other people who carry knives and their motivations.

Figure 5. Other directed opinions of knife carrying



There was a strong negative response to the statement “people who carry knives are cool”, with an average score of 1.4 in both conditions). Only 3% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, and we cannot rule out that this may have been to “spoil” the survey.

This indicates that even if some young people (already a minority) think that carrying a knife themselves is cool, they still have a negative opinion of other people doing so.

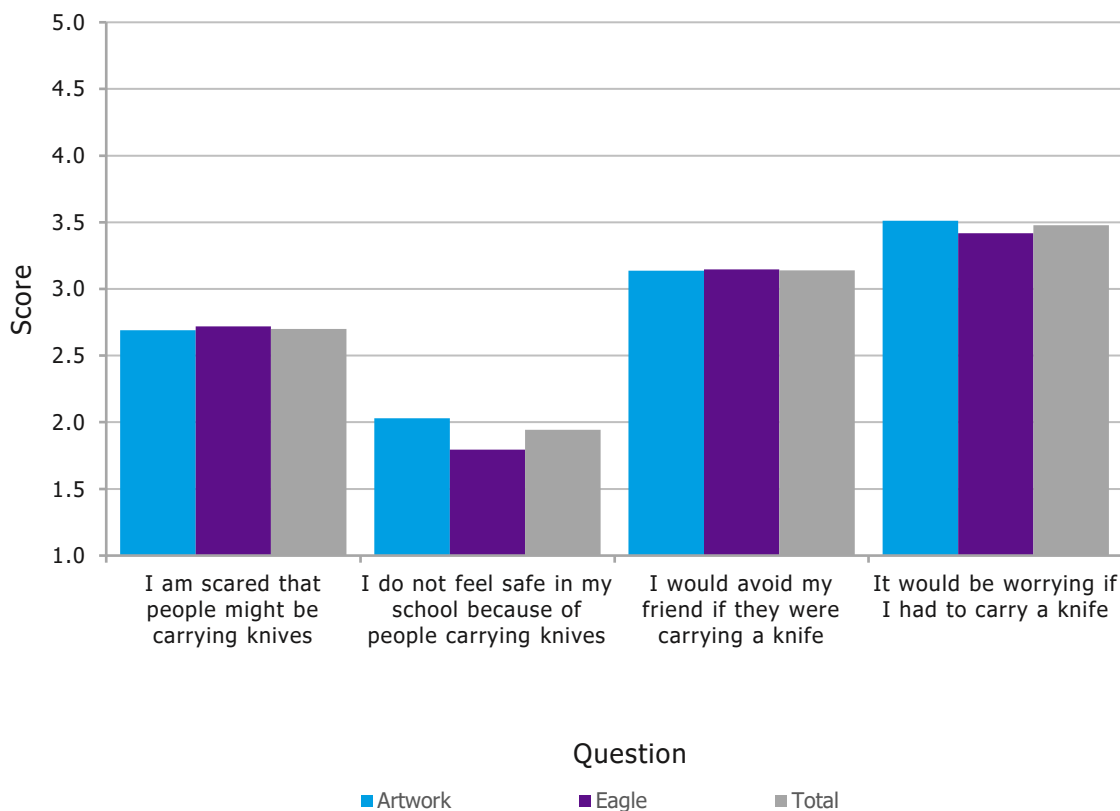
Interestingly, young people were neutral overall concerning the control aspects of knife carrying, scoring an average of 2.8 on “people carry knives to help them make other people do what they want” and “people carry knives to help them control situations”. This was due to a wide spread of responses; 36% of respondents said they strongly disagreed or disagreed, 34% neutral, and 30% strongly agreed or agreed to “make other people do they want”. This could simply be that young people do not understand the motivations for knife carrying, or it could indicate a greater engagement and internal debate about why they might carry.

More young people thought the main motivation for others to carry knives was to scare other people, with an average 3.4, than any other motivation.

Fear of knife carrying

Young people were asked 4 questions related to their fear of knife carrying.

Figure 6. Fear of knife carrying



Overall, young people are more likely to say they are not scared that people may be carrying knives, with an average score of 2.7. This is still very close to the neutral response score of 3, and 22% of young people still said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

There is a small difference between conditions for young people's response to the statement "I do not feel safe in my school because of people carrying knives", with an average score of 2.0 in the artwork condition and 1.8 in the eagle condition.

40% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that they would avoid their friend if they were carrying a knife. The average score on this measure was 3.1, because there were a large number (31%) of neutral responses. It could be that young people don't see this as a deciding factor in their friendships, or have not considered their response to this situation before this survey.

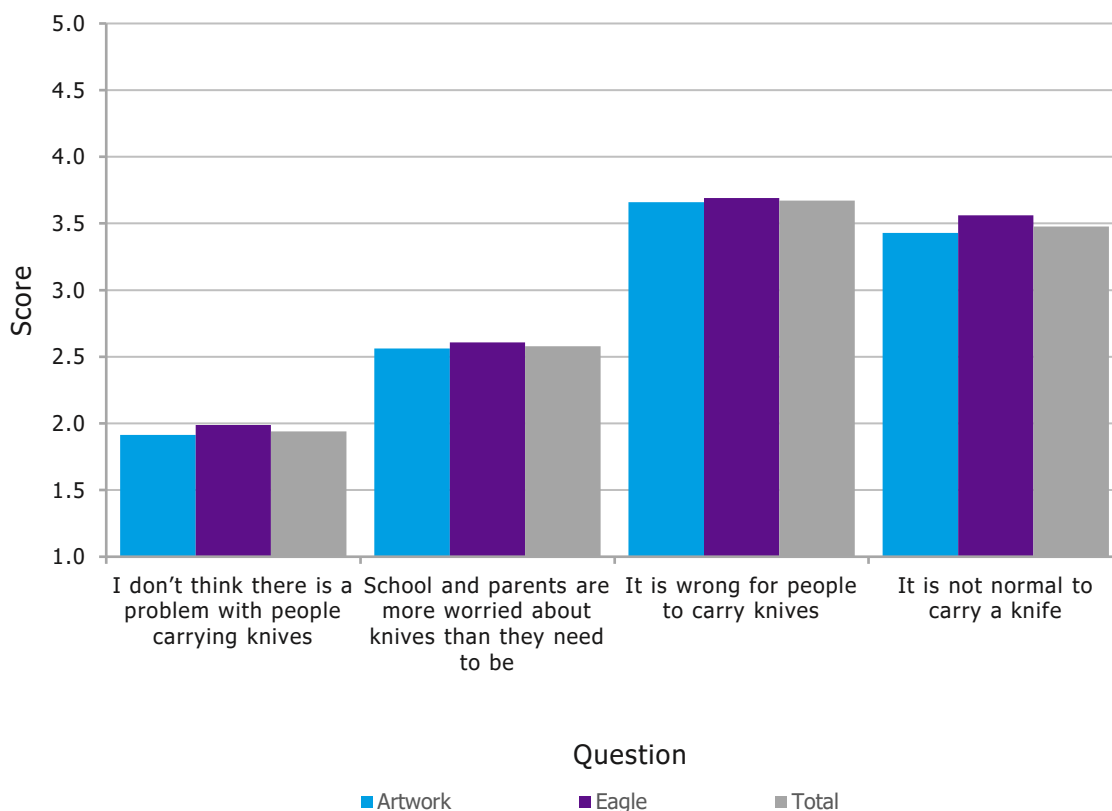
54% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that it would be worrying if they had to carry a knife, leading to an average score of 3.5. This was one of the strongest responses we saw, but there was still a strong contingent of neutral (26%) or disagree/strongly disagree responses (20%).

These results suggest a degree of apathy towards the issue of knife carrying, although there are some young people who are afraid of knives and see them as troubling.

Normative attitudes towards knife carrying

The survey asked 4 questions about whether young people thought that knife carrying as normal or unproblematic, what we call "normative" attitudes. What we want is for knife carrying to be seen as not normal, and our results broadly support the idea that young people do not think knife carrying is normal.

Figure 7. Normative attitudes towards knife carrying



Young people disagreed with the statement “I don’t think there is a problem with people carrying knives”, with an average score of 1.9, one of the most negative responses seen in the survey. 6% of respondent said they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, compared to 71% who disagreed or strongly disagreed, of which 42% strongly disagreed. Young people, as a whole, do not think carrying knives is normal.

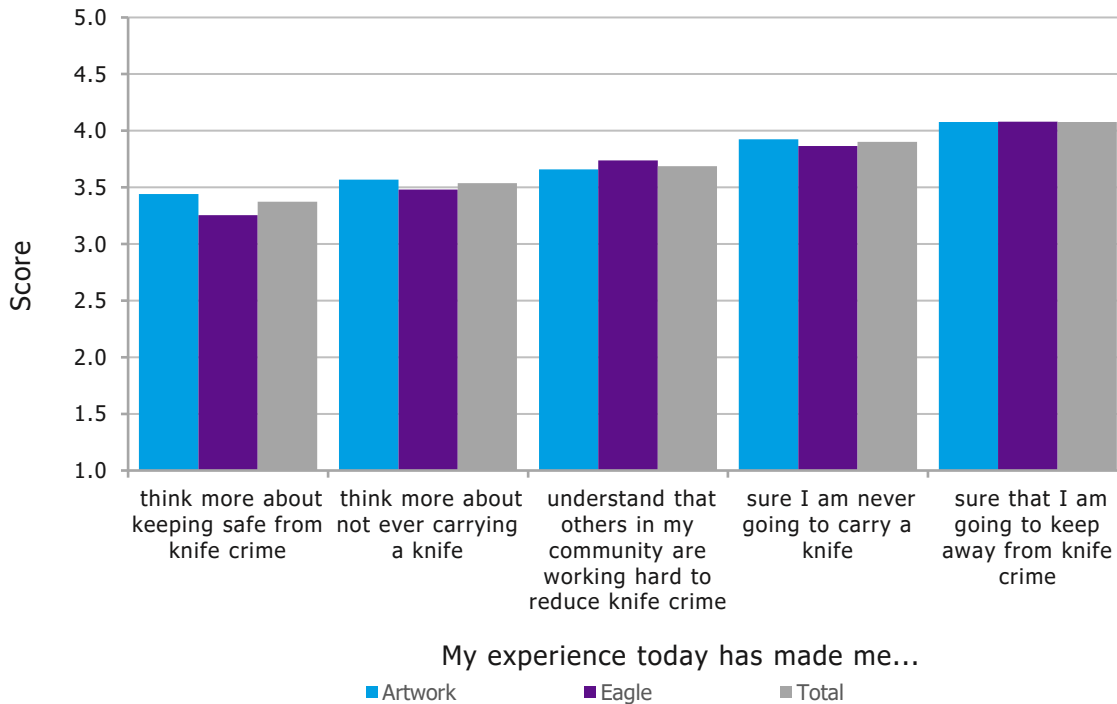
At a score of 2.6, more young people disagreed with the statement that “school and parents are more worried about knives than they need to be”. 41% of respondents indicated a neutral response, which suggests they did not know how to answer this question or were unsure on their position. An agree or strongly agree response, given by only 15% of respondents, may suggest a belief that knife carrying is not as big an issue as presented, rather than a positive attitude towards it.

There was also broad support for the statements “it is wrong for people to carry knives” and “it is not normal to carry a knife”, at an average score of 3.7 and 3.6 respectively. Only 14% and 21% of young people disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements.

These results suggest that, in general, young people do not have a normative attitude to knife carrying.

Take-home messages

Young people were asked 5 questions about what the experience had taught them.



The responses to these questions were more positive than to other questions, ranging between an average score of 3.4 and 4.1. There were no differences of note between the two conditions.

There was a majority positive response to the statements “my experience today has made me... understand that others in my community are working hard to reduce knife crime” (62% strongly agree/ agree), “... sure I am never going to carry a knife” (65% strongly agree / agree) and “... sure that I am going to keep away from knife crime” (73% strongly agree/ agree).

Summary of Qualitative Results

Students who had attended the Community Conversation Event were invited to be interviewed about their experience. 24 students were interviewed by two students from Sheffield Hallam University, who thematically analysed the results. The following thematic map summarises the themes.

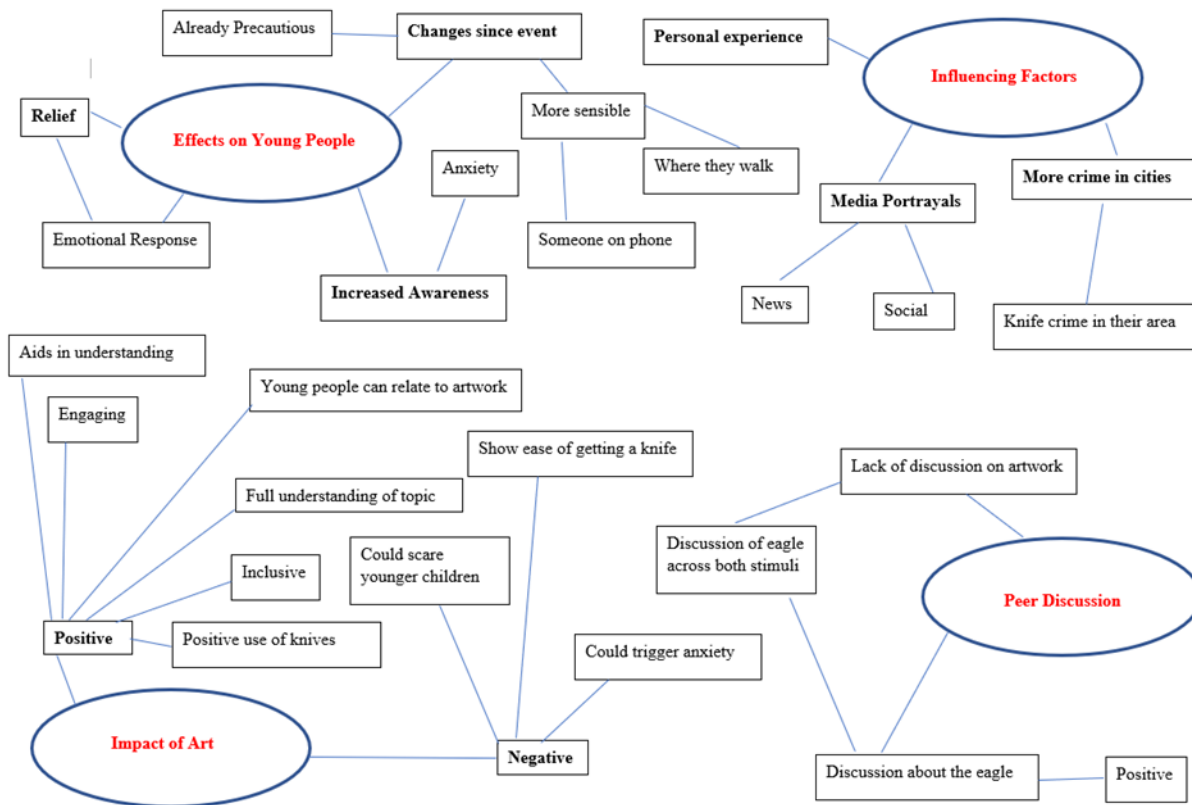


Figure 8: Thematic Analysis Map

The circles represent the primary themes, and the boxes represent sub-themes.

The transcripts were also read by a Violence Reduction Unit analyst in South Yorkshire, which led to some disagreement about the codes. This disagreement was interesting as it showed different perspectives on the same data.

Effect on Young People

First of all, we want to know whether the art communicated the right messages to young people. Crucially, we want to know if they also caused anxiety or fear.

Awareness or anxiety?

Young people reported a greater awareness of knife crime in their interviews. This suggests that at least self-reported awareness of knife crime increased due to the day.

'Made me aware of what knife crime like where like it's like a bigger thing than I thought it was.'

'Erm. Sort of because it made me realize that some people do actually want to stab someone or be a carrier of a knife.'

This can be seen as a positive, with young people showing awareness and taking sensible precautions to avoid danger. However, many of the statements which showed awareness could also be interpreted as fearful. We do not want young people to think that knife crime was "bigger than they thought", if this leads them to believe it is more prevalent than it is.

Some young people openly admitted to feeling anxious. We can conclude from this that the education today provoked anxiety in some students, and therefore interventions like this have the capability to do so.

"I think it has actually made me a bit more anxious because on one hand it's like I'm glad I'm not like going down these alleyways? But at the same time, it's kind of like there's a bit of a fear of it now when we kind of like move a bit to the side to like fully like go past it..."

It is clear then that some young people did experience anxiety, even if it was paired with increased awareness. This was true in both the eagle and artwork conditions.

Relief

Whilst the sculpture (and artwork) may have caused anxiety in some young people, the sculpture in particular caused relief in others.

"It's sort of relieving people have given that up"

This was not seen in the artwork condition. This suggests that the intended point of the sculpture, to show that knives have been taken out of circulation, does translate across to the young people viewing it.

Changes in Lifestyle

Most young people said they had not made changes to their lifestyle due to the education. Some already took precautions when out and about, and thought they were sufficient. Others did not perceive much risk in their area.

However, there was behavioural change from some young people;

"You know like if someone's walking towards me I make sure I move out of the way far like, far enough"

This could be seen as a sensible safety behaviour. Alternatively, it is an expression of fear or anxiety around knife crime. Many of the young people interviewed came from areas with very little knife crime. Such safety behaviours are more likely to be excessive there than elsewhere, where they may be sensible.

A further complication in the question of whether a behaviour is anxious or appropriate is that some participants already engaged in safety behaviours before they saw the stimuli.

"I remember I always, if I'm going about on my own and all that lot I always, if there is someone coming passed and I'm on my bike, if there's no cars coming down the road I'll go into the road if there's somebody there then I'll go back onto the pavement but some people would stop and move out the way I like to keep as much distance as possible as I have trust issues and stuff like that, like with anybody."

The eagle or artwork not having an effect here is not due to a problem with the art and messages, but because young people are already at a heightened awareness.

Impact of Art

As works of art, both the eagle and artwork, and their reason for being created, may be understood differently by different young people. Respondents had different views about the aesthetics and how well the art conveyed the intended message.

Positive

Overall, young people interviewed were positive about the art. They thought it was more engaging than pure numbers, and draws people's attention. An unexpected positive was the idea that art could be inclusive, perhaps because we emphasised the community led nature of both the eagle and the artwork.

"If you just told people numbers they wouldn't really, it's like visual aids and stuff, with like actual thing help people to understand"

It would appear that both eagle and artwork were successful on an aesthetic level, and in drawing attention.

Negative

On the negative side, young people expressed concern that the artwork trivialised knife crime, that they could take off one of the knives, or that it was potentially triggering or harmful. A lot of this concern was about other children, however, not themselves. This was a trend in the transcripts more generally; negative effects were seen as potentially occurring for other people, not for the young people.

Influencing Factors

The young people's responses to the art did not occur in isolation. They will be bringing in their own pre-existing views. This included personal experience, media exposure, and knowledge about their area.

Previous Exposure

Previous exposure to knife crime was rare in this sample. Nonetheless, two young people had experience with knife crime.

"Didn't really change how I felt, but I already knew it was bad and I was already quite wary of my surroundings cause I was actually put held a knife point a few years ago"

"there were just knives being chucked across the room like slashing it in our faces and stuff it was really scary."

Interviewee 14 is interesting because the artwork could not really affect their view, because it was already coloured by their experience. These interviewees also showed understandable anxiety about knife crime and would travel in groups to avoid "trouble".

Media

The young people interviewed were influenced by the media they consumed, both traditional and not;

"I've seen a video of someone have a fight on Facebook or something and there was a knife involved and it was horrible."

"Just like news really like you're sitting there you've got the TV on you just it's all you see at the moment really."

However young people were also insightful about the effect the media had on their perceptions;

"I don't know, I don't know if its getting worse or we just have like more news coverage of it"

Media literacy is not generally considered part of anti-knife crime campaigning, but it may be necessary to make sure that young people have an accurate view of knife crime.

Cities

The interviewees noticed that young people often talked about the risk in cities, comparing it to their own areas which they considered quite safe.

"Erm I think it's quite low where I live but in other places like London and main areas are quite high"

The young people who mentioned the difference also talked about taking more precautions in cities. As was often the case in these interviews, the problems were seen as being for someone else, be it fear or risk of knife crime.

In this case, the young people were also likely right. They were noted as coming from safe areas, and cities are usually at higher risk of knife crime than outlying areas. This may effect engagement with the art and education, as they may not see it as relevant to them.

Peer discussion

We would hope that the Knife Eagle would spur discussion between young people and their peers, and also with others. We want young people to be able to talk openly about their motivations and concerns as this will allow others to challenge or reassure them.

Spoken to Friends

Young people reported discussing the Knife Eagle with friends, suggesting that the Knife Eagle was memorable.

"Uh, when when I saw it first with my friends we did we did think it was quite a strange statue and then we started talking about it cause the good thing I think because it is a piece of artwork aren't so subjective so like everyone has different thoughts about art"

Interestingly, one interviewee in the artwork condition also talked about the Knife Eagle, as it had been discussed with friends.

"Not really a lot of them spoke to me about the eagle and (stuff) but we didn't really talk about the artwork"

This supports the view from the quantitative data the Knife Eagle was more memorable than the artwork. This may lead to improved behaviour change, as the day and its messages are more memorable, but we did not measure long term effects.

Spoken to Parents

Some interviewees discussed the Knife Eagle with their parents, again supporting the idea that the Knife Eagle was memorable and good as a discussion point.

"I told them about the eagle that we saw, erm they said it was quite a good way of putting it. Quite a good way of like, telling people of the dangers of it."

Young people did also speak to their parents about artwork, suggesting that any stimuli can be engaging for discussion.

Conclusion

The artwork and Knife Eagle appear to have had a very similar impacts on the young people who received the education, although the Knife Eagle had more aesthetic value and was more memorable.

This can be viewed positively. If the Knife Eagle had no significantly greater effect on fear of knives than artwork without knives, we are less concerned that it might encourage more carrying of knives. In the survey questions, the majority of young people disagreed or strongly disagreed that either artwork had made them more likely to carry a knife.

From the qualitative results, we can see that the Knife Eagle also caused discussion and was memorable.

Throughout the measures we see a fair degree of apathy or neutrality. Many responses, especially in the large question block 4, had an average score close to the mid-point of 3. Further analysis showed that this was due to large numbers of "neither agree nor disagree" responses, rather than a masking of polarised responses. This could suggest many things. It could be that young people do not think about these issues enough to have formed strong responses. It could also be that the middle ground was the "safe" option for young people when they were not sure how to respond. Finally, this could indicate that the young people do know about the issues, but do not have strong feelings.

For questions concerning why others carry knives, it could simply be that young people did not think they had the insight necessary into their motivations to answer.

However, there were some survey responses which did elicit strong responses, and these tell us about the attitudes of young people towards knife crime.

The majority of young people thought knife crime was important to reduce. In addition, young people were more likely to agree than disagree that the police were doing well at addressing knife crime. Only a small minority of respondents thought that carrying a knife was "cool", and more agreed than disagreed that carrying a knife is normal. This supports a general alignment between the views of young people and the objectives of the police, although of course this sample still includes a minority of young people whose views are not aligned.

The survey also suggests that for the majority of young people school is a safe place, with the majority disagreeing that they do not feel safe in school when carrying knives. This reinforces the importance of keeping school as a safe place for young people. Again, there were still some students who agreed with this, suggesting school is not a safe place for all students.

The questions on the take-home messages from the day also yielded positive results. There was strong agreement from the young people that the day had made sure that they would never carry a knife and keep away from knife crime. This is only stated intent, not a measurable change in behaviour.

Positively, in all questions that asked about whether young people were more scared due to the artwork or Knife Eagle, the response from most young people was no. We are often concerned that these education programmes do more harm than good; the young people's responses would suggest otherwise.

In all responses, we cannot rule out a spoiler effect; young people giving answers simply to "mess with" the survey. We also cannot rule out social desirability bias; young people may have given us the answer they thought we wanted to hear.

The aim of the Young Person's Community Safety Conference was to educate the young people on how to stay safe. We could see behaviours such as crossing the street to avoid strangers, avoiding people walking "stiff" as if they have a knife in their trouser leg, or walking whilst covering their face, as sensible measures to avoid trouble. This would support the safety day as being successful. Alternatively, we could see them as expressions of anxiety and fear that the education day instilled, or made worse, in the young people. The evaluation we carried out did not specify what a "good" outcome was, as we were focussed on the effect of the Knife Eagle.

One aspect of knife crime that emerged from the interviews was the need for media literacy in young people so they can better understand stories about knife crime and what they mean for their own risk. Interviewees mostly knew about knife crime and carrying from the media they consumed, although some did have first hand experience. This is therefore an obvious route for both information and misinformation to reach young people, and increasing their ability to distinguish between the two is important.