

Deter, Detect, Disrupt. An Analysis of Nottinghamshire Police's Knife Crime Team

Introduction

Knife-enabled crime (KEC) is a national priority, featuring heavily in government and policing policy (Ryan, et al., 2021). Nottinghamshire Police are no different (Nottinghamshire Police, 2024) and were until recently, the only force outside the capital's Metropolitan Police, to establish a team dedicated solely towards tackling this specific problem (Jarram, 2019). Launched as partly a political response to the issue by the elected partisan Police and Crime Commissioner (Tipping, 2018), the Knife Crime Team (KCT) has now existed for over eight years, since January 2016 (Burrows, 2018), and numbers of officers in the role doubled (West Bridgford Wire, 2021). This case study seeks to place the team in the context of wider policing practice, explain the tactics the team adopt to tackle KEC, examines its successes, and considers its effectiveness against its stated purpose. Whilst it may appear to be a problem-oriented policing (POP) response (Goldstein, 1990), for that to truly be the case, such a response needs to be evidence-based (Sherman, 1998), and its efficacy assessed robustly (Sherman, 1998a).

The aim of this analysis therefore is to attempt such an assessment, using available evidence from both public information and that obtained through *Freedom of Information Act 2000* requests to Nottinghamshire Police, in search of stop and search numbers and powers, intelligence submissions, and weapon seizure data (see Table 1 later). The analysis will be framed through the 'SARA' problem-solving model (Eck & Spelman, 1987), as a means to identify what the problem is that the KCT are seeking to address; whether this approach is a potentially suitable response; and then whether the means through which the team operate is producing the desired results. The SARA model consists of **S**canning (to identify the problem, and its root causes), **A**nalysis (of available and previously trialled interventions), **R**esponse (options available under legislation, policy, and practice; as well as through the latest research and implementation thereof), and post intervention **A**nalysis of the efficacy of the methods trialled. The SARA model is held up by leading scholars in the field of criminology and policing to be the simplest and most widely accepted model in the field to undertake POP (Weisburd, et al., 2008), as well as by the

UK College of Policing (College of Policing, 2022) and thus provides the best framework for this analysis.

Whilst KEC appears to be an easily identifiable problem, the myriad responses and solutions need to be considered to identify best practice. This breakdown will assist in utilising the evidence-based testing approach of the PICO method: (identifying a relevant) **P**opulation, (planning and undertaking the) **I**ntervention, **C**omparison (of the intervention to previous activity), and **O**utcomes (Amir-Behghadami & Janati, 2020). These will be evident through the use of the SARA model.

This analysis will conclude with an evaluation of the KCT against its objectives, and provide recommendations surrounding potential future operating practice drawing on best evidence and ‘what works’ in policing as identified through research and testing. Such evaluation is necessary to:

“understand [the] implementation of the intervention and the impact of the initiative, [...] evaluated using two forms of evaluation— process evaluation and impact evaluation, respectively”. (Lab, 2013, p. 36; Ekblom & Pease, 1995)

This however represents only a single cohort study utilising primarily before and data, alongside wider research evidence, and is therefore unable to control against other influences (which shall also be considered); thus representing only weak evidence regarding the efficacy of the team itself (Ackley, et al., 2008, p. 7). It is intended however to provide a base-line initial assessment with concluding recommendations for facilitating more in-depth analysis.

Scanning

Like most core cities across England, Nottingham has faced a growth in the concern – or moral panic – around KEC in the preceding decade (Cohen, 1972; Williams & Squires, 2021). This has been fuelled by extensive coverage of the “knife crime epidemic” in the media (Minty, et al., 2010; Braddick, 2021) – through which a majority of the public are known to garner their views on crime, policing trends and world view (Anastasio, et al., 1999; Hohl, 2011). Nottinghamshire Police therefore treat KEC as a priority (Nottinghamshire Police, 2024), and have incepted numerous tactics to deter, detect and

disrupt such offences, including: proactive KCTs; school liaison and prevention work; and involvement of charity partners (Nottinghamshire Police, 2023a; Nottinghamshire Police, 2023b; RedThread, 2021). These various approaches are guided by the Home Office *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy* (HM Government, 2018) under the “4P’s” mantra: Prevent; Prepare; Protect; Pursue.

There exists in research literature a strong debate about the efficacy of any of these outlined approaches by policing, or indeed whether the police are the best placed agency to deal with the KEC ‘epidemic’. Schools liaison officers (SLOs) have recently been criticised as actually more likely to criminalise children (Runnymede Trust, 2023), albeit stronger research evidence suggests that such roles are more likely to increase police legitimacy and community relations amongst children (Hopkins, et al., 1992; Lamont, et al., 2011). Similarly, analysis of charity RedThread’s approach of embedding youth workers in hospital emergency departments (including Nottingham’s Queen’s Medical Centre Major Trauma Unit) to engage with KEC victims presenting there to decrease repeat victimisation or subsequent offending has also received favourable reviews (Butler, et al., 2022; Dickson, et al., 2023). Such prevention work with *victims* of KEC is necessary owing to the strong evidence that such victims frequently become offenders (Haylock, et al., 2020; Marshall, et al., 2005; Youth Justice Board, 2007; Bailey, et al., 2020; Browne, et al., 2022). This post-hoc intervention work however is carried out by external partners, outside of the police’s control or involvement – albeit with the provision of significant funding to the charity to enable their work, based on evidence of its efficacy (Nottinghamshire Police & Crime Commissioner, 2022). Such work also operates towards providing ‘capable guardians’ for the ‘victims’ (either direct victims or of potential grooming) under a routine activity approach (Cohen & Felson, 1979). It also allows for greater engagement with an organisation separate from the police and thus without the stigma or hesitation that interacting with the police may carry, especially for youths (Norman, 2009).

It is the policing-led approach of the KCT, trying to provide managers for the ‘place’ and handlers for the ‘offenders’ however that to date has not faced significant scrutiny of review on an evidence-based perspective (Sherman, 1998), and therefore shall form the case study for this analysis of a policing solution oriented around an identified problem (Goldstein, 1990). This is hindered however in as much as there are no (published) aims

and objectives of the KCT, and thus this analysis will be based on an objective assessment on an evidence-based approach regards their efficacy.

Analysis

Policing and partnership interventions to KEC fall under the “4P’s” approach towards serious and organised crime (SOC) as outlined above (HM Government, 2018). SLOs and the involvement of charity partners fall firmly under the purview of ‘Prevent’, ‘Protect’ and ‘Prepare’ – with the aim of deterring and distracting young people from becoming involved in SOC, or facilitating their exit from it at an early stage. Whilst SLOs are police officers (albeit can be Police Community Support Officers to remove the implied power of arrest for softer policing approaches (Trotman & Thomas, 2016)), much of the youth intervention work particularly is done by external partner agencies not affiliated with (but often financially supported by) the police (Nottinghamshire Police & Crime Commissioner, 2022; Henry, 2023). This use of the wider internal policing family and outside agencies is necessary in an age of plural policing (Crawford, et al., 2005; Johnston, 2003); especially when the law enforcement role of the police comes with pre-conceived ideas of their intent and thus a reluctance to engage with them, that external partners do not face (Andrews, 2022).

These youth and victim intervention approaches are based on extensive research into the drivers of weapon carrying; primary amongst which is the association with gangs, primarily involved with the distribution of drugs (Maher, 2010; Woods & Rafaeli, 2019; Haylock, et al., 2020; Bennett & Holloway, 2004; McKeganey & Norrie, 2000). To examine the causal factors thereof would necessitate extensive additional explanation beyond the scope of this analysis, but it is sufficient herein to link drugs gangs and weapon-carrying.

It therefore falls on the police to identify and detain those for whom interventions have failed, or not reached, under the ‘Pursue’ strand, which is the one most commonly associated with law enforcement. The biggest influence in deterrence, affecting a person’s rational choice to commit an offence (i.e. carry a weapon) (Cornish & Clarke, 1986), is the fear of getting caught (Nagin, 2013); it therefore appears necessary to have such an identified deterrent.

Response

Nottinghamshire Police's most publicised response and deterrent to the problem of KEC is the KCT; of which the force boasts "Nottinghamshire Police is one of only a handful of forces nationwide to have two dedicated knife crime teams" (Nottinghamshire Police, 2023a). This work therefore seeks to examine the efficacy of such a problem-oriented policing response (Goldstein, 1990), which operates on a proactive approach of using intelligence-led policing (ILP) to determine areas and individuals at high risk of KEC, through which the KCT are deployed (Andrews, 2022a). It seeks to examine if such a method comprises the most effective policing means of combatting KEC; whether it is effective at all; and if it can exist in isolation or whether it requires the multi-faceted approach including prevention, via which Nottinghamshire Police's response currently operates.

The team comprised six constables and a sergeant (Sandeman, 2017), and can be deployed anywhere within the Nottingham conurbation, typically on a fortnightly basis, informed by a threat, risk and harm ('THRIVE') approach (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2017; Andrews, 2022a). This is determined by an analyst assigned the wider KEC agenda, through the assessment of a variety of factors such as intelligence, reported weapon-related incidents and crimes, community tension indicators, and recent KEC signal crimes (Innes & Fielding, 2002). The deployments are made to entire city suburbs, and the duration was determined solely by the bi-monthly nature of the force's tasking meetings. Whilst influenced by the factors above, KCT deployment to areas was done through the request of the local neighbourhood policing inspector (NPI) in response to such, not necessarily through a data-driven approach, contrary to best practice of ILP. This was also hindered by some NPI's being averse to the statistical increase in drugs and weapons crimes that such a proactive team brought to their area, when policing is very target-driven (Talbot, 2000; Flannagan, 2008; Sutherland, 2020).

In addition to this deployment strategy, a list of so-called 'Habitual Knife Carriers' (HKCs) was developed based on intelligence, arrests, and victimisation of KEC. Victimisation to KEC was important in this calculation based upon research that demonstrates those attacked with weapons are far more likely to carry afterwards themselves (Bailey, et al., 2020; Browne, et al., 2022; Youth Justice Board, 2007). The KCT would be briefed regarding such individuals and use Integrated Offender Management-

style tactics to visit and make them aware that the police were watching them to deter them from crime (Nettle, et al., 2012).

Whilst such 'labelling' can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Becker, 1963), the HKC list was reconstructed every three months based on the latest THRIVE picture with previous identification as a HKC not feeding into the next iteration. The HKCs were also given markers on the Police National Computer (PNC), further assisting an ILP-based approach. It was not a 'licence to search' such individuals as the new Knife Crime Prevention Orders and Serious Violence Reduction Orders are, but merely formed a part of a broader intelligence picture informing officer decisions as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1969; Home Office, 2014; College of Policing, 2014).

The team deployed with a mixture of uniformed officers in marked police cars, and plain-clothed officers in covert non-police vehicles – which were rented on a rotational basis and not fitted with any police equipment at all. They were specifically not standard new rental vehicles, which were found to stand out and be easily noticed by those the team were targeting, who often utilised such vehicles themselves.

After a period of establishment during which evidence demonstrated the high proportion of vehicles that failed to stop on police request, marked vehicles and the uniformed drivers were upgraded to intermediate or advanced driving standard, authorised to conduct pursuits. Marked vehicles made use of onboard automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) technology, and the passenger in at least one of the marked vehicles would have access to mobile data functionality to provide instant access to static ANPR cameras, the PNC, and regional intelligence databases. Such use of mobile data was in its infancy when the team was established and was pioneered in-force by them (Andrews, 2022). This idea was then expanded to other pro-active teams across the force and then to emergency response officers once mobile data-connected laptops were personally issued to all front-line officers. A measurement of the impact of this personal use of ANPR systems is yet another area that future research could take.

This access to local and national intelligence systems enabled the team to be largely self-sufficient and not reliant on radio dispatchers for such checks. It also meant that the KCT could almost instantaneously ascertain if there was intelligence of note relating to persons or vehicles, before even conducting a stop, greatly contributing to decisions on

whether to conduct one and contributing significantly to any decisions made under the National Decision Model (College of Policing, 2014). This further enabled the stops to be intelligence-led and reduce any allegations of discrimination based on protected characteristics.

From approximately 2018 onwards the uniformed officers were also equipped with Taser® conducted-energy devices, forming some of the first officers in force outside of the firearms team to receive the training, based on a risk assessment of their remit. Prior to this the team had relied on requesting support from armed response vehicles when conducting stops with higher risk, but these units were often unavailable or some distance away, leading to the decision to equip the team with such.

This arming meant that the KCT were often utilised in higher-risk warrant executions, to assist other teams when risk assessments had determined the presence of Taser®-trained officers was required. This further assisted the team with the intelligence cycle (Phythian (Ed.), 2013), in being introduced to additional suspected dangerous offenders and locations, and thus in turn being able to submit further intelligence on subsequent encounters therewith. As the roll-out of Taser® expanded to wider force teams, this utilisation declined, but in line with 'contact theory' (Allport, 1954) the other teams recognised the value of involving the KCT in operations and intelligence sharing.

The KCT were also the first in the force to have dedicated personal-issue body-worn cameras (BWC) with which to record all encounters. These were switched on at the outset of any stop; footage from which was reviewed by independent scrutiny panels, further enhancing legitimacy (Adamson & Cole, 2007; Nawaz & Tankebe, 2018). This pilot of issuing BWC personally, also demonstrated that the cameras were more available and less prone to mistreatment or damage than 'pool' ones used by the wider force at that time. This instigated a roll-out of personal issue cameras to all officers enhancing record-keeping across the force.

Plain-clothed officers in the covert vehicles would often be joined by a local officer, either a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) or a neighbourhood beat manager. They served to act as a spotter with local knowledge of names and faces, to assist in identification of key local intelligence targets related to KEC. These would often sit in the rear of the covert vehicles with tinted windows to obscure them. The covert officers

would assist in being able to observe persons or vehicles acting suspiciously and could either monitor them for a period or conduct spontaneous foot-follows. This was never sufficiently protracted to become directed surveillance and was primarily just to observe individuals or follow vehicles that had been identified as being of interest. The covert officers had access to the intelligence information in the hands of the marked vehicles through closed radio channels. There was also reliance on the idea of the 'Copper's Nose' – a developed and honed skill to spot a "wrong'un". In reality this more equated to an ability to identify unusual conduct through behavioural analysis training, and primarily policing experience – or 'copper's nose'. The benefits of the access to immediate intelligence was that suspicions could rapidly be either confirmed or allayed. This deployment strategy was underpinned by the intelligence cycle (Phythian (Ed.), 2013), with officers both being directed and in turn collecting intelligence which would then be analysed and disseminated accordingly – either to the local neighbourhood officers, serious and organised crime (SOC) teams, or back to themselves to act upon.

The primary tactic of the KCT was use of stop and search powers, utilising intelligence, behavioural analysis training, and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Whilst stop and search is a contentious tactic, and its efficacy is often contested (MVA & Miller, 2000; Tiratelli, et al., 2018), the KCT maximised its legitimacy through the early adoption and rigorous use of body-worn video to record all interactions, which would subsequently face scrutiny by independent review panels from the community (Adamson & Cole, 2007; Nawaz & Tankebe, 2018).

Many of the team's searches are conducted under drugs powers, in line with the national picture, where drugs searches make up 61% of search grounds, and weapons only 16% (Gov.uk, 2023). Given the evidenced link between weapons possession and drugs supply, whilst many more searches were conducted under *Misuse of Drugs Act 1971* powers, this also enabled a search for weapons as a by-product. It was found to be much easier to gain grounds to search for drugs through intelligence, and behaviours of the subject, than it was for weapons (Andrews, 2022). The *Freedom of Information Act* request to Nottinghamshire Police also secondarily requested the number of searches by the KCT under drugs powers, that subsequently recovered a weapon. This was however refused on the basis that the data was not held in an easily retrievable format. This this would therefore provide a good area for future research to identify the prevalence of this.

Team members were trained and experienced to a high level in stop and search use, and were designated 'stop and search champions' (mentors) to provide ongoing continuous professional development to other front line colleagues in its use and associated policy and legislation (Home Office, 2014; Nottinghamshire PCC, 2016). The team also became specialists at searching, especially vehicles, identifying hides and voids within, that most front-line officers, even the most pro-actively minded, would not be aware of or missed (Andrews, 2022a, p. 181)

Whilst the primary function of the team was to work proactively and make arrests, it had secondary goals of identifying individuals to refer to other policing departments. Some examples include identification of potential Covert Human Intelligence Sources; and those at an onset offending stage with whom intervention programmes such as the Youth Offending Team and Integrated Offender Management may be able to effectively deter from offending and a descent into more serious criminality (Wilson & Hoge, 2013).

Alongside the 'deter' aspect, and the 'detect' factor of locating individuals with weapons of other contraband items, the final aim of the team was to 'disrupt' criminals linked to SOC and KEC. This was achieved through a multitude of ways using numerous police tactics and powers, most commonly through *Road Traffic Act 1988* offences, primary amongst which were: driving without insurance; driving otherwise than in accordance with a licence; and driving over the prescribed limit of a specified controlled substance (drug driving). The intent of these was to deny those linked to KEC the use of the roads and thereby hamper their ability to travel; as well as enabling interactions with persons more likely to be involved in criminality than their legitimate road-using counterparts (Corbett, 2008). The introduction of Section 5A of the *Road Traffic Act 1988*, and the accompanying new roadside detection technology (specifically the DrugWipe 3S® device) was of particular use, and once again, an area that the team pioneered in proactive, disruptive policing (Andrews, 2022). It was found that whilst many KEC-linked individuals rarely drank and did not use class A drugs (which they were often selling), a large proportion regularly smoked cannabis. Through such means a leading member of a local organised crime group was successfully prosecuted, receiving a three-year driving ban.

A final tactic developed by the team was the occasional test purchase operations, which used police cadets aged under eighteen to attempt to purchase bladed articles

such as kitchen knives. These operations had the team working in plain clothes, with two of them as safety officers for the young people, one entering the shop beforehand and one waiting outside, while a young person would attempt to purchase a bladed item restricted for sale to over eighteens only. The safety officer in store would always make a small purchase immediately in the queue behind the cadet and thus be the evidential witness, ensuring to a great extent the young person's removal from the evidential chain for safeguarding purposes. Stores were targeted during national knife crime weeks of action under the banner *Operation Sceptre* and were identified by local neighbourhood policing inspectors based on community concerns, as well as through random choice.

Failure rates were generally low, with shops receiving a warning letter on the first occasion, and repeat offenders being prosecuted. Early campaigns resulted in a mix of small local shops and larger national chains failing, but after the larger chains' head offices were contacted and alerted about the failures, the team did not see any further failures from them; suggestive of enhanced national training as a result (Locker, 2019).

Assessment

With their use of stop and search, the KCT achieved significant success with regards to positive outcomes of stop and search, as evidenced in Table 1:¹

Year ending April	Stop & searches	Positive outcome rate	Arrests	Non-arrest positive outcomes (summons, out of court disposals)	Intelligence submissions	Weapons seizures
2018	846	60%	247	498	613	125
2019	1497	65.1%	276	363	/	157
2020 ²	1438	60%	279	369	/	90
2021 ^{2 3}	682	55%	215	64	349	57
2022	493	53%	191	106	345	79

¹ Data within the table is compiled from annual informational videos that Nottinghamshire Police released available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=344594866149350>; <https://youtu.be/cDCacxHnr9A> as well as a Freedom of Information Act request to the force for the figures. In the FOI reply Notts Police acknowledge that their data pre-2022 may not be accurate due to changes of recording software, and as such the figures from the informational videos has been used for those years as a primary source. This also accounts for the blanks.

² These years consisted of several periods of lockdown resulting from the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic which afforded police additional powers of stop and account

³ From this year, two teams were in existence, one in the city area and one in the north of the county covering towns such as Mansfield, Newark and Worksop

2023	700	/	/	/	/	130
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Of particular note is that the overall positive outcome rate (for all disposals) resulting from the KCT is consistently over half of all searches conducted, and as high in 2019 as almost two-thirds. The national average positive outcome rate is just 29.3% (Home Office, 2023), demonstrating the value of the heavily ILP approach adopted by the KCT.

A large volume of the work from the KCT was related to drugs, based on the evidence that drugs and weapon possession are common bedfellows (McKeganey & Norrie, 2000) (Bennett & Holloway, 2004). It was also found to be much easier to obtain reasonable objective grounds to conduct stop and searches for drugs rather than weapons. At a fundamental level, cannabis smells and so provided a *foundational* ground for a search immediately (in conjunction with further suspicions): even with guidance that this is not sufficient grounds in isolation (IOPC, 2020). All drugs have a noticeable physical effect on those taking them, as well as psychological impact. There was also found to be significantly more actionable intelligence relating to drugs than weapons.

The introduction of the *Offensive Weapons Act 2019* offered further validity to the use of drugs powers, with arrests for drugs offences (most notably for supply) allowing officers an opportunity to search private residences. Located therein were often weapons now illegal to possess even in private. Unfortunately there is no data with regards to how many weapons were found in such a manner, as they cannot be linked directly to the original stop and search, with no recording mechanism existing to capture this. This could indeed also be an area for future research.

It is a reasonable conclusion, based on the practical and theoretical aspects considered, that the lack of community concerns regarding the team and its focus on stop and search resulted from the fact it was regularly deployed to various areas across the Nottingham conurbation, comprising entirely different demographics. This ensured that no one community felt targeted, which has been identified as a key factor in public mistrust of the police when using this tactic (Skarlatidou, et al., 2023). Stops were also heavily intelligence-based and these grounds were explained to those detained for searches, meaning that even though they may be displeased to be searched, they understood why. The principles of procedural justice confirm that this explanation of the

search grounds improves police-public encounters (Tyler, 1990; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Mazerolle, et al., 2013). The increased community presence through visible policing action, in response to specific public intelligence and concerns, also leads to increased legitimacy through POP (Goldstein, 1990; Gill, et al., 2014), rather than police-determined activities.

An early analysis of the team's impact was conducted after approximately nine months of its existence. This report concluded that:

- In the team's first three months, KEC figures reduced by 62.5% month-on-month, despite inclining upwards in the preceding months.
 - This reduction was most pronounced in the areas where the KCT was directly patrolling.
- Anti-social behaviour (ASB) in the areas the KCT was patrolling was found to reduce by 20%. (Nottinghamshire PCC, 2016)

Whilst this is comparison data, and therefore does not hold significant evidential weighting (Sherman, 1998a), the impact of reduction on ASB was an unanticipated additional benefit and was measured based on police incident data compared with KCT deployment data. This may link to 'broken windows' theory (Kelling & Wilson, 1982); areas that had been identified as having a high relationship to KEC, were those where tolerance towards such behaviours had been built up over time through lack of formal intervention; and knife carriers feeling emboldened in their behaviours linked to a sense of deindividuation by being part of a crowd (Myers & Twenge, 2022). The anonymity provided by a group, that may not have been approached by a single- or even double-crewed police unit concerned for their safety and unsure of the availability of any backup (Houdmont, et al., 2017), was alleviated by the teamworking ethos of the KCT whose sole *raison d'être* was to speak to these groups in a bid to deter, detect and disrupt – further strengthening the argument for deterrence (Nagin, 2013). To best method to test the team's effectiveness would be to do randomised control trials of deployments and this will form part of the recommendations.

The impact of the team in this regard is perhaps best exemplified by feedback when conducting a stop of one known individual who explained:

“You won’t find anything on me. We’ve already seen you about today. We’ve sent round a message that you’re here, so everyone’s taking their girlfriends shopping, or chilling at home. It’s not worth doing anything as we know you lot will find us.” (Andrews, 2022a)

This ‘smoke signal’ warning was strongly indicative of the deterrent impact of the team’s presence, and one which seems to starkly undermine the findings of Tiratelli et al. (2018), whose research concludes that stop and search does not deter crime. Whilst this evidence is only anecdotal, measuring an absence of crime is difficult, especially crime which is police-discovered where baseline figures are problematic to establish; it also supports evidence from the Youth Justice Board (YJB) (2007) who found that “Few of those [gang members] interviewed [...] routinely carried a knife – not least because of the risk of being stopped and searched by the police.” The KCT experience and the YJB findings would seem to bear out the ideas of deterrence theory (Nagin, 2013); with potential knife carriers making rational choices in the face of capable guardians to not do so (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Whilst stop and search alone may not deter or prevent crime, such focused use of it, coupled with the fear of being watched (Nettle, et al., 2012), clearly has an impact, albeit this is, again, difficult to measure without a well-designed experimental approach, that is tricky to conduct in a live operational environment (Mazerolle, et al., 2014).

Such visible presence in tackling a community concern also demonstrates a problem-oriented policing approach (Goldstein, 1990), through which legitimacy is increased (Gill, et al., 2014), as it is through interactions with patrolling officers in the community (Peyton, et al., 2019). The highlighting of such success through social, and conventional media, further enhances this (Ralph, 2021), and feeds into the deterrence principles outlined above. The KCT have featured extensively in such public-relations exercises, including UK Channel 5’s *Police Interceptors* series, as well as operating their own social media channels and appearing in newspapers and TV documentaries. Such confidence increases again are however not currently measured, especially as being directly attributable to the KCT.

An aspect that is measured, is a comparison of rates of KEC within Nottinghamshire, versus national trends (excluding police-discovered crimes). Table 1 shows the changing rates of KEC nationally, versus in Nottinghamshire.

Table 2:

Year end	National Knife-enabled crime statistics (increase / decrease %)	Nottinghamshire Knife-enabled crime statistics (increase / decrease %)
2016	+14%	+6%
2017	+22%	+11%
2018	+6%	(unable to locate data)
2019	+7%	-8%
2020	-9%	-10%
2021	-4%	-8%
2022	+6%	-3%
2023	+5%	-3%

As can be seen from the data, Nottinghamshire is able to consistently buck the national trend, in many cases quite significantly. Whilst this is unattributable solely, or specifically to the work of the KCT, and represents only comparison data at Level 2 or 3 on the *Maryland Scientific Methods Scale* (Sherman, 1998a), it is indicative that Nottinghamshire Police must be consistently doing something different (and better) than other forces nationally; an approach which includes the KCT amongst its other interventions outlined at the outset. SLO's and the use of charities such as RedThread however are initiatives that don't solely exist in Nottinghamshire. They are also variables that would be difficult to eliminate – not least ethically – in any experimental design to measure the efficacy of the KCT alone. The number of weapons possession offences conversely – which are only recorded when police find such – has *increased* by 32% on pre-Covid levels, offering further evidence of the effectiveness of the teams in locating and seizing weapons (Henry, 2023).

Evaluation and Recommendations

The inception of the KCT was done primarily based on what had always been done with regards to dedicated proactive teams, and many of its founding officers came with extensive proactive policing knowledge. Its tactics were then refined to specifically target

KEC and those likely to be involved therein. It was however, not done with any regard to evidence-based policing (Sherman, 1998), and it is therefore necessary to recommend actions based on analysis of the team and wider best evidence for future improvements.

A key starting point for this would be to examine the deployment strategy which was based purely in line with the force's pre-existing tasking period, and around the perceptions of the neighbourhood policing inspectors on a superficial THRIVE analysis of their command areas. A far better evidence-based approach would be to devise a deployment strategy in line with the principles of hotspot policing (Sherman, et al., 1989), conjoined with the weightings of the Crime Harm Index (Sherman, et al., 2016) and through an ILP approach. When

“half of all crime events are concentrated within 3% of all street segments in the selected councils, yet harm is even more heavily concentrated, with half of all harm located in just 1% of each council” (Weinborn, et al., 2017, p. 226)

it seems entirely practical to identify this 1% and deploy the team accordingly through this ILP approach. In 2018 there were just shy of 10 000 streets making up the Nottingham conurbation (Whitfield, 2018), meaning that only 100 streets represent the highest harm, and these are likely to be in clusters. Even if calculating *harm* is too problematic under current recording mechanisms, half of all *crime* exists in just 3% of streets, (Weinborn, et al., 2017) equating to only 300 streets in the conurbation. This could be further filtered down to purely on-street, non-shoplifting offences to narrow down this quantity.

The deployment duration too could be examined, which may result in significant gains of time back to the force for the officers. A recent randomised trial in Australia demonstrated that officers need only be deployed to crime harm hotspot areas for a period of *five days* to see a significant and lasting reduction in harm therein of 42% (Barnes, et al., 2020). Combined with use of the Koper Curve (Koper, 1995) which identified that just thirteen to sixteen minutes of patrolling in hotspots was the optimum duration, these could together represent significant gains in officer hours and crime (or harm) reduction. Such an idea could easily be tested using a randomised control trial approach, representing the best evaluative practice at level 5 under the *Maryland Scale*. The KCT could be randomly deployed to select hotspots for specified time periods, with

other hotspots being left as control sites thereby measuring the effectiveness of the team alone.

There are however issues with such a proposal, in that the fortnightly deployments allowed KCT officers to become familiar with local persons and vehicles of interest and become familiar with the intelligence picture of the tasked neighbourhood (Andrews, 2022a). Utilising the team for a hotspot policing approach as above would significantly negate the *operational* ILP approach, and the brief period identified by Koper would likely not permit time for reasonable grounds to be formed to conduct stop and searches, especially through observation by the unmarked officers. There is also no research currently that examines whether the nature of the criminality sought by the KCT is fixed to a place such that 'management' of such by the team (Cohen & Felson, 1979) would result in negating the crime, or merely displaced elsewhere. Typical methodology for drug dealing now is in line with a food takeaway service, where orders are made to a single phone line and the drugs delivered across the city (Woods & Rafaeli, 2019; Andrews, 2022). Given the established link between drugs supply and weapons carrying this may negate such a focused hotspot strategy. This would provide another opportunity for analysis, albeit one requiring significant thought in experimental design, because counting, let alone identifying victimless crimes, or an absence of such, is problematic.

It thus appears necessary to define the aims of the team, whether they are striving towards deterrence, through a fear of being caught (Nagin, 2013); or whether they are striving for best returns in crime or harm reduction through hotspot policing (Sherman, et al., 1989). Currently the KCT appears to exist firmly in the 'deterrence' camp, and by the available data presented herein, appears to be successful at such endeavours, albeit with the need for a more rigorous evaluation. This would be easily achievable through randomised control trials of deployments, measured against police-recorded crime and anti-social behaviour (excluding police-discovered crimes to control for the team's presence skewing such). A pivot towards the hotspot policing approach would necessitate a change in the team's tactics, most notably towards highly-visible foot patrol for short periods in the identified hotspots (Sherman, et al., 1989; Koper, 1995; Barak, et al., 2016). It may however be possible to assess both methods concurrently, assessing crime and harm reduction through the current tactics, a shift to hotspot policing tactics, and control areas; with a view to identifying if the current deterrence approach is indeed the

most effective, or whether a more minimal, but focused hotspotting approach would serve better.

Whilst knife crime remains a significant moral panic for the United Kingdom and beyond (Cohen, 1972; Williams & Squires, 2021), it would seem unlikely, and politically unwise for any incumbent Police and Crime Commissioner, for a disbandment of the team. This may be encouraged however through a return to a target-driven culture, whereby the substantial amount of police-discovered crime the team generates may represent a quick-win reduction in crime rates through their abolition (Faull, 2010). It is clear though from the tabulated data above, that the per-officer arrest and 'detection' rates would seem to work in the team's favour with regards to target-drive approaches.

It may also be beneficial for a better and more robust measurement of the team's impact to change from simple numeric assessment of arrests and other positive outcomes on stop and search, and crime data, to a method more focussed on the analysis of the crime *harm* the team has dealt with and/or prevented (Sherman, et al., 2016). The *harm* approach could also be better utilised when identifying the aforementioned Habitual Knife Carriers.

It is therefore clear that whilst the KCT are seemingly effective against a purpose for which they have been created, specifically with regards to deterrence, there exists a clear need to better define their objectives. It is also apparent that more rigorous methods of evaluating their worth are needed – specifically their benefits within the wider anti-KEC approach within Nottinghamshire Police, under the '4P's' approach to SOC.

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