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OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

OFFENSIVE WEAPONS BILL

Fourth Sitting

Thursday 19 July 2018

(Afternoon)

CONTENTS

Examination of witnesses.

Adjourned till half-past Four o'clock on Tuesday 4 September.

Written evidence reported to the House.

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chairs: † MIKE GAPES, JAMES GRAY

† Atkins, Victoria (<i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department</i>)	† Morgan, Stephen (<i>Portsmouth South</i>) (Lab)
Foster, Kevin (<i>Torbay</i>) (Con)	† Morris, James (<i>Halesowen and Rowley Regis</i>) (Con)
† Foxcroft, Vicky (<i>Lewisham, Deptford</i>) (Lab)	† Pursglove, Tom (<i>Corby</i>) (Con)
† Haigh, Louise (<i>Sheffield, Heeley</i>) (Lab)	† Robinson, Mary (<i>Cheadle</i>) (Con)
† Huddleston, Nigel (<i>Mid Worcestershire</i>) (Con)	† Scully, Paul (<i>Sutton and Cheam</i>) (Con)
Jones, Sarah (<i>Croydon Central</i>) (Lab)	Siddiq, Tulip (<i>Hampstead and Kilburn</i>) (Lab)
† Maclean, Rachel (<i>Redditch</i>) (Con)	† Smyth, Karin (<i>Bristol South</i>) (Lab)
† McDonald, Stuart C. (<i>Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East</i>) (SNP)	Timms, Stephen (<i>East Ham</i>) (Lab)
† Maynard, Paul (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)	Mike Everett, Adam Mellows-Facer, <i>Committee Clerks</i>
	† attended the Committee

Witnesses

Tony Dale, Head of Research, USDAW

Doug Russell, Health and Safety Officer, USDAW

Chief Inspector Emma Burroughs, Thames Valley Police

Public Bill Committee

Thursday 19 July 2018

(Afternoon)

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

Offensive Weapons Bill

Examination of Witnesses

Tony Dale and Doug Russell gave evidence.

2 pm

The Chair: We will continue by hearing oral evidence from the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. We have until 2.30 pm for this panel. Welcome to our witnesses. For the record, could you introduce yourselves?

Tony Dale: Thank you very much for the invites. My name is Tony Dale, and I am the head of research at USDAW.

Doug Russell: My name is Doug Russell, and I am the national health and safety officer for USDAW.

The Chair: If you wish to take your jackets off, because it is very hot in here, please do.

Q226 Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Thank you very much for joining us this afternoon to give evidence on the Offensive Weapons Bill. Will you explain to us why you have concerns for your members regarding the age verification measures contained in the Bill?

Tony Dale: We have a number of points to make. Basically, we are very supportive of the principles behind the Bill. Our union represents 436,000 members, a large number of them in low-paid jobs. We have members who live on working-class estates and who see the damage done by the growing knife culture and acid attacks, so we are supportive of the aims, but with any age-restricted sales legislation, it is often our members who are expected to police it. It is our members who have to stop people and ask them for proof of age or to deny people sales, be that of knives, alcohol or a range of other products. As a result, our members are being placed more and more on the frontline. I think it is right to have extended legislation on this, but it will be our members who will be placed on the frontline and will face abuse and, at times, violence.

Q227 Louise Haigh: Could you tell the Committee what kind of numbers we are talking about for threats or assaults on retail workers?

Tony Dale: Last year, we did quite an extensive survey, of just over 3,600 shop workers among our members. Some 67% of the shop workers interviewed said that they had been abused in the past year, 42% said they had been threatened, and growing number of people had actually been assaulted. The numbers are significant, and we are speaking out. We have over 300,000 shop workers in membership, so we are dealing with a significant number of people. Abuse and violence against shop

workers is at a significant level and, interestingly, it is on the increase. We have been running the survey for quite a number of years and we have gradually seen it increase. The abuse figure increased from 53% the year before to 67%.

Doug Russell: To put that in context for this discussion, 30% of them reported that the trigger for the violence or abuse was dealing with age-restricted products and having to ask somebody for identification because they might be under age. It is clearly a significant problem in terms of the numbers. Last year, we and the National Federation of Retail Newsagents commissioned a survey with a group called Under Age Sales, and based on that there are probably about 6,000 incidents a day of people facing abuse or threats from challenges associated with age-restricted products.

Q228 Louise Haigh: Over 6,000, you say. Is that the biggest factor?

Doug Russell: It is one of the biggest factors. And it is not just us: the Association of Convenience Stores, the British Retail Consortium and everyone else who has done research in this area says it is up there as the first or second main cause of violence.

Q229 Louise Haigh: What is your proposed solution?

Tony Dale: We need to change the culture. There seems to be a culture among a small element of the shopping public that you can have a go at shop workers—you can abuse them and threaten them.

One of the important things in the Bill is about extending restrictions on the sale of knives. It is currently not an offence for somebody under 18 to attempt to purchase a knife. Knives are age-restricted, so it is an offence for a shop worker to sell that knife to the individual, but it is not an offence for the individual under 18 to attempt to buy it. They can attempt to buy a knife one morning, and if that does not work they can come back in the afternoon and try again. That is a contradiction we would look to deal with.

If we are, quite rightly, to look at restricting the sales of products and have more age restrictions on the sale of products, we need to look at increasing the protection of shop workers who are on the frontline of trying to police that. We have been campaigning for it to be a specific offence to intimidate or assault a worker enforcing the age restrictions covered by this Bill and other legislation.

It is a two-pronged approach. First, it should be an offence for the under-18 youth to attempt to buy age-restricted products, and secondly the shop worker should have specific protection from violence and abuse while carrying out the legal obligations under the Bill and other legislation on age-related restrictions.

Q230 Louise Haigh: Why do you think shop workers are not sufficiently protected by other offences that offenders can be prosecuted for, such as assault, actual bodily harm and grievous bodily harm?

Doug Russell: There has always been an argument that existing legislation covers all forms of assault. There are some aggravating factors listed in the sentencing guidelines under the assault legislation, one of which includes, if I remember rightly, assaulting a public servant who is in the course of serving the public at the time of the assault. The trouble is, that is one of 19 aggravating factors attached to the sentencing guidelines and there

are 11 mitigating factors to be taken into account as well—and that is only when it gets as far as a court and a judge or magistrate is interested in bringing sentencing at the end of the process. In practice, we are told by our members—this is backed up by retail employers—that many cases do not get as far as the courts, so they do not get the chance to apply those sentencing guidelines. Even when they do, those guidelines are not applied as effectively as they should be and the sentences passed are not strict enough to reflect the damage done to the shop worker.

Q231 Louise Haigh: Why would a new offence correct the issues in the criminal justice system around plea bargaining and incorrect charges being applied or magistrates not paying due heed to aggravating circumstances?

Doug Russell: There are three things: it would help to clarify the law, make sentencing a simpler process and hopefully encourage more prosecutions to take place. This is all stuff that would have to be discussed with the Crown Prosecution Service and the Ministry of Justice. If those two work together and we see people getting more of the sentences they deserve for physically attacking or seriously threatening somebody in that situation, I think it would have a deterrent effect in the long run as well.

Tony Dale: There would be a publicity impact as well. If it was a specific offence to assault a shop worker involved in policing age-restricted sales, retailers could advertise that—they could put up zero-tolerance, respect for shop workers posters, notices and so on. While many members of the public think certain people are more protected and should not be abused, quite rightly, such as the police and firefighters, it seems that shop workers are open to abuse—they are fair game.

I think all workers in public-facing businesses should get additional protection. In the context of the Bill there is an opportunity. By widening the range of products that will be subject to age-restricted sales, such as corrosive substances, there will be an opportunity to say, “We will do three things. First, it will be an offence to sell it to someone under 18. Secondly, it should be an offence for somebody under 18 to attempt to buy it. Thirdly, we will give special protection to shop workers who are denying a sale to someone under 18.” It seems to me that that is a consistent approach.

Q232 Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): You might duplicate some of what you have just said to Louise Haigh, but I just want to clarify some things. I have your biography here, Tony. You say that the Bill should make it a specific offence to

“Attempt to purchase corrosive substances and knives underage.” That should be criminalised. You have talked about that, but we heard in evidence this morning and previously concern about criminalising younger people, who are sometimes forced to make decisions that they would not necessarily take by themselves, perhaps by being goaded or pushed into a place. Could you speak to that a little bit?

Doug Russell: I am aware of that argument. It is one that we have had with various people over the years. Part of the problem is that the law in this area is a bit confused and confusing. In England and Wales, if you are under 18 it is illegal to try to purchase alcohol,

and it is illegal to purchase a firearm or an air rifle. The latter is of particular relevance to the Offensive Weapons Bill: obviously, the restriction on firearms and air rifles is because they can be used as an offensive weapon. In Scotland, it is also an offence to try to purchase tobacco products if you are under 18, because in Scotland they had that debate and they decided that they wanted to send a clear message out to young people that society considers it wrong to take up smoking. Therefore, they made that a penalty, as well.

It is a question of the messaging you are giving to young people, which is crucially important. It would be better if there was more consistency across more of those age-restricted products, to make it clear that it is an offence to try to buy. Otherwise, as Tony said, you will end up in a situation where a young person intent on buying this stuff for the wrong reasons just goes around and tries it on in various different stores until they find somebody who, for whatever reason, gives in and gives them the product.

Q233 Paul Scully: I should have prefaced my remarks by saying that I do feel for retailers, who are putting themselves in considerable danger, just to make a living, whether we are talking about counterfeiting or other issues with tobacco, alcohol and all these restricted items. Picking up on what you said, Doug, about Scotland, what is the impact of that difference in the laws in Scotland about tobacco?

Doug Russell: If you talk to trading standards people in Scotland, they say the impact has been that the ban on selling and buying cigarettes for under 18s has been more successful in Scotland than in England and Wales. The number of test purchases they have done that have gone wrong has gone down substantially, and they believe that the number of underage people who are buying these products has gone down substantially as well, so they think it has had a positive impact.

Q234 Paul Scully: They think that is partly because underage people underage fear criminalisation.

Doug Russell: They are told it is illegal to buy as well as to sell. That is the crucial thing.

Q235 Paul Scully: On the other two, about intimidating or assaulting a worker enforcing the age restrictions in relation to any sale, I have a point of clarification on the evidence we are receiving. They are clearly criminal offences already. Assault—you used the word assault—is a criminal offence. You can talk about messages, but I am always wary about embedding anything in primary legislation to send a signal, because we have to make the primary legislation work. It has to be enforceable. How would you make it enforceable? How would you differentiate the two? If a police officer was going to be charging someone, how would the CPS then know which offence they will charge someone with and which angle would they go with? You have to make it work, if there is going to be a specific offence.

Doug Russell: It is a question of making it quite clear, which is to do with the seriousness of the offence and the sentencing that would follow from that offence. The emergency workers Bill that is going through Parliament at the moment has got some interesting ideas on how that would work in practice. The point is that if the

assault quite clearly happens as a result of somebody trying to enforce the law by asking for ID and refusing a sale to somebody who might be underage, that should attract a stiffer penalty.

Q236 Paul Scully: So you envisage different sentencing.
Doug Russell: Yes.

Q237 James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): A quick question: notwithstanding your argument in favour of some of the proposals, I was wondering whether training for shop workers and shop staff in dealing with the process of getting the appropriate information out of an individual and dealing with situations that might be confrontational would help in achieving your objective.

Tony Dale: Most of the members we represent work for large retailers, so the training does take place. One of the big problems that we have is that it is an extremely difficult bit of legislation to police. Guessing the age of many young people, and where they stand in the spectrum from 16 to 30 or whatever, can often be extremely difficult. Sometimes just being good at your job or attempting to do your job thoroughly can lead to a reaction from customers. I have been behind people in a queue who have been asked for ID for buying alcohol, and the person reacted quite strongly, saying it was ridiculous, that they were 28, and who on earth would challenge them? That person was just doing their job.

Quite often, those situations are quite difficult to train for. The task facing shop workers is very difficult, because it is not just the task of stopping the sale to people under 18. It is also the more difficult one of identifying who is under 18. I think training has taken place to the extent that it can, but you are talking about quite difficult levels of managing conflict. I think even the best-trained police negotiator would have difficulty sometimes in dealing with those situations.

Doug Russell: One of the findings from the research that we commissioned with the National Federation of Retail Newsagents was that when shop workers were asked what the main reason was that they would be reluctant to ask somebody to provide proof of age when they thought they should be doing so was the fear of violence. They feared that they would get abused or threatened, or even worse, if they challenged somebody. Ironically, that has actually been made more difficult by the training, because the training that is widely implemented now is the Think 25 policy. If you think somebody looks like they might be under 25, you should be asking them for proof of age, because that gives the seller a bit of a buffer to protect them against unintentionally selling to somebody who is under 18. Of course, that means lots of people who you are challenging for ID are going to be old enough to legally buy the product and if they happen not to have ID on them at the time, that is the kind of situation that Tony was describing where they can kick off. Legislation to back up the fact that you have got to do that, and that if it does go wrong, society will look after you, is quite an important message to send to shop workers.

Tony Dale: One other point is that in that sort of conflict situation, we are expecting shop workers to police the situation. They are in a position of authority, and if they sell the product to somebody under 18, they will be committing an offence. We need to do more as a

society to say that those shop workers are in a position of authority. Creating a specific offence of attempting to assault a shop worker who is trying to carry out that check would be entirely legitimate.

Q238 James Morris: A quick factual, and slightly tangential question: has there been a rise in violent assaults against shopkeepers with weapons—guns or knives—in recent years?

Doug Russell: Yes is the answer to that, but it is very difficult to prove. In our surveys, we do not specifically ask about weapons; we just ask about physical attacks, because we have pretty short contact time with the people we are talking to. We have seen physical attacks double over the last year, from 4% to 8%. The British Retail Consortium does an annual retail crime survey and it has also seen a rise in serious assaults, and I think the rise in the use of weapons is reflected in the findings of its survey.

There is also a business victimisation survey done by the Home Office and it has come up with some amazing figures for the increasing use of weapons in attacks. Unfortunately, because the survey is done by statisticians, they keep pointing out the fact that these changes are not statistically significant. I think there has been more than a trebling of incidents, but for whatever reason the Home Office's statisticians still say it is not statistically significant, which I cannot quite understand, although I am not a statistician. But everybody who collects this evidence has been reporting an increase in the use of weapons in these circumstances.

Tony Dale: When we come to do the written submission, we can definitely look into that and see what information we could find out about it for you.

James Morris: That would be very helpful. Thank you.

Q239 Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Just following on from the subject of physical attacks with weapons in stores, do you think it would be helpful if we legislated for all knives and sharp instruments to be locked away behind counters, rather than just having the voluntary agreements?

Doug Russell: It would be. Obviously, now big retailers are increasingly going down the route of making it more difficult for customers to get their hand on the product until they have been age-checked and it is a safe transaction. The problem with it, of course, is that all sorts of bladed things are being sold and it is about where you draw the line. Kitchen knives are quite clear, you wouldn't want somebody to pick a nine-inch blade off the shelf, unpack it from its packaging and then use it as a weapon, which has happened in some of the stores where our members work. However, when it gets down to safety knives, razors and things like that, it does get a bit more complicated. But, yes, we would be in favour of that, certainly.

Tony Dale: That is something the retailers are going towards more often, in the sense of having a range of knives that are behind a counter. Obviously, with the corrosive material there will be a question about other materials, such as bleaches and so on, and we may well need to look at how access to that material is restricted.

However, there is also the issue of the people who are working behind the counters at the cigarette stalls, which would be the age-restricted stalls. That is where

an awful lot of abuse takes place. When people are turned away, that is a possible area of conflict as well, and abuse is increasing. Quite often, behind those counters you only have one or two people on their own, isolated from the rest of the store, so that has its own problems as well.

Q240 Paul Scully: There is one question that follows on from that about distribution. I was explaining to another panel that I went down the high street in Sutton, in my constituency, with a couple of anti-knife charities, and different shops were doing different things. There is obviously the voluntary code at the moment, but it was inconsistent. A lot of people were not aware of it. So, regarding display, how is it working at the moment for your retail workers and what would be the effect on those retail workers if things were changed and mandated?

Tony Dale: If it was mandated to be removed into?

Paul Scully: Either under lock and key, or behind the counter—whatever.

Tony Dale: I think we would welcome that, because there is an issue that you have dangerous weapons. You could have knives or corrosive materials, and so on, easily available on the store floor, which brings its own problems. I also think that if there are age-restricted products, to have those clearly marked and identified and away from the shop floor brings with it an increased recognition that they are age-restricted products, and sometimes at the moment there is not that recognition.

Q241 Paul Scully: You represent retailers as well as shop workers, do you not?

Doug Russell: No, we represent the workers only.

Paul Scully: Just the workers. One of the things I noticed when I went round last year—one of the issues, I suppose, for retailers—is that the more difficult you make it for someone to access the product, to feel the product, or whatever, the less likely they are to buy it. So you have the defence aspect. You want to protect your workers. You want to ensure that people are not just swiping the knives to use them then, which is the whole point of the Bill in the first place, but you do not want to get in the way of businesses selling something because it is on open display. How do you get that balance?

Doug Russell: It would be a different selling relationship, wouldn't it? A lot of these products—things like knives and bladed weapons, for example—are sold in DIY outlets. It would be a move away from the big B&Q-style warehouse, where everything is out on display and you wander around lost trying to find what you are looking for until you find the right thing, and you can never find an assistant to ask for help when you need it. It would make it much more of a human interaction.

There would have to be somebody there to deal with the customer who wanted it, and you would probably end up with better customer service, because that person would know what they were talking about, and could advise you on the right thing to buy and check that you were legitimately buying it for the right purpose along the way. That would actually be a better exchange. It need not be bad for businesses; a different model of business would just develop if those restrictions were in place.

Q242 Paul Scully: Forgive my ignorance, but the distributive bit—the “D” of USDAW—does that include distributors such as deliverers or anything like that? Do you have an angle or a view on what might happen to distributors?

Doug Russell: Are you talking about delivery to the customer away from the store?

Paul Scully: Yes. What might happen to the people who are actually out and what about if there are unintended consequences?

Doug Russell: I don't see any. Given the rise in e-commerce and e-shopping, it is a very important issue. For our members who work for Tesco, who work for their .com service, for example, it is already the policy that they cannot deliver to somebody who is underage. There has to be an adult in the house when a delivery is made. That should be the kind of principle employed by everybody in that area.

The trouble is that increasingly the partial delivery service is being hived off to a kind of Uber-economy approach, where the last person who does the delivery from the hub to the individual customer is some private individual who is getting paid so many pence per parcel to do it, and is working effectively as a self-employed person in that circumstance. It is very difficult to train and police them, and make sure that that side of the business is looked after. However, for all the big supermarket that do home deliveries, the staff who do that are trained about age-restricted products, and are expected to abide by the same principles now. It is not a particular problem.

The Chair: There are no further questions, so thank you Mr Russell and Mr Dale. We will now move on to our final panel of the day.

Examination of Witness

Chief Inspector Emma Burroughs gave evidence.

2.28 pm

The Chair: We will now hear oral evidence from Thames Valley police. We have until 3 o'clock for this session. If the bell rings for a Division in the Chamber we might have to go out for 15 minutes and then come back and conclude. I hope that it will be after the evidence session, but we cannot be sure. Would you please introduce yourself?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Good afternoon. My name is Chief Inspector Emma Burroughs, and I am a serving police officer for Thames Valley police, based in the Reading police area.

Q243 Louise Haigh: Thank you for coming to give evidence. Reading is a particular recipient of county lines. Could you describe to the Committee the current picture of serious violence that you are encountering in Reading, what kinds of offensive weapons you are encountering, the demographics of the offenders, and how you are currently responding to it?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: In Reading, given the large train station and the accessibility, we have seen almost a 250% increase. We are talking extreme numbers, where we are seeing two or three county lines coming

together and almost having what we would call a bit of turf war—so, an area where they all want to supply their drugs. As that demand increases, they have to change their tactics to see how they can be the dominant gang. That has resulted in the need to arm themselves with knives.

We have seen an increase in open fighting in Reading. That is not in alleyways or places that are obscure to the public; it can be in the main shopping areas of Reading at 4 o'clock in the afternoon where you have children catching buses home from school and people shopping. There seems to be no concern about what they are doing. They are very driven by their task.

That comes back to their age group. The majority of people who we are dealing with at the moment range from those as young as 12 years old to 16 or 18-year-olds, who are being tasked by the top-level people in a certain area to go to areas such as Reading and deal a certain amount of drugs, then to return to hand over a phone and what cash they have made, and then to wait—almost on a shift basis—for the next individuals. Because of that threat, we have seen an increase, in using our stop-search powers, of those arming themselves with knives, or of offences where robberies and so on have taken place and they have been in possession of knives.

Q244 Louise Haigh: You said a 250% increase?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Yes. The figures have gone from 52 to about 280 at the last count—they are the rolling 12-month numbers. We have seen the number of offences or stop checks where people have a weapon increase.

Q245 Louise Haigh: What kind of knives are they using? What kind of knives are you finding?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: We have what I would call a kitchen knife or a bread-carving knife, up to flick knives. We are now seeing more and more of the new zombie knives, which are serrated with the circles. They seem to be more prevalent among what they are arming themselves with.

Q246 Louise Haigh: So the measures in the Bill will help you to respond to that?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Absolutely, in particular for the zombie knives, which are now mentioned for stop and search.

Q247 Louise Haigh: In Reading, I understand that you are adopting a trauma-informed response to the issue. Could you describe how that works for the Committee?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: As with everything the police are trying to do at the moment, it is that preventive element—that early intervention. Why do so many young people now feel the need to arm themselves? We are trying to backtrack through their lives and adverse childhood experiences—I do not know if that is common terminology for everyone. Why are they behaving like this? What has happened in their previous life to make them behave like that? Are they a looked-after child? What traumas have they suffered? What level of violence have they suffered? What sort of home life have they suffered? We are trying to see if we can get in at a much earlier part of their lives, potentially when they have initially been made a looked-after child, to try to deter them away from this and give them the support elements.

We have success stories at Reading where we have intervened with county lines boys, understood where they are with their issues and managed to rehouse them and get them back into education. Some have gone into foster homes, some into care homes, to get that stability back to help them to address the trauma that they have suffered, which reached a point at which they could not cope and therefore resorted to working for county lines.

Q248 Louise Haigh: Are there any barriers that you face in taking that approach? Is there anything that we can help with in Parliament that would enable you to do even more of that?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: The issue we have in Reading is that there seem to be a number of spaces in looked-after children's homes, so we have quite a lot of children who come from, for example, Croydon and Lambeth. Then it gets into, "We're Reading social care or Reading social services, and that's Lambeth," and that poor child gets mixed up in the politics of, "We only look after Reading."

For us, it would be about greater working relationships, so it does not matter where they initially lived or have gone missing from, we will actually look at the individual and say what is best for that young child—forget the boundaries and different financial implications if you house a looked-after child from Lambeth in Reading. That is the bit that we find a challenge at times—the dialogue and the information sharing.

Q249 Louise Haigh: Is it children in the looked-after system that you are mostly dealing with?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Mostly, yes.

Q250 Louise Haigh: We heard this morning, but it gets said quite often that knife crime is cyclical. Why would knife crime be cyclical and what do you think are the main factors that have driven the recent increase in violent crime?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Whether it is the lower availability of firearms that we are hearing about through intelligence reports, or from some of the work we do with schools, where I know that it is described as the social norm that every child must now arm themselves, so whether it is that they feel it is the right thing to do—or the media attention. Reference has been made to the new—it is not new, but it seems to be fairly new for a number of children—"Fortnite" game that people may be familiar with, which talks a lot about the weapons. Those of you who know about the game will know that you can stab someone in it, and you do not bleed and you do not die. That is why, when we interview children and ask why they have knives, some say it is fine and that nothing will happen. We have dealt with domestic incidents involving a mother and child, in which they have re-enacted "Fortnite" because they think it will be fine. We not only have the social media films, potentially, but we have online gaming.

It is cyclical. I recall two or three years ago when we had a real push on knife arches. You could not get into schools or licensed premises unless you went through a knife arch, which would pick the knife up. Those are perhaps not being regularly tactically used. We may need to look to licensed premises to reintroduce those.

However, it seems they feel that, because of the threat of violence against each other, that is the only way they can arm themselves.

Q251 Louise Haigh: Do you think school-based police officers, or police officers allocated to schools, would help the response to the problem?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Definitely. We employ that at Reading. It is about early engagement with a child who is either beginning to truant, whose behaviour is changing or who has a lack of interest in education. It is also that visible presence and being able to hear about, after maybe seeing a bullying incident in the playground, what is actually behind it and what is the level of violence. We recently had two 14-year-olds who unfortunately used knives that they had taken from their home economics class to threaten each other and to cause injury, because that was the next level that they felt they needed to go to, because of what was happening in their bullying cycle.

Q252 Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Clearly the Bill seeks to address and tackle the issue around offensive weapons and the sale and possession of knives. Do you have any information about how these young people—they are predominantly young people in county lines—are getting the knives? In other words, are they buying them themselves, or is an adult buying them for them?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: It is probably mixed. Some of them openly buy them themselves. A lot are ordered through the internet. We know that vulnerable adults are, if you like, employed by county liners to purchase them on behalf of children. There is a variety of measures. As with everything, we will never prevent it, but some of the Bill's recommendations will make it slightly harder to happen. They will have to be more creative, which sometimes puts people off, because it becomes a bit too much work.

Q253 Mary Robinson: Could you quantify what sort of effect you think the Bill will have?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: It will very much be preventive as to what we can actually do to stop knives getting out and about. There will be greater, tighter controls on the sale. Having listened to the previous witnesses, it will actually make it difficult; they will be behind the locked cabinet, if needs be. They will not be able to readily buy them over the internet and have them delivered to their home address.

Also, the Bill will give further stop-and-search powers. Yes, that power exists, but the Bill will open it more to knives and will have that element. The only other thing—I cannot remember the specific clause—is that it will make being threatening with offensive weapons an offence, which is a bit broader, because sometimes you struggle with what substantive events have occurred.

Q254 Mary Robinson: It may be that these young people—schoolchildren, very often—travel into Reading, and a 250% increase is huge. As they travel in, in possession of a knife, what sort of resources do you have at the travel hubs in Reading to stop them and to deal with it at that point? Is this something you have looked at?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: We work very closely with British Transport Police. The issue is that, for a stop and search, you have to have the relevant grounds. A lot of

the time, there is very little intelligence. It is more that, after there has been an incident or a coming together, they are subsequently stop-checked. Only last week we used the section 60 powers because there was information that two gangs were going to come together. Unfortunately, while that prevents the fight from taking place, it does not prevent the stage before, when they initially come into that area with knives. Unless the train station has stringent checks, like security at an airport, for people coming in and out of Reading train station, that is not prevented.

Q255 Mary Robinson: So you have not conducted any pilots to concentrate on these travel hubs?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: No, not at the moment.

Q256 Mary Robinson: What sort of drugs are these young people carrying across county lines?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: At the moment we are predominantly finding class A—heroin and cocaine. There is some cannabis, but we would probably say that that is more the lower level—what we call local dealers, within Reading. It is predominantly opiates and cocaine at the other end.

Q257 Mary Robinson: Do you have any sort of media targeting the people who would be using drugs such as heroin or cocaine to let them know that young people who are being abused are bringing it to them?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Yes, we do. We have quite a strong media strategy at the moment on not only the dangers, but the vulnerability involved in getting them in the first place.

Q258 Mary Robinson: Is that message getting through?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: It is probably too early to tell. We are working closely with a community safety partnership to understand that we need to get that messaging out. We have a couple of charities in the Reading area for people who self-refer for drug and alcohol abuse, but it has only been since around April, so we cannot gauge the benefits at this time.

Q259 Paul Scully: Coming back to stop-and-search, can you just outline what changes have happened in your stop-and-search over the last two, three or four years? How have you approached it?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: We obviously had the guidance that we had to ensure the grounds were there, but for an area such as Reading that has not had a significant impact, because of the visibility of individuals who meet the profile. We have had clear intelligence that they have come to Reading to deal and we have had information from a phone, so for us, the grounds have been sufficient, but I know there have been concerns over whether we are complying legislatively on stop-and-search. In Reading, we have continued the level of stop-and-search, primarily because it is very evident, but I know that in other areas of Thames Valley police, where it is not, there has been a decline in stop-and-search with confidence.

Q260 Paul Scully: Are there any more changes that could be made, such as regulations or guidance, to tackle what you were just describing to Mary Robinson—

[Paul Scully]

tackling them at a wider perimeter, rather than their coming in toward a fight and then you doing the stop-and-search?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: We do a lot of work with education on the preventive element, to ensure that people know the dangers, to try to identify those children that we think are being exploited for that reason, and to put in the interventions on the trauma side of it, as has already been mentioned. Are we seeing any signs? Accessibility is a main factor, but having the intelligence picture to work up that chain and prevent the drugs from coming in in the first place is a huge issue, given that the demand is clearly there from people wanting to buy the drugs.

Q261 Paul Scully: In the briefing we have here, it says you are particularly interested in the new powers that are given to police officers to deal with acid attacks on individuals. In what way are you interested in that?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: In the areas where we have a very stringent approach—what we call the knife arches, the checks and the engagement—the acids would not be picked up. Not that you could detect them in that way, but it is allowing the stop-and-search to identify those issues, seize the substances and have a substantive offence. As we know with many legislative things, our criminals can be one step ahead of us. If there are increased restrictions on knives, what would their next tool be? It will help us to have that very early testing, the ability to seize items that we suspect are acids, and for it to be part of the stop-and-search if they are found in possession of them.

Q262 Paul Scully: You talked about zombie knives. Is there a particular profile of people or groups that are escalating to zombie knives, machetes and the like?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Not at the moment. We have seen them in all age groups, from the young individuals right up to some of our local street robbers—local criminals—who are arming themselves; those are people in the mid-40s age range. At the moment I would not say there is a clear profile. It is just that a knife that, potentially, we did not see six months ago is now being seized and found in house searches.

Q263 Paul Scully: Finally, you talked about the game “Fortnite”. Are you doing anything about demonstrating the actual consequences, with graphic stuff?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Very much so—within education, to say, “If you do stab someone, they will be seriously injured.”

Paul Scully: “This is what it is like?”

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Yes. It is definitely within education. I know there is a lot going on regarding the impact of the addiction and mental health elements. I know a hospital near us has seen children come through who have been classed as having an addiction, so it is working through from the mental health element. If you mention mental health to parents, it clearly sets different alarm bells ringing when they understand that. We have had conversations with numerous parents over some behaviour issues that we have been called to,

which are classed as a domestic, but when you have chatted to them and understood it is because they have asked their child to get off “Fortnite”, then you talk to them about addictions. There is education through a different route.

Q264 Paul Scully: That presumably includes the non-gang stuff. We heard the other day how 75% of the people St Giles Trust was working with are non-gang. Would that include them?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Yes. What is a normal family? But yes.

Q265 Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is clear from the evidence sessions that it is important to liaise not only with the pupil referral units, but generally with schools. Do you think there is more we can do to engage schools, specifically and strategically, through the crime and disorder reduction partnerships?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: On a personal note, in Reading, we have monthly headteacher meetings where this is very much on the agenda. From my personal experience, we have a good partnership working arrangement with schools, because of the trauma approach we take in Reading, but I would not say that is consistent—*[Interruption.]*

2.45 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

2.56 pm

On resuming—

The Chair: Chief Inspector, you were at the beginning of an answer to a question from Mr Morgan. Would you like to pick up where you were?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Yes. I was talking about schools and where I am currently working, while reflecting that I have worked in other areas of Thames Valley police, Slough and south Buckinghamshire, and we did not have the same engagement from schools. To some extent, some schools did not even want a visible police presence in their schools. I was reflecting back to when the Prevent agenda was introduced and every school had to do Prevent training. Yes, it is a different element, but because it was going to happen for the same need, such as the knowledge of weapons and the impact, we should come out to schools and have that engagement from them.

Q266 Stephen Morgan: Strategically through CDRPs, is there value there where more could be done?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Absolutely. Once again, if things are very clear, it is the strategic body to drive it and ensure accountability.

Q267 Stephen Morgan: My other question was how confident are you that the duties in the Bill will actually help to reduce crime?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: Trying to be optimistic, at the end of the day we are never going to totally resolve the issue, but we have got to try to make life harder and put ownership back on the various bodies that are involved, whether that is retail, education or the police.

It is preventive, and it will all help. I cannot quantify, but I think anything where we have greater powers, greater opportunities and greater seizure powers can only be beneficial to what we are trying to achieve.

Q268 Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): You made some comments earlier about “Fortnite” that concerned me. Unfortunately, we are hearing a lot about that here in Parliament. You mentioned that parents are probably buying weapons for children, as well, whether intentionally or unintentionally. That does raise the question about the online world and parental responsibility. As it relates to age verification online, do you see problems in that area? Children are meant to be 12 years old before they play “Fortnite” but you are probably seeing much younger children being exposed to violence. Then there is the age verification as it relates to buying products that they probably should not be buying at a certain age. Do you see that online world being problematic? I am not trying to put words in your mouth, but you have alluded to some difficulties there.

Chief Inspector Burroughs: We can only educate on the difficulties. I have talked about incidents where officers have attended, and then we have talked about the area from a problem-solving point of view. There are some sites where parents have left their credit card details and the children can just log on. I would not say Amazon, because I am not sure you could—I am sure you could buy a knife off there, but once people’s credit card details are stored, parents need to be careful with password protection. We ask, “How on earth was this ordered?” and they say, “Well, they’ve got access to my account. I just let them log on and buy whatever they want. I didn’t realise it was going to be a weapon.” Likewise with the downloading of games, they say, “I didn’t realise—I just allowed it.” It is the element of parents’ trust of their children. Actually, they could prevent it.

Q269 Nigel Huddleston: Do you think there is sufficient awareness among parents of how to turn those verifications and approvals on and off?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: No, definitely not. I know that Thames Valley Police, and I am sure other police forces, have done a big media drive to talk about how you protect and put in restrictions. The generation in our mid-40s to 50s did not have it in our education at that point. Our children, who do, are far more educated on that system than we are. It is about whether people have been brought along with that, but we are really trying to give guidance. There was a big Facebook media campaign to say, “This is how you put those restrictions on,” to support them.

Q270 Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Can I follow up on a couple of questions that you were asked earlier about acid attacks and corrosive substances? In your experience, who is carrying or even using acids and corrosive substances? In particular, do you tend to find that it is adults—18 or over—or is it sometimes also under-18s?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: We find it is under-18s. I think we have had one incident—I am talking only about Reading at the moment; I am not certain of the whole Thames Valley figures—where an assault has taken place with an acid, but we have seized items where liquid has been transferred to a drinks bottle, and it has been subsequently tested and found to be acidic.

Q271 Stuart C. McDonald: In relation to under-18s, do you have any knowledge about where they get the substances from? Do they just buy them themselves in a shop, or are they are being supplied from somewhere else?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: The ones we have been told about so far bought them themselves from shops. They used a bleach, or a particular cleaning product—I think there was an oven cleaner that was a very strong corrosive substance, which was subsequently used.

Q272 Stuart C. McDonald: The Bill will create a new offence of selling a corrosive substance to a person under 18, but not of supplying. You could still supply without consideration a corrosive substance to somebody under 18. Does that cause you any concern or, given the evidence that just gave, do you think that prohibiting sales should be enough in itself?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: I would hope that the sale in itself should be the initial restriction, but it depends to what extent. If you look from household bleaches right up to the last thing we heard about, which was this oven cleaner, they are readily accessible. It is about how the restriction works—whether it is like alcohol, which obviously has to be age verified, but then you have the issue that if they know that that check is there, they will steal it by other means.

Q273 Stuart C. McDonald: Are you happy enough that the age is set at 18? You would not argue for a higher age limit?

Chief Inspector Burroughs: From the evidence we have so far, it is much more under-18s. I would say, from the evidence base we have at the moment, that 18 is a suitable age.

The Chair: That brings us to the end of the time allotted for the Committee to ask questions. I thank Chief Inspector Burroughs for her evidence today, and all our previous witnesses as well. That brings us to the end of the oral evidence sessions on the Bill. The Committee will meet again to begin line-by-line consideration of the Bill at 4.30 pm on my 66th birthday, Tuesday 4 September, but I will not be in the Chair on that occasion.

3.3 pm

The Chair adjourned the Committee without Question put (Standing Order No. 88).

Adjourned till Tuesday 4 September at half-past Four o’clock.

Written evidence reported to the House

OWB 68 Ben Freeston	OWB 85 Charles Murton, Deputy Chairman, SLG Bisley
OWB 69 Matt Szafran	OWB 86 Mr C W R Phillips
OWB 70 University of London Rifle Club	OWB 87 Nigel Newby
OWB 71 National Crime Agency	OWB 88 Raymond Mears, Founder and CEO, Woodlore Wilderness Bushcraft & Tracking
OWB 72 Joshua Collins	OWB 89 Keith Rayner
OWB 73 Steven W Kendrick	OWB 90 Stephen Hills
OWB 74 Mike Dunstan	OWB 91 CART (Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team)
OWB 75 Mrs Helen Whicher	OWB 92 Whitby & Co
OWB 76 Simon Duffy	OWB 93 Angela Wigley
OWB 77 Egginton Bros Ltd.	OWB 94 Bruce Bollington, Managing Director of Lorax Ltd, trading as Heinnie Haynes
OWB 78 David R Johnson	OWB 95 The Fifty Calibre Shooters Association of the United Kingdom
OWB 79 Christopher Ashbolt: Mora Distribution Limited	OWB 96 Dr Tom Walker
OWB 80 British Shooting Sports Council	OWB 97 Taylors Eye Witness Ltd
OWB 81 Martin R Cook	OWB 98 Andrew Mercer, Chief Executive, National Rifle Association, Bisley Camp, Brookwood, Surrey
OWB 82 Mr M B Jenvey	OWB 99 John L Harvey
OWB 83 Adrian Hale, Honorary Treasurer, Blackpool & Fylde Fullbore Pistol & Rifle Club	
OWB 84 Jonathan Watson	