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KNIFE OFFENCES AND POLICING

Jacqueline Fitzgerald

The NSW recorded crime statistics showed a significant rise in assaults and robberies involving knives between 1996 and 1997. In July 1998 the NSW Government introduced legislative changes which gave the NSW Police powers to search persons for dangerous implements and give move on directions. Between July 1998 and March 2000 the NSW Police recorded 27,419 such searches of which 6,374 resulted in a knife being found. The police also recorded issuing 24,778 move on directions. While there seem to be some problems with the recording of searches the police appear to be utilising the legislation.

Since the legislative changes the number of robberies with a knife has dropped significantly. However, assaults with a knife remain unchanged. While the knife laws are correlated with a reduction in robbery with a knife, we cannot be certain that the reduction is directly attributable to the knife searches. It may be that some other factor (e.g. restricting knives to minors or publicity surrounding the knife laws) is responsible.

On 1 July 1998 legislation came into force in NSW which followed an increase in knife related violent offending. Under the *Crimes Legislation Amendment (Police and Public Safety) Act 1998 No 38* it became an offence to carry a knife in public without a reasonable excuse in this State. Police were given the power to search people suspected to be carrying a dangerous implement, confiscate any such implement found, obtain name and address details and where a person in a public place was causing or was likely to cause fear, give directions to move on.

As can be seen from Table 1 (see also Figures 2 and 3) the incidence of assaults and robberies involving knives

increased substantially from 1996 to 1997 and through the beginning of 1998. The number of assaults with knives recorded by the police showed a significant increase of 16.8% from 1996 to 1997 while robbery with a knife went up 73.9% over the same period.

This upward trend was not unique to offences involving knives. The recorded crime statistics for a large number of other offences also rose over this period. The increase in the number of assaults and robberies with knives, however, was in excess of the general increases. From 1996 to 1997 assault other than with a knife increased significantly by 11.0% and robberies other than with a knife increased significantly

Table 1: Assault and robbery with and without a knife in NSW, 1996 to 1999

Offence	1996	1997	1998	1999
Assault with a knife	1,180	1,378	1,346	1,053
Assault other than with a knife	47,689	52,925	57,326	56,506
Robbery with a knife	788	1,370	1,704	1,286
Robbery other than with a knife	6,882	9,637	10,100	9,338

by 40.0%. In response to the rise in knife related crime the government introduced the laws outlined above.

This paper will examine the impact that these laws have had upon police practices as recorded by the police and on the number of recorded offences involving knives. The source of the data presented is the Computerised Operational Policing System database (COPS).

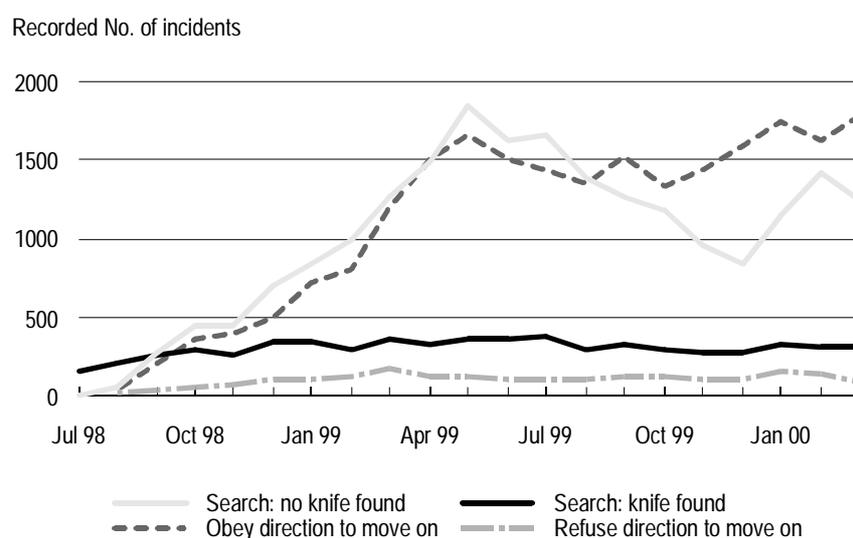
THE IMPACT OF KNIFE LAWS ON POLICING PRACTICES

Records of knife searches and 'move on' directions entered into the COPS database show that the powers offered by the new legislation have been frequently used by NSW Police. Between July 1998 and March

likely that there is now an increased propensity among the police to record unsuccessful searches. The latest figures indicate that in the first three months of 2000 a knife was found in one out of five searches (945 knives found in the three month period from 4,757 searches).

The number of unsuccessful searches recorded also fluctuate dramatically. Between January 1999 and March 2000 the number of unsuccessful searches ranged from a maximum of 1,833 in May 1999 to a minimum of 845 in December 1999 (median = 1,262, sd = 299.6), a difference of almost 1,000 searches. The number of successful searches on the other hand has remained steady over the same time period with a maximum of 374 in May 1999 and a minimum of 275 in December 1999 (median = 323, s.d = 34.4).

Figure 1: Police recorded use of the powers under the Police and Public Safety Act, July 1998 to March 2000



2000, 27,419 persons have been searched and in 6,374 cases knives found. Police records show a low level of non-compliance with the laws by the public. Only 53 persons have refused to be searched and six have 'refused to produce object'.

Figure 1 shows the number of actions under the Act recorded by the NSW Police. These trends should be considered with the caveat that police recording of such events is almost certainly variable. For instance, it can be seen that the number of successful searches has remained fairly steady since the introduction of the powers at around 300 per month. On the other hand, the number of unsuccessful searches has risen considerably. Rather than assuming that this shows the police to have been initially achieving a nearly 100 per cent successful search rate, it is probably more

The Police and Public Safety Act also allows police to issue move on directions. Between July 1998 and March 2000, the issuing of 24,778 move on directions were recorded by the NSW Police. Of these directions, 2,144 were refused. Figure 1 shows police recorded incidents of persons obeying and refusing to obey move on directions by month. The recording of incidents in which persons obey directions to move on may have similar recording problems to that of successful knife searches as no further action is required so officers may not consider it worth reporting.

THE IMPACT OF KNIFE LAWS ON OFFENDING

As noted above, assaults and robberies involving knives increased significantly in the period leading up to the implementation of the new legislation. In the 21

months since the new policing procedures have been in place, several trends can be observed in the related recorded crime statistics. It is also the case that many crimes in NSW are currently showing decreases. Data will be presented here showing the change in assaults and robberies involving knives since July 1998. The change in associated crimes which do not involve knives will also be considered to ascertain whether any changes are unique to knife offences or are part of a general downward crime pattern. Changes in crime often occur gradually rather than suddenly, thus a trend test has been applied to the recorded number of incidents from when the legislation change came into force to the present. The alternative, considering a period prior to July 1998 with a period after this date, would be less sensitive to a gradual change in offending,

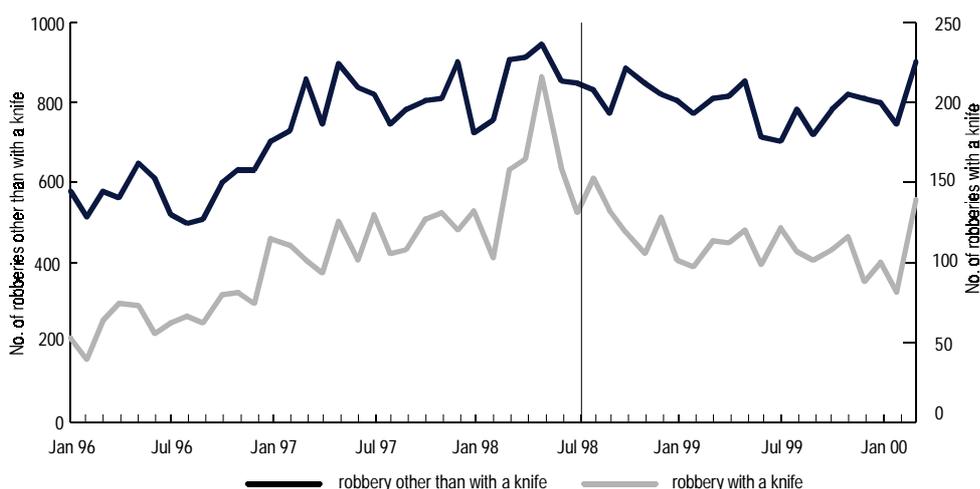
knives, however, has shown no statistically significant upward or downward trend over the 21 months from July 1998 to March 2000. This result suggests that the knife legislation has reduced the number of robbery offences involving knives. Notice however that the drop in knife robberies commences before the introduction of the knife laws.

Assault

Contrary to the incidence of robbery with a knife, assaults involving knives have not shown any statistically significant change over the 21 month period from July 1998 to March 2000.

The number of assaults excluding those that involve knives also showed no statistically significant change

Figure 2: NSW Recorded criminal incidents of robbery with a knife and robbery other than with a knife. January 1996 to March 2000



* This graph shows the trend in two offences plotted on separate axes. This allows a trend comparison to be made between the two offences despite the difference in scale.

Robbery

Figure 2 shows the trend in robberies with a knife and without a knife from July 1998 to March 2000. There has been a statistically significant downward trend in the number of recorded incidents of robbery with a knife since the introduction of the knife laws (from July 1998 to March 2000). In the nine month period immediately following the legislation's introduction, July 1998 to March 1999, there were 1,082 robberies with a knife. Over the same nine month period in the following year there were 10.1 per cent fewer offences (963 between July 1999 and March 2000).

It is possible that this trend is merely part of an overall downward crime cycle. If the latter were the case, other types of robbery would be showing a similar decline. The number of robberies excluding those that involve

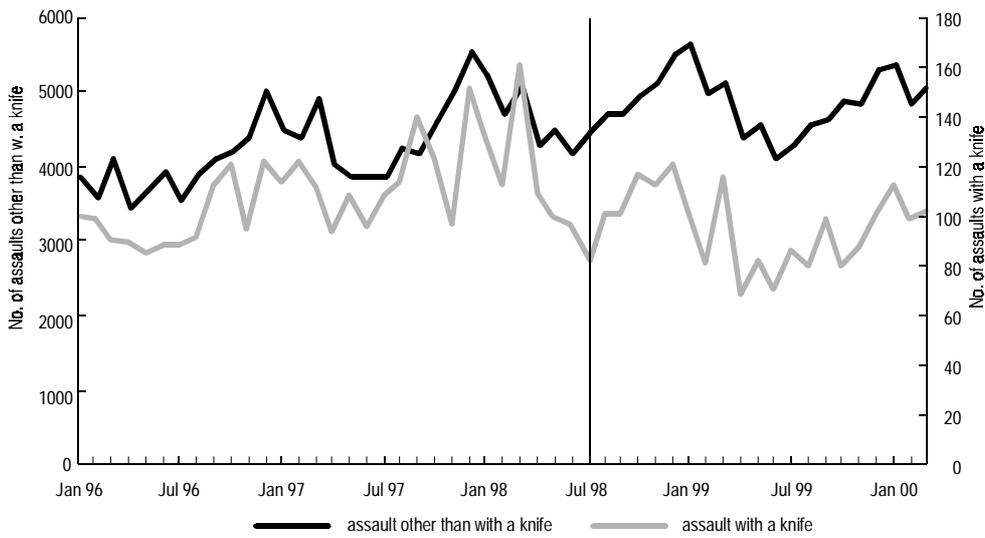
between July 1998 and March 2000. This is consistent with the trend for assault with a knife

CONCLUSION

Police records show that the NSW Police have been using the new powers available to them. The proportion of successful knife searches is surprisingly high, particularly given the large number of searches being conducted. As move on directions and unsuccessful knife searches are not criminal offences, it is possible that their recording is not be as reliable as that of other incidents. Increased accuracy of recording would give a better picture of the effectiveness and utility of the legislation.

Since the introduction of the knife legislation, robberies involving knives have dropped significantly

Figure 3: NSW Recorded criminal incidents of assault with a knife and assault other than with a knife. January 1996 to March 2000



* This graph shows the trend in two offences plotted on separate axes. This allows a trend comparison to be made between the two offences despite the difference in scale.

while assaults involving knives have remained unchanged. It cannot be determined with certainty whether police searches for knives have contributed to the decrease in robbery with a knife. Although it seems plausible that some factor relating to the new legislation is responsible, the drop in robberies involving knives actually started before the new legislation. It could be that the publicity surrounding the initiative was effective or that restricting the sale of knives to youths has had an impact.

Assault with a knife remains unchanged following the legislative changes. The nature of assault with a knife is different to that of robbery with a knife and this may account for the lack of downward trend in this offence. For instance, if assaults involving knives occur in public places less often than robberies, the restrictions on carrying knives in public places would have less influence. In addition, because the increases in assault with a knife leading up to July 1998 were not as great as for robbery there is less room for change.