



## The New Gonzo Journal

### The Great Knife Hunt:

*"Knives are like credit cards; don't leave home without 'em and always carry several"*

Richard Marckinko

An epidemic has been slowly sweeping its way across the United Kingdom. Silent. Unspoken. Ignored. Yet feared entirely. If you are to look closely and pay attention, whilst watching the youth of today, you may see in-between their swift motions about the playground a sparkling glint. The flash of a small steel blade before it plunges into another teens flesh.

Is the above an exaggeration? Or perhaps an acute embellishment? I am prone to those from time to time, however in this instance, the truth is not far from this gonzo journalist's fantastic imagination. The kids are carrying knives and more often than we realise. The statistics entirely back this up. According to the online commons library, at year end in March of 2024 there had been reported 50,500 offences in England and Wales (excluding Greater Manchester) where a sharp instrument was involved. This widespread reporting manifested a 4.4% increase of this type of offence since 2022/23. On a positive note, it was at least a 2.8% decrease from 2019/20. The number of hospital admissions for knife assaults also increased however in 2024 by 9% compared to the previous year, which aligned with an increase of knife related suicides.

17.3% of the assailants across all reported attacks were juveniles aged between 10 to 17 - shockingly that's not far off juveniles taking up a quarter of all knife crimes committed across England and Wales... this resulted in 40 children in 2024 losing their lives; of which 17 of the victims were aged 15 years old or younger. What a waste of life, and doubly so too... in a matter of thinking, you could argue these homicides kill much more than the victims. These incidents and crimes of passion destroy life, opportunity, a sense of safety and innocence... imagine being a child and so confused or scared that you pick up a switch blade instead of using your intellect to disarm a disagreement. The pen is mightier than the sword, yet todays youth are seeing words as weakness... particularly among young men who currently are at a 50% higher likelihood to be the victims of a knife attack from another youth, compared to girls that make up 35% - the remaining numbers being adults murdered by youths. Overall young men make up 66.2% of the perpetrators of violent attacks involving knives. That said, girls are currently starting to increase their likelihood to pick up a blade, a report on GOV.UK in 2024 found, with a reported 12% above the prior years figure.

This is all hard to stomach, and figures for 2024/25 haven't yet been released, yet we know that 2024 felt like one of the most unstable years for this kind of crime with multiple reports hitting the breaking news flash cards of mainstream news across all major networks; the South Port attacks being the most reported on and also most heinous. A moral panic of course ensued and even now, elderly women who once walked with such confidence are now crossing the road to avoid even a single youth who is adorned in a grey tracksuit, for fear of a sparkle of steel to be the last they see of either their handbags or their lives.

Despite the reports on knife crime in youths increasing and mainstream outlets as well as Netflix shows addressing the issue or reporting on it, something feels missing. In all the discussions and debates, every voice has a certain timbre. A bass to it and level of wisdom that only lengthy experience on the walk of life will give you. Every voice I heard on the issue was adult... but how can this be? Why do adults believe they have a capital on this debate? What do they know of the youth mind on carrying knives? These are the very people driving the narrative of the moral panic - and as we know,

adults just don't understand kids. Their lingo, their ever-changing crazes or fads and affections towards mundane pieces of plastic such as pogos, yo-yos or furbies (I am an adult and intentionally mentioned items from my youth here... just to emphasise the point of me being so far past that point of understanding the kiddos). Let's also face it too that for most of us journalists, we didn't grow up in the age of the smart phone. Hell, I still remember there just being 4 channels on the television, and all of us losing our minds at the birth of channel 5... then the introduction came of cable tv. Even so, information was drip fed to us. The news was simply something for the parents.... But now its everywhere. Even just 7 hours on tik tok will start feeding you graphic world affairs and obscure opinions on them from all kinds of influencers, all thanks to todays algorithms that pray on your attention and focus.

Kids are growing up in a different world and until we start speaking to them, we'll find we've learned nothing of this issue... it was musing on this point that got this journalist and his tape recorder out on the, how do the youth say it? Roads, innit.

Knowing that this assignment had overtones of extreme personal danger to undertake solo, I called up an associate of mine.

"Leeson... how are you keeping?" I asked as he answered at 06:15 on a Saturday morning. He sounded weary and suffering the poor decisions of his Friday night.

"Just about awake," he started, "you?"

"All good this end... I'm going on a knife hunt... got a new beat and pitch I'm working on, but could do with some back up, you in?" I'm greeted with a couple seconds of pause, before he responds.

"A knife hunt? What the hell is that?"

"It's you and me getting out there with my tape recorder and interviewing youths that may or may not be carrying steel... no one's speaking to them and I'm doubtful we can ever fix this thing if we don't understand it..."

Another pause followed by a low hum of ponder.

"Sure, I'm in... just watched that show Adolescence so sounds like this would be a noteworthy task... I'm in..." he said.

"Good, I'll pick you up in a couple hours..."

The Great Knife Hunt was on.

The series mentioned by my associate is a limited one that debuted and stays an exclusive to Netflix. It's a well-crafted show, wherein each episode is filmed in an expert one take. It's an impressive feat when you consider the subject matter and the savage nature of the scenes and dialogue, as they tell out the story of a teenage boy who has been influenced by incel culture to murder a female classmate with a knife who has been bullying him. The series was strikingly bold and right on time for what has been happening in the UK, but unfortunately political and social commentators hijacked its message to drive their own narrative, either for a race baiting war - due to the lead character and perpetrator being a white male with these commentators believing it to be a white wash of the story it was supposedly based on, which is where a black student committed a stabbing, of which the creators denied. The other hijack was to push the agenda that this is yet again another attempt to put down male youths and push a feminist ideology that women are under threat from young boys following the prior me too movement, than most spout as the reason for emergence of the manosphere - a call to arms from mostly misogynistic influencers on social media to the men and boys of today to find their balls and stick women back in their place... of course both of these observations are biased to the subjective views of those trying to gain hit and attention, missing the point entirely that we need to be focusing on the task at hand, understanding why the youth are carrying knives and how to stop it...

Perhaps we have already stumbled on a key part of this issue. The fact that opinion seems to be more important to most than understanding and key research with those carrying the blade... indeed...

I packed up my equipment and headed off to pick up Leeson. He stumbled out clearly only recently getting dressed holding a slice of half eaten toast in hand, the butter atop not yet melted, bumbling along with the gait of a man still feeling the prior nights festivities as I suspected earlier.

"Feeling good about this? Any concerns?" I queried with him, ensuring that his head was fully invested into this ominous assignment I had cooked up.

"I'm excited for it... I'm down for working on something that's such a worthy cause... this knife situation is pretty fucked up." He shook his head, before scoffing down the last bite of his breakfast and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. I started the engine and pulled off to head into the city.

"Agreed... I feel this is a valuable piece of research. It's certainly a story I've heard little of so far... at least not from this angle. Plus, we'll be speaking to these kids in *their* habitat as opposed to the adults... just youths out doing their thing." As I said this, I eyed myself in the rear-view mirror. Bush hat, sunglasses, a beard peppered with grey, adorn a weathered and aging complexion. Cracked skin from experience - suddenly I am confronted with my own youth, that has long since faded.

Perhaps this is why I called upon Leeson? Although he is about 10 years my junior, he sits comfortably in the middle of his twenties, whilst I am middling now in the thirties. This is a significant gap for the youths as when they watch such reality shows as Love Island, they see other 20 year olds and can envision themselves in that position - empathy running unabashed- however, I fear they would see me as an adult more in line with the age of their parents... the greying beard certainly helping to support this hypotheses.

"Yeah... I think it will be good, but aren't you worried they'll look at us and run a mile? Couple of older blokes asking kids about knives is kind of suspect... they might believe us to be police informants or something." He spoke.

"I suppose.... But you're still gifted with a youthful face... I look older than my years! Besides, I doubt they'd think we're law enforcement... we look like the kinds of adults that are carrying!"

Leeson blasted out a joyful laugh at this. The laugh of you can detect the undertones of an agreement that doesn't need to be said to be heard.

"True... speaking of which, I get we'll be in public, but people with knives can be unpredictable - especially kids - how do you propose we protect ourselves?"

It was a solid question from my associate, and one that I couldn't really answer in any way that would give a man comfort, who is about to go on a knife hunt. I'd done my research and had thought originally of mace or pepper spray; however, both are illegal to possess unless you are law enforcement. I had thought of taking the risk and to the consequences I'd say, 'be damned', but then again, I'd rather not run the risk. Besides, having to be in a position to be forced to use it would mean assault on a minor, of which such an offence I certainly wouldn't want on my rap sheet. I'd looked for alternatives, but there are none. Online UK stores such as Amazon do stock legal defence sprays that don't harm an assailant but are described as irritating and will also mark them with a dye that is hard to wash off, making it easy for law enforcement to make an arrest later. Unfortunately, upon further reading and research, although these are advertised as legal, they fit in the same category of other defence sprays as mentioned above and if used, then you can be charged with assault. The only other options for protection were to either carry a knife myself and hope I am quicker, or run...

I relayed this to my associate, who frowned briefly, going through the mental gymnastics, weighing up the risks... he looked a tad pensive, but only for a moment.

"I guess we better be faster than a knife if it comes to it... but let's keep the tape recorder running, keep cool so we don't come across as a threat and ensure we know we're being watched by CCTV"

Despite knowing the dangers of this assignment I had cooked up for us, carrying one of my own blades felt wrong and a complete contradiction to the advocate nature of the piece. Any attempt to understand the youth and then help to prevent further blades from being carried would be intrinsically undermined by my own actions. No, it would not do to embarrass myself in such a way - besides the fact that anyone carrying a

knife has a statistical 80% chance of using it and I certainly do not fancy any of my chances, getting into a clash of swords with a wayward teen.

The sun was shining brightly. Sparkles bouncing magically across the windowpanes of the urban jungle as we crest the peak of the Itchen toll-bridge, the city unfurling before us like a banner flattening across the landscape. Southampton is where I call home, so it's only right that this assignment be worked through in my current stomping ground. I'm comfortable with the city. I know its curves, its edges, its inhabitants and above all, the pathways in and out in a pinch. For discussions around knives, it sadly suits the curiosity this article aims to explore further. According to the statistics contained in the Southampton Safe City Strategic Assessment 2023/2024, the city I call home ranks 13th across English and Welsh Community Safe Partnerships (CSPs) and ranks among the worst 5% nationally for violent crime - the rate of such crimes has remained significantly higher than the national average since 2015/2016. Currently for every 1k residents, 50 are victims to it. In 2023 it was estimated by the Office for National Statistics that 264,957 persons reside in Southampton - if my calculations are correct, that puts 13,247 residents (roughly) as victims of violent crime. During 2023/2024 there were 829 crimes that involved the use of a bladed implement, a +4.8% increase from 2022/2023 where 791 had taken place... that is a lot of knives... just imagine for a second that each incident is an individual... 829 blades in the pockets of 829 unstable individuals of have succumb to the fear... but just what fear that is, we are yet to know, but it looks as though we're in the right place to find the main nerve of this thing.

Southampton accounts for over a quarter of crimes involving bladed implements in Hampshire and Isle of Wight constabulary in 2023/2024, highlighting that Southampton remains a substantial hotspot for knife crime, with the profiles skewed towards that of youth age groups - particularly young males.

With a head full of this data, my tape recorder, notepad, and associate, we ventured forth into the maw of the beast, with jaws lined with steel plated, serrated teeth that could slice meat from bone with just one swish...

Our targets were all over, but it was clear many were not willing or prepared to speak to us. As I'd already suspected, our approach was *off*. We seemed far too straight for this type and line of questioning. The kids we suspected to be carrying were clearly the ones first to say no and decline... it was only a hunch, but our guts were growling confidently. Why else would a youth decline an on-the-spot interview about knives if they had nothing to hide or hadn't ever or had never even considered carrying one. It was at this point my associate pointed out what the youths have latched onto and how my approach was too *heavy*. Nike swoosh emblazoned tracksuits moving quicker than shadows away from my tape recorder, road men curling up and retracting into their hoods like hermit crabs, pulling on drawstrings to hide their faces... others laughed us off like we were not in a serious assignment, with some throwing slurs about my age... or hat.

"You need to think about where their attention goes..." he began.

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow...

"Yeah, think about it... it goes to their phones. To social media... got to approach it like one of those guys you see on the street... make it fun and engaging... well as best you can I suppose."

"Good idea... we should change the location too. Trawling the high street is too open and obvious, albeit safe... let us walk through the parks, aim for youths relaxed and at ease in the benches." I directed Leeson towards the direction of the park.

"You take lead... you're younger than me and not wearing a leather vest with a bush hat..."

We walked into the park and Leeson at once spotted a trio sat casually chatting on a bench, two teenage females and one male. They didn't give off the energy of those that would carry a knife, but they certainly displayed a certain aura of those that would have either known someone who has or does carry...

Leeson approached, flamboyantly to gain their attention.

"Excuse me ladies and gent, do you mind if we speak to you? We are a couple of journalists working on a story that we believe you're perfect for..."

They seized up, but less so with fear or worry and more so out of caution, as if we were not to be trusted.

"That's right... I'm a Doctor of Journalism and we are in the great knife hunt..." I chimed in, my arms stretched out slightly by my side, palms open and facing them - body language adjusted to demonstrate the lack of threat.

"Knife hunt? What's that?" Asked the young man, piping up and falling right into my snare...

"Well, you see, we're playing a dangerous game of speaking to youths we believe, or suspect may be carrying knives... you three fit the bill..."

Their faces went from apprehension to shock, like that of a woman who when she says to guess her age, you either get it wrong, or you guessed too high...

Before I let them recover, I went straight for the pitch.

"Look, we are not going to do anything with whatever you confirm or deny here, we're just looking to record an interview with you all to discuss the reasons why kids are carrying them in the first place... as you've noticed by now, we're adults... well, him just barely," I gestured towards Leeson, "and the significance of this, is that you know we probably have an agenda... or an idea to paint the youth in this article a certain way, just like the rest of the media... well, I'm here to say fuck those guys - pardon my french - but were just as you must be, tired of hearing adult voices and not those of the youths carrying these damn sharp things... so, what do you say? Fancy being a voice for change and help turn the tide of adulthood ignorance?"

Zing. They took the pitch and now looked courageous. Almost glowing with potential and delusions of grandeur.

I set the tape recorder running.

The young man quickly explained that he is thirteen years of age, but the two girls with him are both twelve and all of them live in the Southampton area. The young lad at first looks plucky, brazen and cocky to start the interview - machismo in front of the young ladies no doubt - yet, despite

this it's easy to say it's as thin as a funeral veil and I see a glimmer of nerves in his eye as he meets my sunglasses as I aim the recorder at him.

"Why do you think kids are carrying knives?" I ask.

He wastes no time in contemplation...

"Because they are scared of getting jumped." His response comes swift and sharp, with a tone of certainty.

"Jumped you say? Okay, well, by whom? Who do they believe they are going to get jumped by?"

"Other kids..."

Another snap response... perhaps this is indeed the teen to guide us to the main nerve of this epidemic...

"Other kids who may be carrying knives?"

"Yeah, maybe, I don't know..." his confidence shaken, but why? Was the line of questioning too loose or too direct, why the sudden change?

"Do you think it's some kind of paranoia? Something that's sitting in the mind and is a reaction to something purely hypothetical?"

He gave me the puzzled look that most youths give their elders who are speaking the language of a lost and distant generation - the gap of which becoming a chasm between us...

"I don't know what pareenoyah is..." he stumbles through the word.

"Well, it means to have a worry that something may happen or occur that may have a very low chance of actually happening. So, you may carry a knife to protect yourself from something you are worried may happen, but it's an irrational worry as it may not even happen."

He pauses for a moment and stares off towards the younger kids in the play park. "I guess... like they think something bad is going to happen, but instead of getting caught or hurt, they are safe."

"Have you ever carried a knife?"

Tension builds and he looks worried by the question, furrows his brow before responding, "yeah, I have... but I wouldn't do it, just seems stupid..."

Smart lad.

"Do you know anyone that does or has? Someone from school perhaps?"

"I don't go to school..."

"Oh... so are you home schooled instead?"

"No, I just don't go to school..."

I try not to let my concern on the lack of education this child is getting and find an opportunity to build further rapport.

"Just doing your own thing, that's cool... you're not missing out on much, school isn't a place for smart people..." all three of them giggled and then settled with sighs of relief.

At this time, you could tell the young girls were itching to talk and get involved, so I decided it was time to wrap the first interview,

"Well, thank you for that my man... any message you would give to the kids out there who are considering picking up a blade?"

Focus descends upon his features as he sits up straight ready to deliver what could be the Greta Thunberg equivalent speech of all speeches to prevent any other kid from carrying a blade...

He leans in, confidently to the microphone, inhales deeply, eyes fixed ahead of him, ready to hit the youths with something that we could only assume would be powerful...

"Don't carry knives!" A Cheshire smile beams on his face as he looks into my shades for a sign of approval. I give him a nod.

"Well said..." I confirm, with the tonal equivalent of a pat on the back or a tussle of the hair...

I hit stop on the recorder and the two young girls faces droop in disappointment.

"Don't worry, I'm still interviewing you both... just easier to stop per person to track later is all."

Their spirits perk up and they sit closer to each other, pressing hard enough to confirm they wished to do this as a couple's exercise.

"Okay, so why do you believe kids are carrying knives?"

"To protect themselves."

"Protect themselves from what?"

"Dangerous people who want to harm you."

This time round, the answers come with precision, confidence and even a touch of authority.

"What kind of people do you believe want to do you harm?"

"The bad kinds... the ones that want to rob you or worse. Especially if you're a woman..."

Sad to see girls of such a young age, already aware of the gender disparities that exist for women, but sadly they are not wrong.

"Have either of you considered carrying knives?"

"Not knives, but I'd carry something else if I could, just to feel a bit safer when walking alone."

"What type of item would you carry instead?"

"Probably pepper spray or something like that..."

At this point I explain to the girls the legalities around pepper spray, how it cannot be carried by members of the public, and that even the defence sprays you see online in stores such as Amazon, these are also illegal and how any such use of an item would be classed as assault, even if used on an assailant you believed had intent to do you harm.

"Oh, really?! Okay, then I guess maybe something like knuckle bashers..."

I raise an eyebrow...

"Knuckle bashers, what are those?" I ask.

"You know, the metal things you put in your hands? Then your punch hurts more..."

"Oh, right... yeah, those are called knuckle dusters... but you didn't learn that from me..."

The girls burst out in a harmonious laughter at their error and then make comments on how if pathetic defence sprays are illegal and could be classed as assault, that their idea of knuckle dusters may be a little flawed.

"I don't know... it's silly because nothing really makes you feel safe anymore... even people I know who have carried one have still been hurt."

My curiosity peaks and I continue the questioning to find out what drove this statement. The young girl tells us that her brother had to spend two weeks in Hospital after being stabbed outside a local nightclub at the age of 21, even though he was too carrying a knife for protection - police confiscated this after they attended, but he was not charged and it was returned a short time later. This may be due in part to the explanation that it was a knife on a multi tool, which have blades that are shorter than the legal limits set on knives which is no more than three inches (7.62cm) for any non-locking folding pocketknife.

"Do you think he was carrying it because he knew there was someone after him?"

"Yeah, maybe it was to do with that word you mentioned earlier."

"Paranoia?"

"That's it, parry-noyah... I think he just worried it would happen, and it did, so he carried it just in case, but then didn't use it... did have me more worried so I started searching for things to carry, just in case."

"Indeed. But where do you think the paranoia has come from?"

"I don't know... I always wonder if it was the pandemic, I was younger, but everyone got really weird at that time... it's almost like people got more scared of everything and each other."

She had a point, and I agreed with it. I changed a lot during the pandemic, with my PTSD firing on all cylinders, then I had been made redundant in my job, whilst watching the world slowly fall apart, whilst millions died at the hands of an invisible killer.

"You're probably onto something there..." I confirm with her before wrapping up.

The girls both confirm they would not carry a knife, nor ever consider it any further, but they are far more empathetic than most and assure me that from their angle as the youth of today, they totally get why.

Despite Leeson and I being happy with the exchange with our first willing participants, we both felt further from the truth of this sharp ended epidemic than when we started. Despite our line of questioning, it was clear that as we dug further, we had hit nothing but bedrock. Miners in pursuit for a nugget of truth that may lie in another hill...

I fell a little despondent to the mission; this hunt I had cooked up. Despite not wanting to meet a blade, or two, there was a disappointment that we had experienced no real threat. I supposed it was due to the lack of willing participants. I pondered on whether the approach of taking an associate, only directed the concerns of the youths we had spoken to, toward thoughts of us being police informants... which made me feel dirty, but then again, if I came across a kid with a blade, what exactly would I do? The whole point of this hunt as it is with all good journalism, is to serve the public interest. That being the case, if I do run across a young man wielding a blade willingly and happy to share that information, perhaps I would switch on him and call the police in the name of public safety... seems like a reasonable and adult response to this type of encounter, despite how much it would make me feel like a snitch.

I put off the hunt for a few days, until I decided that the central part of the city was not really the right place to get the youths talking. No, the best place to get them out in the open, would be to corner them in their own space. Their stomping grounds where they were in charge and ruled the blocks with an iron fist, or a fleshy fist clutching some steel.

The area where I live is not exactly the ghetto, but it is an area that was once solely council housing and has a high portion of low-income families. Even the wife and I, only got our first property here by going through a government led shared ownership scheme - the governments modern day answer to classic council housing. The new estate we are on is full of wonderful neighbours (well, unless you read my article *The*

*Gunman and The Growhouse*), it has exceptions of course, but the previously built and existing housing surrounding us, has far more troubling sorts. Ruffians that constantly walk around, knocking on doors and legging it off, but doing it by kicking their boots on the door so hard, so as to knock it off its hinges - which happened to a pensioner only 300 metres along the road from my own abode. There is always grime music floating on the air from teens gallivanting around in their matching tracksuits, blasting their tunes from criminally sourced speakers. Some of these youths already had run ins with the neighbours and police due to the levels of anti-social behaviour, especially since the surge in purchases of residents to the UK of camera recording doorbells and such. I decided it was time to get to know my community.

Across from my home is a small cluster of shops, a church, a youth club, and a nursery. This is our neighbourhoods central hub for youth activity - if they are not outside the corner shop sipping on overpriced and ill-effective energy drinks, then they are usually in the parks scaring away the younger kids, or gathered under the veranda of the Baptist church, freaking out old the religious elderly zealots. I figured it best to abandon the tape recorder and just take my notepad, whilst handing out a few business cards to show them that I am a professional journalist, but also figured the skull logo I adorn, would speak more so to their outlaw spirits.

These kids gather in large numbers and have exhibited violence more often than not, especially when their behaviour that can be seen as unsightly is challenged - particularly by adults.. although it flew in the face of this assignment, I picked up one of my short handled claw hammers and set it in my back pocket, so it would be in reach in a moments notice. The plan being to either brandish it and show I am also tooled up, or to give it a sharp thwack into their arms if they were to go to pull a blade with intent...

As I donned my trainers to head out however, I reconsidered the statistic I was taught at school, that if you carry a weapon, then you are 80% likely to use it. I am not sure the facts that confirm this statistic, but even so, I had horrible premonitions Of my article never getting finished, but instead subsumed by another journalists write up of a Gonzo Doctor who lost his sense of self control when a teen came at him with a

knife, resulting in him bashing a sixteen year olds skull in, pulverising brains until they resembled the inside of a pumpkin. I sold myself a little short in this wicked thought, as I know I have far more self control than this, but when fight or flight kicks in and you're outnumbered or outgunned, you would be surprised to learn just how far you may act in opposition to morals and ethics.

I crossed the road and headed down the hill, my confident flat-footed gait, forming into a strut as I pass a group of youths on my right. Grime music blasts out and fills the air from a portable speaker, as the kids of the street, stand firm, all adorned in black, with Nike swooshes, Adidas stripes, hoods pulled over clean shaven faces that have barely begun to sprout a whisker.

I calmly assess the threat - six young lads and one young lady. I feel confident on my odds should this all go a direction I would rather it not. I am at least only around 400 metres from my property, so if I do need to make a run for it, I can get through my front door with ease and grab the claw hammer I always keep inside the door frame - for those 'just in case' scenarios. I approach them, hands with palms facing out towards them, positioned at the end of arms held out to either side - the universal signal for 'I am not a threat.' They eye me with caution. One raises a curious eyebrow, as another begins to smirk a Cheshire grin...

"Say uh... Hi kids..." the first failure, I think to myself... you should never treat a teenager like a lesser, and kids is a dismissive term for most of them. Despite my worry that I'd already blown it, they seemed almost chipper about the comment.

"Yeah?" Says the young female.

"Listen, I'm a local journalist and I'm working on an article about weaponry on the streets of the UK, and I'm wondering if I could interview you lot for it... if you'd be willing of course?"

I pull out my tape recorder and I can see it unsettles them...

"It's just for my records, it ensures I get accurate quotes and can replay the interview..."

They still seem off.

"Okay, well, look I don't have to record it if you don't feel comfortable... I don't take names or any details, just your age and the answers to the questions..."

The taller lad starts up, giving the impression that he is the leader of this group. His voice crackles as he squeaks in a nasal prepubescent tone.

"How do we know that you're not a cop or summit?" He asks.

"Well... I guess you don't, but it would be a bit weird if I were a cop that conducted interviews and took no credible evidence on a recording, nor photos or any other piece of surveillance..."

"I guess... just seems weird... why do you want to interview us about weapons? We're just kids..." he gives a delightful cheeky smirk at this, giving me a playful look, knowing full well he is jumping on my introductory sentence... clever lad.

"Well, kids are what I need for the article... it's about you lot and the weapons that are being carried by some of your ilk." His smirk continues...

"Right... and what's this article going to be called?"

"Well... I've called it The Great Knife Hunt... At least that's what I'll call it when I write it, figured it makes sense because that's what I'm on right now..."

He looks down for a moment, pondering the title.

"The great knife hunt? So, you're like, hunting kids with knives or summit?" He smiles and lets out a childish giggle, the rest join him as they look anywhere but my eyes and scuffle their feet.

"Not quite... but close, I'm hunting kids that may carry knives. I've had some great chats so far, but I've not found my white whale yet"

"White whale? What's that?"

"Have you not read Moby Dick?" I at once consider how foolish of a question this is. If these kids were reading, they surely would not be loitering outside a local church.

"No... I've not read anything about any dicks..." he laughs again, whilst another behind him sniggers the word 'gay.'

"Okay, well it's a book about a captain hunting for a specific type of whale... a rare find... I suppose I am the same as him, but with knives... I've spoken to many about carrying but am yet to see the real deal... I'm not convinced the reporting out there now is accurate that kids are even carrying blades..."

Picking up on the clear cat and mouse in our conversation up until this point, I feel the best approach is to toy with them, like you do a cat with a laser pointer. Set a trap and lure them in.

"The way I figure is if any kids were to carry them, they'd have to be some real tough little sons of bitches... no one who is chicken shit would carry a knife... only the real kids that run the streets... that said, I might be speaking to the wrong kids..."

They notice my derogatory tone, the taller one who has been leading the conversation, straightening, and adjusting his posture, increasing his height by a couple of inches, towering over me, despite being five foot and eleven inches. He sucked his teeth, then fixed me with a serious look.

"What's that meant to mean?" He asks.

"Well," I start, "what I mean is that you seem like a well behaved lot... the kind that wouldn't feel the need to carry a blade... I mean, what need would you have for it if you're playing it cool and just relaxing outside your church. Religious do gooders are unlikely to carry such an instrument. Let me hit you with the first interview question, and we'll test out my theory... have you ever considered carrying a knife?"

"Listen yeah... I ain't no religious goodie goodie or sumfing like dat..." the mispronunciations a deliberate effort, as if trying to put on a London accent, "I'm always ready for dem innit..."

"Ready for who? What do you mean? Are you carrying a knife?"

His Cheshire smile returns, as he reaches down, to pull the waistband of his tracksuit down just a little to expose the hilt of a knife...

"Shit... perhaps I was wrong, you kids are the real deal... damn, how old are you?"

"Fifteen"

"And that's a blade? Not just a handle to convince someone to back off?"

Before I'd finished my sentence, he looked briskly from side to side, eyeing up the entrance way of the church - one can only assume to search for any kind of surveillance cameras or onlookers. Satisfied with his assessment, he produced the sharpest hunting knife. Serrated steal for dressing deers, with a razor-sharp blade toward the tip. It glistened slightly in the sunlight, the edges silver steel, but the majority of the blade is a jet black.

The other youths gathered around him and me, so as to shield any onlookers.

"Fuck me... why the hell would you carry this? What's the point? Who do you suspect you need this for?"

Despite being a confident fighter and ex-soldier, I was nervous, and I know they could sense it. I kept my cool as best I could, but it wouldn't take much to plunge that blade in between my ribs, parting them with ease before sinking into a vital organ, and I didn't fancy a collapse lung or pulmonary artery being slashed.

"For dem, innit... dem dat are gunna come round 'ere..." he looked around, eyes shifting for the invisible enemy.

"But who are they?! I don't understand..."

He cuts me off, and speaks abruptly now, frustration setting in due to my lack of validation to his paranoia.

"Depends... could be other youts, could be some random like you... but the streets ain't safe no more, probably never were... but I'll tell you one ting... I pull dis bad boi out and no fucka is messing wit us, do you get me?"

I did get him. Hell, I feel comfortable in combat, but I am not about to test my abilities with a blade so sharp, that this young teen would be a fool to have it down his trouser unsheathed.

"Makes sense, I agree with you... sometimes a knife is like a condom..."

They all giggle at this, apart from the knife wielding teen, who again looks at me puzzled.

"Condom?"

"Yeah... I'd rather be caught with one and not need it, than need it and not have one..."

The grin returns and stretches from ear to ear...

"So, you do get it..."

The rest of the conversation was surprisingly pleasant. The knife concealed and further questions answered but asking them felt a waste as I could predict the answers. The whole scene unsettled me though and I couldn't get the image of that blade out of my mind as I nonchalantly headed into the corner shop to grab a four pack of beers. It felt wrong to leave the youths out there and that big fucking blade just wandering around waiting for any excuse to be the bigger man. I didn't want to rat them out myself, so instead I spoke to the cashier, who I have known a while and with footage from my CCTV cameras, helped him put away a criminal that robbed him and his family at knife point only a year ago. If anyone would want to call the police on those youths, it would be him... despite knowing it would be the right thing, it somehow went against some weird outlaw ethical code I'd involuntarily written for myself whilst on this assignment. Following the placed call to law enforcement, no less than fifteen minutes later, a police car entered the estate.

In line with any other feature article, I sat down reviewing this script and wondering how I come to some sort of conclusion. So far, it felt as though I had learned nothing new about this phenomenon. In place of sought after answers to already existing questions, I ended up creating more. Any reporter worth his salt knows that you can't accept a question in response to your question - especially when pressing a political pundit or any other authority figure. This tactic is a smokescreen and usually tends to turn the interviewee into the interviewer, shifting the power so that the authority no longer sits with the reporter. I'm starting to wonder if that's what has happened here in this blasted assignment. In place of becoming the authority, I've instead become another lost philosopher; searching for meaning that I'll never know in this mysterious world of blades wielded by children.

I have no discernible answer as to what is causing this rise in sharpened implements being clung to, like a hand gripping onto a rope so as to not fall into the chasm. However, these metaphors that fly into the mind may hold the key to unravelling at least a part of what is going on here. The latter is an example of survival - a desperate attempt to hold a tool that will deliver safety from certain doom. Let go of the rope, you'll plummet to your death - stop carrying the knife, you guarantee yourself to become a victim to another swordsman. It's this mentality that confirms that it's a sheer case of paranoia, driven by multiple idioms that's causing these kids to arm themselves the way they are.

Every example demonstrated a sense of fear and loathing that sits in the psyche of the British public.

*"I carry, because they might be carrying."*

It's almost the British equivalent of the Yanks that walk around in carry states with weapons of war, because of their second amendment rights.

To fully understand and appreciate this fear, it's my humble belief that we need to tap back into the shadows that plagued us in our youths. At some point in our formative years, the world ceased to maintain it's kaleidoscope filter and instead, we saw the grey.

A friend getting run over, their head caught under the wheels of a truck until it popped like a melon.

A loved one, sick and riddled with cancer that's now embedded itself in their bones, leaving palms wet with blood at the conclusion of a raspy cough.

Bodies tumbling to the ground after jumping to escape the flames engulfing the tower they are trapped in, a few feet up

from where the plane struck. A death more forgiving than being suffocated and burned alive by jet fuel, before the building collapses.

A short walk home from school, a group surrounds two friends, demanding a toll to be paid before they can continue their way home. One relinquishes their phone willingly, knowing the price to pay could be cold hard steel in the gut. The other decides that a material possession is worth fighting for, so takes their chances - panic ensues and the thieves decide that it's time to use what they carry, stabbing their mark seventeen times before running and leaving them to bleed out in their best friends arms due to slow response times from law enforcement.

These examples are all true cases, some of which you'll possibly recognise. They all happened to or were seen by some kid, in some place, at some other time. If you have any shred of empathy, it's enough to lock you into their struggle and you start to see what they see. A world that is a vampire, thirsty for blood and it shall feed in one way or another. Her fangs take the shapes of humanoids, committing acts of evil or negligence towards each other, amping up the fear to ensure the blood tastes sweeter, so that the saenguination will be worth the effort.

Somehow as we grow as adults, we become desensitised to all the violence and just accept it as being a part of life, choosing to either bury our heads in the sand and hope for it not to happen to us, whilst believing it's all happening over there, or there are the alternatives who decide it's time to take matters into their own hands and arm themselves in preparation for what they know at some day for sure will come for them too...

We went on a knife hunt, and we found a knife. Just a knife, but the message is clear. If we're going to survive this thing and improve it, we need to look within, instead of without. A diversity of thought here is crucial to see through the eyes

of the terrified, but deadly. We need not to fear the darker side of ourselves - that which we attempt to bury deep - and try our hardest to understand what has made our kids snap and continues to drive them into a paranoia so thick, that the only solution is to carry a blade.

As we age, it's crucial to recognise that we gain more sophisticated thoughts, as well as improved ways to apply these musings into the physical realm, to change, influence and control our environment. Essentially, adults hold all the power; much as we do with the narrative here with how we persecute children rather than aim to understand them. We need to let go of this mindset and know the fear of our childhood years. That moment the veil was lifted, and the horrors in the haunted house at the amusement park were revealed to be real corpses, rather than props. What did we do? Where did we go? And what did we reach for to protect ourselves from it? More importantly - and this is key - what did not transpire, versus what did. Then we need to share this openly with the kids.

Tell them, we understand why they're scared. Tell them we still are, and always will be until the banshee screams for us and we exit this mortal coil. That it's unlikely we'll encounter knives, but if we do, the last thing we need to do is be carrying one ourselves, for if you want to lunge at an assailant holding a blade with a blade, then you're putting yourself directly into the stab zone and as far as all stories go, that doesn't end well for anyone.

Put the knives down, pick up a pen instead and write your way out of this one. Cutting words, slicing paper to express the fear in a constructive way, with no need for blood.

The world may be terrifying, but that doesn't mean we should create a moral panic that is destined to turn our future generations into folk devils that wield razor sharp steel. Let's remember our inner child and all of their fears and tell them to drop the weapons.

Richard Marckinko is no role model to abide by and that introductory quote is a lie.

There are and were better role models, but only once they survive long enough to become one, by not carrying around weapons and knowing when to turn the other cheek and keep on walking.

This generation is full of them, and future kids will be guaranteed to hear from them, the sooner they drop the weapons and ensure they're present to share their lessons. Perhaps even the lad I spoke to could be that voice that makes all the difference? I hope so, because from talking to him at his level, relinquishing any judgement and talking from a place of understanding, there was only this outcome; connection and respect.

Dr. Strat P. Koutsoumanis

Southampton

July 2025

