moonshot

Serious violence and harmful online content

An analysis of online vulnerability
to serious violence in the UK

Print Friendly Version
Download

Introduction

The UK is currently experiencing record levels of serious violence. In April 2019, it was announced that knife crime levels in England and Wales, including knife homicide, have reached the highest rates since records began in 1946. This rise includes a 46% average increase in knife-related offences in 34 English and Welsh counties since 2010, compared with an 11% rise in London.

The age of those involved in serious violence has also changed dramatically. Figures show the number of knife crime victims in England aged under 16 rose by 93% in the five years to 2018, with the number of under-16s treated in hospital for stab wounds doubling in the last 5 years.

It is widely recognised that the online space plays a significant role in encouraging and propagating violence in the UK. Social media platforms have been used to document, encourage and glamorise violence. Online retailers can also be used to circumvent laws against the purchase of weapons with little or no age verification. Responses have included the removal of some violent content by social media companies, as directed by law enforcement, but this content is still widely available. Furthermore, even successful removal does little to address an underlying appetite for violent content. More recently, new legislative instruments have incorporated social media into banning orders for violent offenders. While undoubtedly part of the solution, we know from our work in countering violent extremist content online that these measures, when performed in isolation, often work to make violent content more desirable without addressing the underlying narrative or providing an alternative.

There has been little research focused on the role of the internet and social media platforms in facilitating the spread of violent narratives, and how we might use those same platforms to devise and deploy effective counter-violence strategies. In light of this, Moonshot CVE ran a 16-day investigation into how vulnerability to serious violence presents online across the UK. This investigation gathered anonymised search engine queries and analysed video content circulating online that explicitly incites violence. This short pilot study maps the at-risk audience and provides key recommendations to reduce online harm and ultimately change offline behaviour.

Data highlights

22,169 searches
recorded over 16 days indicating engagement with or vulnerability to serious violence.

2.5 million views
of a sample of YouTube videos that directly incite or encourage violence.

Searching for a way out
evidence of individuals using search engines to express their desire to escape violence.

Key recommendations

Programme expansion
Funding would allow Moonshot CVE to consult with police, government and civil society experts to expand the research programme and inform offline government resourcing.

Digital campaigns
Develop micro-trageted counter-narrative campaigns that challenge specific harmful narratives using credible, influential voices.

Interventions
Use innovative technology to run targeted online-to-offline interventions programmes.

UK

*Excluding Northern Ireland

The National Picture

Moonshot CVE gathered anonymised search traffic data from 27th April - 12th May to map vulnerability to serious violence and engagement with harmful content online in the UK.

Search numbers are estimated and it is accepted that some recorded search terms will contain false positives; not all individuals searching will be at-risk. The search terms and volumes are indicative and provide a previously unseen insight into the at-risk audience.

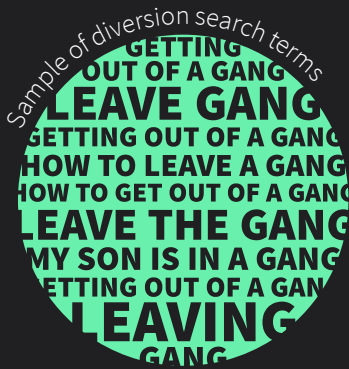## Most searched terms by volume
Number of searches

9267	**stab vest/s**
4013	**bulletproof vest**
3066	**zombie knife**
1814	**hidden knife**
1177	**rambo knife**
691	**credit card knife**
422	**stabbing video/s**
230	**gang life**
192	**knife gloves**
109	**stabproof clothing**
81	**knife defence**
79	**buy acid**
75	**covert stab vest**
64	**die from stabbing**
62	**stabproof jacket**
58	**join a gang**
58	**gang initiation**
55	**surviving a stabbing**
51	**concealed knife**
45	**where to stab**

Map regions labelled: Scotland, North East, North West, Yorkshire, East Midlands, West Midlands, East of England, London, Wales, South West, South East

Legend: High — Low

*total of 22,169 searches recorded in the UK
Search volume weighted by population

Searches broken down by category

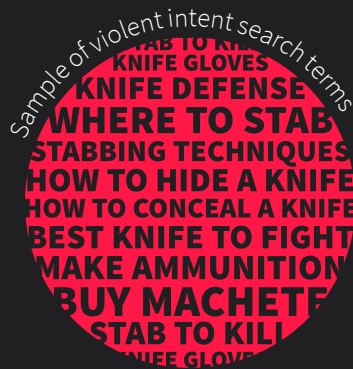## Diversion 110

Sample of diversion search terms

GETTING OUT OF A GANG
LEAVE GANG
GETTING OUT OF A GANG
HOW TO LEAVE A GANG
HOW TO GET OUT OF A GANG
LEAVE THE GANG
MY SON IS IN A GANG
GETTING OUT OF A GANG
LEAVING GANG

Top Search Result
"escape gang"

Engagement 901

Sample of engagement search terms

GANG LIFE
GANG INITIATION
GANG RESPECT
GANG FIGHT YOUTUBE
GANG HUMILIATION
BANNED DRILL MUSIC
LONDON GANG BEEF
JOIN A GANG
SHOULD I JOIN A GANG
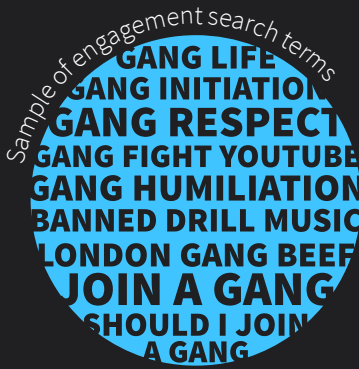
Top Search Result
"stabbing video"

Violent Intent 7,557

Sample of violent intent search terms

STAB TO KILL
KNIFE GLOVES
KNIFE DEFENSE
WHERE TO STAB
STABBING TECHNIQUES
HOW TO HIDE A KNIFE
HOW TO CONCEAL A KNIFE
BEST KNIFE TO FIGHT
MAKE AMMUNITION
BUY MACHETE
STAB TO KILL
KNIFE GLOVES

Top Search Result
"zombie knife"

Crisis 13,601

Sample of crisis search terms

STABPROOF CLOTHING
DIE FROM STABBING
I HAVE BEEN STABBED
HOW TO SURVIVE BEING STABBED
SURVIVING A STABBING
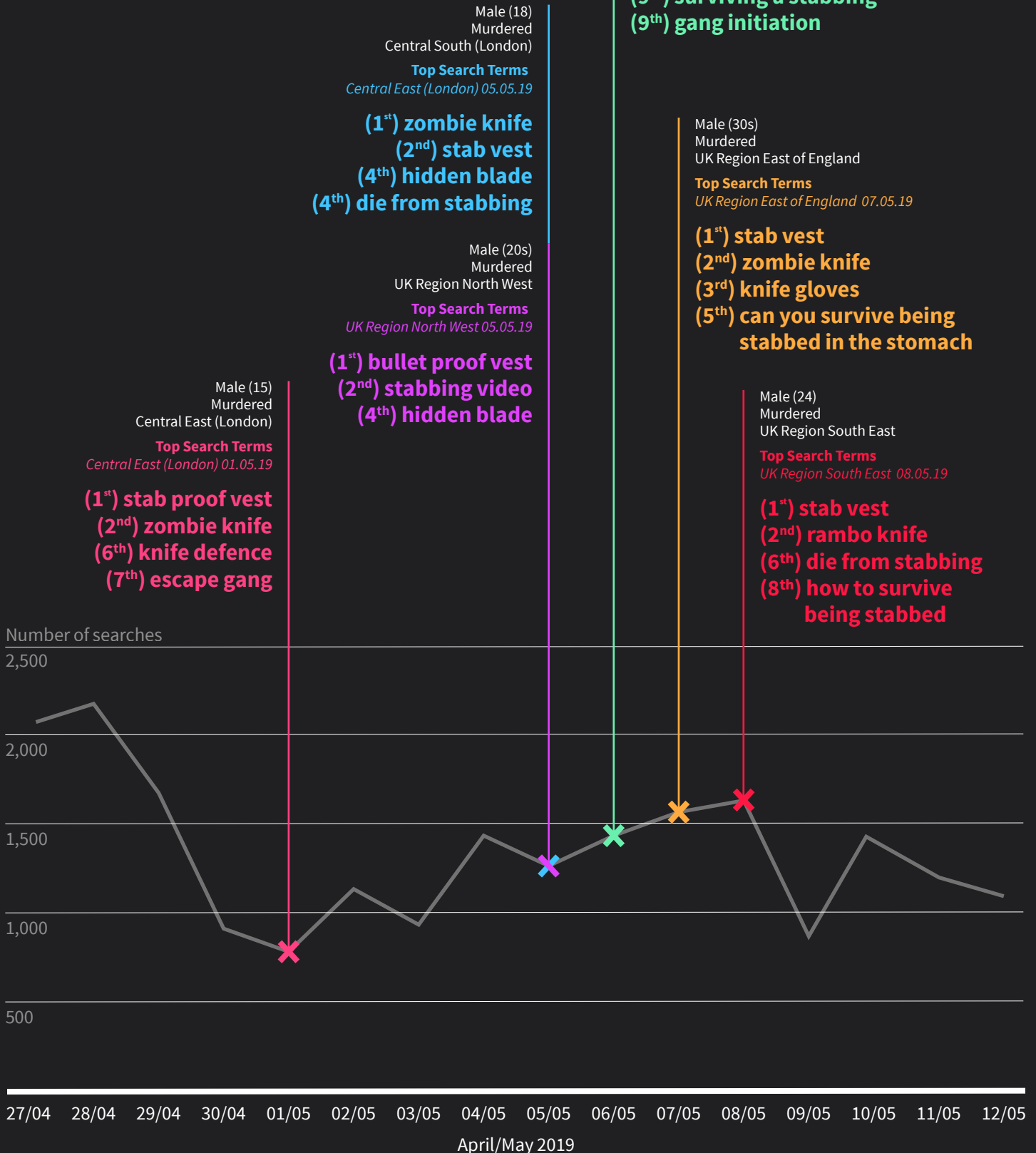WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU GET STABBED
CHEAP STAB VEST
FIRST AID FOR STAB WOUND
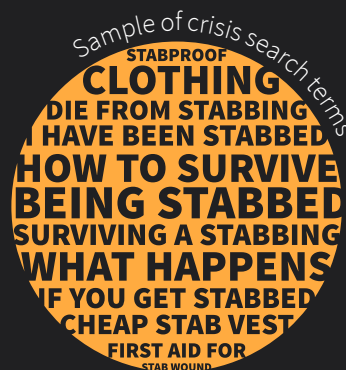
Top Search Result
"stab vest"

Offline events and online behaviour

Five murders and their online impact as recorded in regionally specific search queries

Male (33)
Murdered
UK Region East Midlands

Top Search Terms
UK Region East Midlands 06.05.19

(1st) stab vest
(7th) gerber gator
(8th) credit card knife
(9th) surviving a stabbing
(9th) gang initiation

Male (18)
Murdered
Central South (London)

Top Search Terms
Central East (London) 05.05.19

(1st) zombie knife
(2nd) stab vest
(4th) hidden blade
(4th) die from stabbing

Male (30s)
Murdered
UK Region East of England

Top Search Terms
UK Region East of England 07.05.19

(1st) stab vest
(2nd) zombie knife
(3rd) knife gloves
(5th) can you survive being stabbed in the stomach

Male (20s)
Murdered
UK Region North West

Top Search Terms
UK Region North West 05.05.19

(1st) bullet proof vest
(2nd) stabbing video
(4th) hidden blade

Male (15)
Murdered
Central East (London)

Top Search Terms
Central East (London) 01.05.19

(1st) stab proof vest
(2nd) zombie knife
(6th) knife defence
(7th) escape gang

Male (24)
Murdered
UK Region South East

Top Search Terms
UK Region South East 08.05.19

(1st) stab vest
(2nd) rambo knife
(6th) die from stabbing
(8th) how to survive being stabbed

Number of searches

2,500

2,000

1,500

1,000

500

27/04 28/04 29/04 30/04 01/05 02/05 03/05 04/05 05/05 06/05 07/05 08/05 09/05 10/05 11/05 12/05

April/May 2019

London
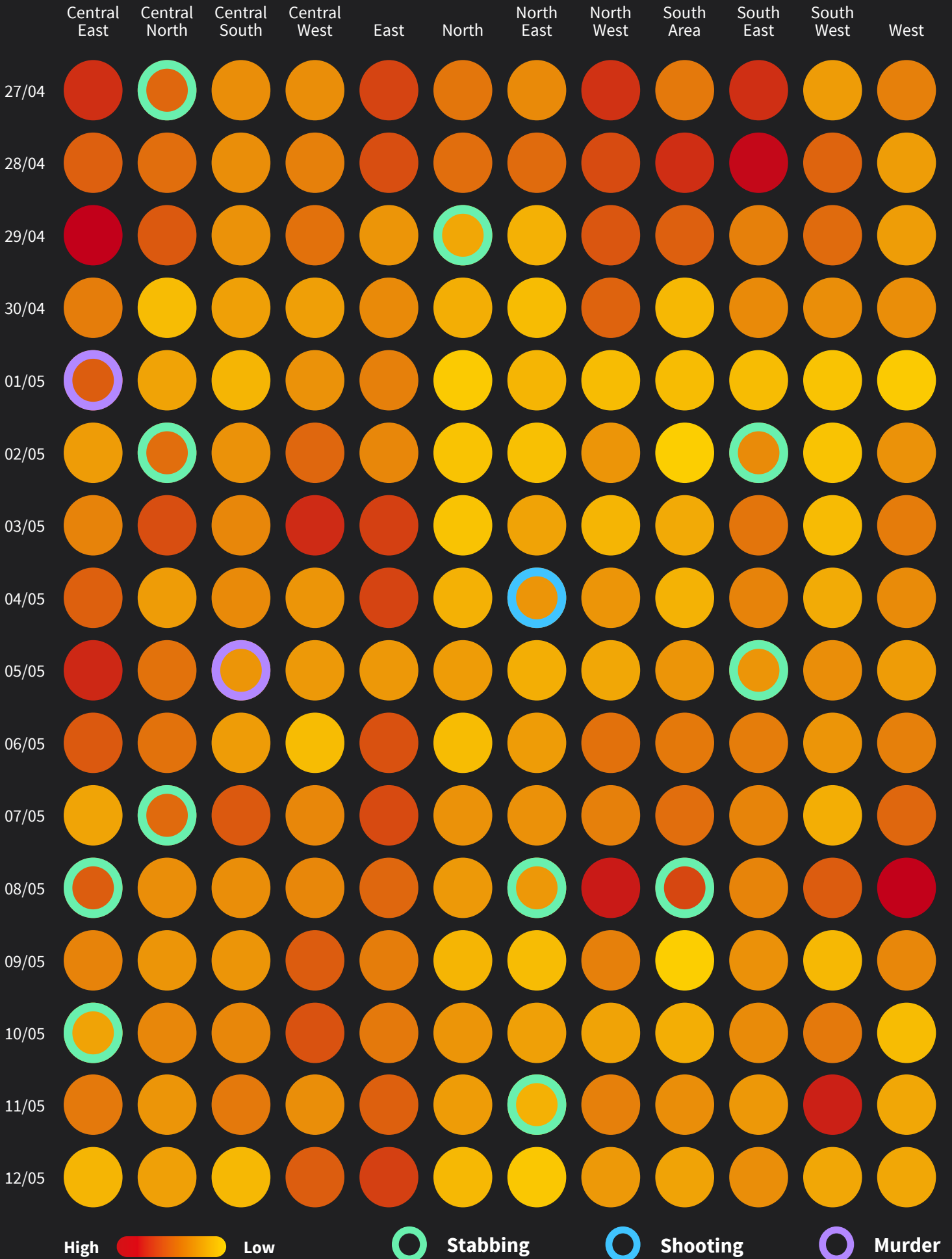
London
Deep Dive

moonshot

High

Low

*total of 4,801 searches recorded in London
Search volume weighted by population

Low volume search terms unique to London

showkey stabbing video
amazon zombie knife
ebay zombie knife
buy stab vest
crib session pornhub
how to conceal a knife
Join NPK
knife defence classes
zombie knife buy

Offline events and online behaviour

Incidents of serious violence in London and volume of related searches over time broken down by Borough Command Area


moonshot

	Central East	Central North	Central South	Central West	East	North	North East	North West	South Area	South East	South West	West
27/04		Stabbing										
29/04						Stabbing						
01/05	Murder											
02/05		Stabbing								Stabbing		
04/05							Shooting					
05/05			Murder							Stabbing		
07/05		Stabbing										
08/05	Stabbing						Stabbing		Stabbing			
10/05	Stabbing											
11/05							Stabbing					

High 🔴🟠🟡 **Low**   🟢 **Stabbing**   🔵 **Shooting**   🟣 **Murder**

Video content

Moonshot CVE isolated a sample of 20 videos uploaded to YouTube between January 2018 and May 2019, and which either incite or encourage violence. The videos have collectively received a total of 2.5 million views and 20,500 engagements (likes, comments or shares).

Gaining an understanding of the narratives and format of harmful video content is invaluable when it comes to the production of effective counter-content.

20 videos
2.5 million views
20,500 engagements

What video content are the at-risk audience consuming?

A thematic analysis was conducted on the video content with multiple themes applied to each video.
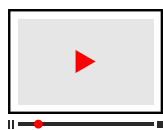
Average Views
Within 30 days of upload
41,100 views

Average Views
Within 24 hours of upload
2,760 views

Acts of violence
17%

Threats of violence (named target)
50%

Provocation of violence
79%

Humiliation of another
29%

Verbal altercation
25%

Criminal acts
33%
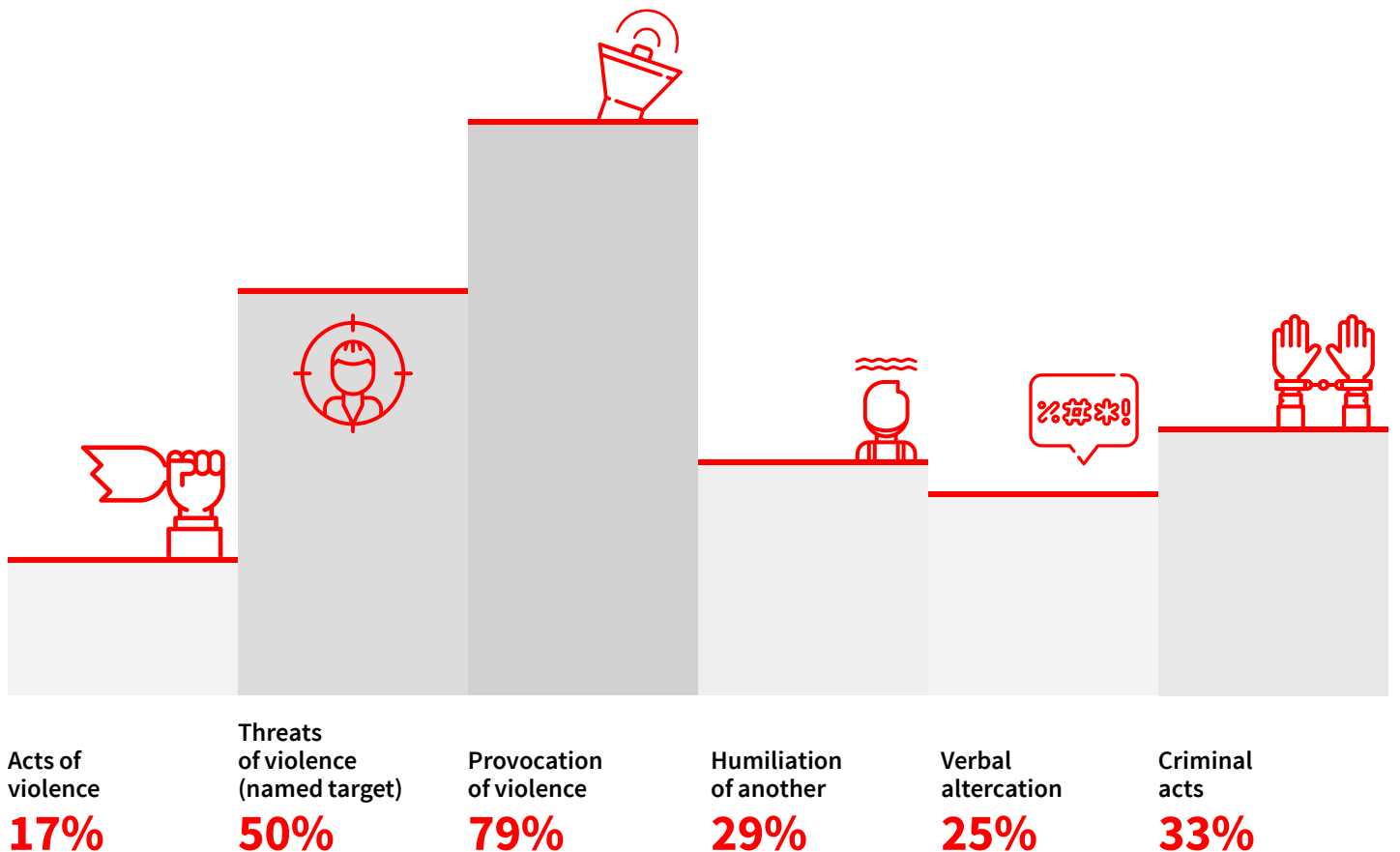
Where are the at-risk audience viewing this content?

The videos examined were all hosted on YouTube. However, our analysis reveals a pattern among users of posting original footage on Snapchat and Instagram - often live - before later re-uploading the footage to YouTube, thereby maximising the lifespan and reach of their content. The visual below shows the breakdown of platforms to which the videos were originally posted.

Snapchat
73%

Instagram
23%
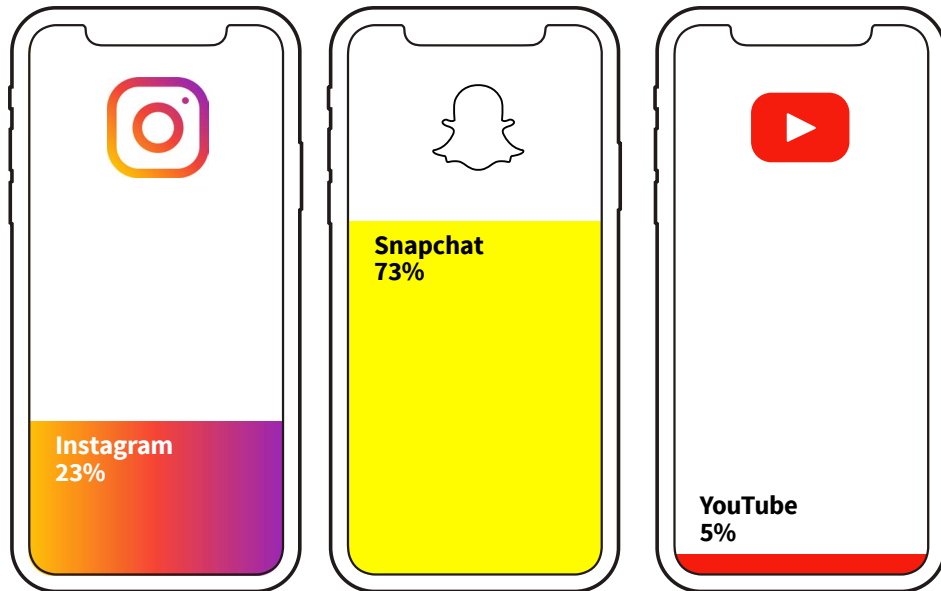
YouTube
5%

United Kingdom 82%

United States
4%

Ireland
3%

Netherlands
2%

Australia
1%

*remaining 8% split between 5 countries

Demographics of the at-risk audience

The visual below shows the aggregate demographic data of every YouTube user who has liked, shared or commented on one of the 20 videos between January 2018 and May 2019.

Female
11%

Male
89%

54%
18-24y

29%
25-34y

11%
13-17y

3%
35-44y

1%
45-54y

2%
55+y
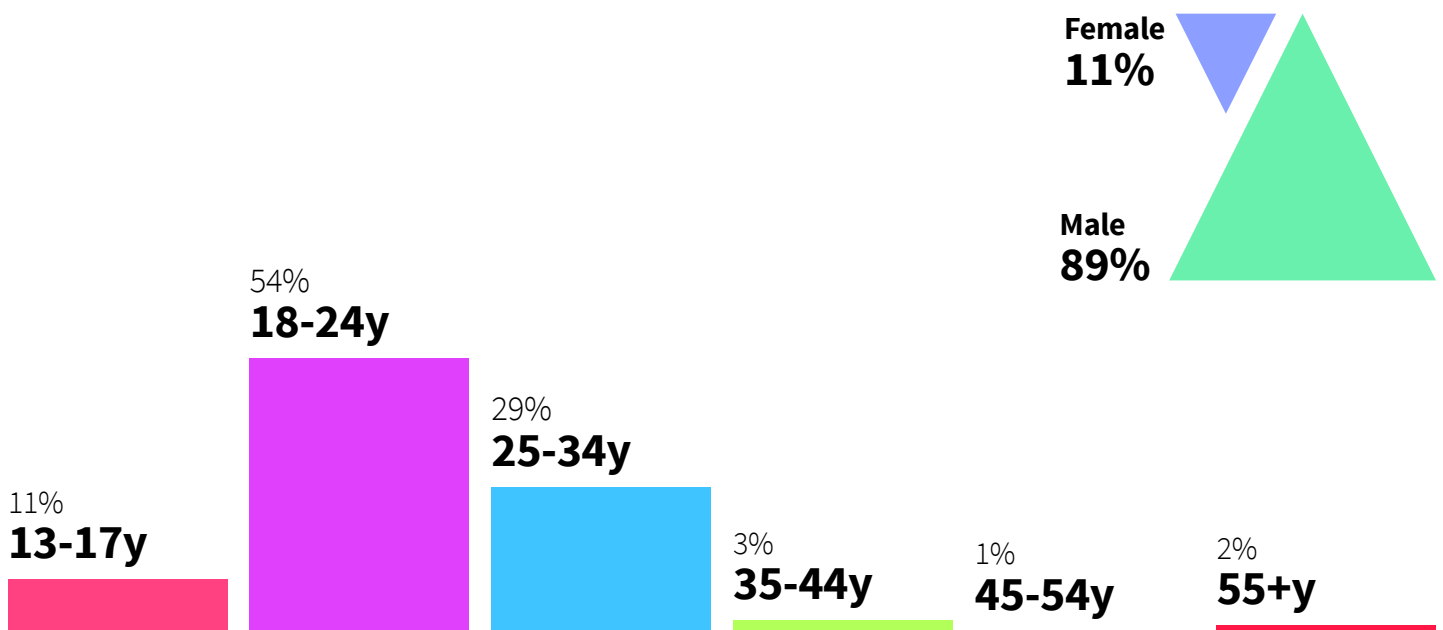
Key Recommendations

The UK Home Office 'Serious Violence Strategy' published in April 2018 emphasises that the Government's approach to reducing serious violence cannot focus solely on law enforcement. The strategy stipulates that the solution requires a 'multiple-strand approach' involving a range of partners across different sectors.

Moonshot CVE has gathered a small snapshot of data on the vulnerabilities of an audience whose online behaviour suggests they are potentially at risk of both consuming violent content online and being affected by violence offline. The richness, depth and granularity of this new data would all be augmented during a longer study, as part of which we would also directly challenge violent narratives in the same online spaces in which they are being sought and consumed, by providing constructive alternative content and support for individuals being drawn into violence.

Recommendation #1

In-depth research is carried out into the at-risk audience online

This pilot project tracked a limited number of indicators over just 16 days. A fuller programme of work would involve the creation of a much larger database of indicators, in part through consultation with subject matter experts and former perpetrators of serious violence. This would enable us to map engagement with violent or harmful content online, in order to:

- Better understand the scale and nature of the issue.
- Better understand the narratives that promote violence.
- Identify hotspots and the hidden impact of offline events.
- Improve allocation of resources and effectiveness of support services.

Recommendation #2

Run nationwide digital counter-content and counter-narrative campaigns

- Micro-targeted messaging campaigns can use online advertising services to provide at-risk search engine users with alternative, credible content.
- This content would challenge harmful narratives that seek to encourage or incite violence, in part through the use of credible, influential voices.

Recommendation #3

Run targeted online-to-offline interventions programmes

- Members of the at-risk audience should be presented with the opportunity to be individually contacted online by a support worker, with the ultimate aim of them receiving offline support. Moonshot CVE have developed innovative technology to initiate and manage this process at scale.
- This online-to-offline process would also involve the coordination of existing offline local services.
- This approach should focus on connecting individuals who are isolated and/or face physical risk in trying to get help with appropriate offline support services.

About Moonshot CVE
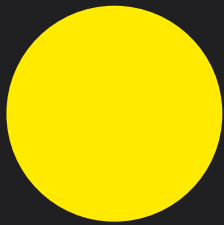
Moonshot CVE is a London-based social enterprise dedicated to undermining the proliferation of harmful content online. We design and deploy new data-driven methodologies and technologies to enhance the capacity of our partners to effectively respond to a wide range of social issues in the online space. Our work ranges from software development, training and capacity building to leading global counter-messaging campaigns.

We have applied our methodologies and technologies to address a range of policy areas, particularly those central to transition and post-conflict environments, including extremism, disinformation, human trafficking and irregular migration, gender-based violence (GBV), and weapons smuggling. To date, we have carried out our programming in over 30 countries.