

WEAPON-FREE ZONES IN GERMANY. THE NEW MIRACLE WEAPON AGAINST KNIFE CRIME?

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to examine and answer the question of whether and to what extent knife crime can be minimised by establishing weapon-free zones in Germany. Furthermore, an analysis will be conducted to determine whether there has actually been an increase in the number of knife crime cases. Secondary research was conducted as part of a literature review in order to answer the research questions. The focus here was on evaluation studies, scientific articles and police crime statistics (a statistical overview of crime in Germany). The study shows that there has indeed been an increase in violent crimes involving knives in Germany in recent years. However, based on the literature to date, it is at least questionable whether the establishment of weapon-free zones has led to a reduction in violent crimes involving knives. Rather, it is becoming clear that an increase in knife crime can only be countered by comprehensive prevention strategies. The establishment of weapon-free zones may be one piece of the puzzle in this context, but it is not a panacea on its own.*

Keywords: *knife crime; violent crime; Police crime statistics; crime prevention*

INTRODUCTION

The knife attack at a city festival in western Germany, which is believed to have been motivated by Islamism and in which three visitors were killed¹, marks the sad climax in 2024 of several years of increased media coverage of serious violent crimes involving knives. In addition to Islamist-motivated violence, reports of knife attacks in public spaces, often for trivial reasons, dominate the print media. Almost every day, new press articles appear that describe such acts, but also discuss the extent to which they occur and whether there is a possible increase in similar crimes. In the recent past, the media have suggested that knife crime has reached record levels, with case numbers steadily rising. (Hestermann 2023) analysed the reporting on this topic in national newspapers and on television and found that 81 of the 645 reports on violent crime in the first quarter of 2023 focused on crimes committed with knives. Deadly knife attacks are also significantly overrepresented. After politicians had already spoken out in the media in favour of tightening weapon laws and calling for more knife-free zones following the knife attack in Solingen, the Act to Improve Internal Security and the Asylum System came into force on 31 October 2024. The amendments to the Weapons Act (Waffengesetz abbreviation WaffG 2024), are derived from the Act. The amendment to the Weapons Act has expanded the options available to regional governments and the federal police for establishing weapon- and knife-free zones (Gesetz zur Verbesserung der inneren Sicherheit und des Asylsystems 2024). Although politicians often portray no-weapon zones as a panacea, the question inevitably arises as to what effect these zones actually have. The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate and answer the question of whether

and to what extent knife crime can be minimised by establishing weapon-free zones. Furthermore, it will be analysed whether there has actually been an increase in the number of knife crime cases.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used for this paper includes a review and analysis of the existing literature. As part of this literature analysis, the existing literature is not only reviewed, but also summarised, evaluated and interpreted in the context of the scientific question. This involves drawing on academic literature and evaluation studies, as well as the legal situation and, in isolated cases, media reports. Data harvesting is therefore carried out as part of secondary research and also includes an analysis of state statistics provided by Germany. An analysis of crime statistics provides the most up-to-date picture possible of the relevance and development of reported knife crime, with a particular focus on identifying any increase in the number of reported cases. However, by evaluating specialist literature and evaluation studies, much more information can be obtained about how research on weapon-free zones has developed and what actual benefits weapon-free zones can have in reducing knife crime.

RESULTS

Weapon-free zone – what is it?

Section 42 of the Weapons Act, as the federal legal basis, authorises state governments to restrict the carrying of weapons and knives and to establish prohibited zones by means of their own regulations. These prohibited zones may be established in areas with high crime rates, on public and heavily frequented streets, paths or squares, in railway stations or public transport, and in certain youth and educational institutions. Furthermore, the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Police are authorised to issue legal regulations and establish weapon-free zones in the vicinity of railway stations and public transport facilities (Section 42b WaffG). It is generally prohibited to wear weapons in weapon-free zones and carrying knives, regardless of blade length or design, in areas where weapons are prohibited. This means that, in addition to spring, drop, butterfly and fist knives, everyday knives such as pocket knives and fruit knives may not be carried in these weapon-free zones (BMI 2024b). By 2023, 11 of Germany's 16 federal states had already introduced special legislation to establish weapon-free zones. The Federal Police, which is independent of the state police forces and responsible for railway stations throughout Germany, has in the past issued general orders prohibiting weapons at railway stations. Four federal states are even extending the prohibited zones to include dangerous items such as stun guns and baseball bats (Reuter 2023, 29) and in certain areas, glass beverage containers are also prohibited by law (Polizei Hamburg n. d.a). The weapon-free zones are marked with signs (Fig. 1). In Hamburg, the sign warns people of the weapon ban and the ban on beverage containers before they enter the restricted area 'Hansaplatz' (a square in Hamburg) (Polizei Hamburg n. d.b).



Fig. 1. Sign indicating weapons prohibition zone in Hamburg Hansaplatz (Polizei Hamburg n. d.b)

From a criminal policy perspective, the focus of weapon-free zones is not necessarily on extending the restrictions imposed by weapons act, but rather on increasing state social control by expanding the scope of police powers and police control options (Lange 2024, 9). It stands to reason that a weapons-free zone only makes sense if the prohibitions in force there can also be enforced by the police. For this reason, the police carry out ‘random checks’ regardless of whether there is any suspicion of a crime (Reuter 2023, 30).

Exemplary presentation based on the weapon-free zone in Hamburg

Weapon-free zones can be established temporarily, for example for the duration of a public event, or permanently. The aforementioned Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg is a pioneer in the area of weapon-free zones. The legal ordinance prohibiting the carrying of weapons and dangerous objects was enacted in 2007. The weapon-free zone covers a geographically limited area and extends around Hansaplatz, the Reeperbahn (a well-known red-light district) including the entire area of the Reeperbahn S-Bahn railway station. In the first six months since the regulation came into force, the police seized a total of 109 knives in the weapon-free zones (Körting 2019, 23). The ban on weapons in these areas is permanent. In addition, the weapons ban was extended in 2009 by the Act on the Prohibition of Carrying and Selling Glass Beverage Containers in Certain Areas (GlasflaschenverbotsG 2009). The area is identical to the weapons-free zone and is temporary (the focus is on nights at weekends and before public holidays). During this period, it is pro-

hibited to carry or sell glass beverage containers (Polizei Hamburg n. d.a). As of 1 October 2023, a weapon-free zone was also introduced around Hamburg Central Station, followed in December 2024 by a new regulation banning weapons on buses, underground trains, ferries and underground stations (Polizei Hamburg 2024). The Federal Police imposes temporary weapon bans in railway stations by means of general orders. These bans are always limited in terms of space and time and apply to individual railway stations or sections of railway lines (Gerlemann et al. 2022, 337).

The knife as weapon – development of reported case

The phenomenon of ‘knife crime’ has only been recorded nationwide in police crime statistics since 1 January 2020. However, in the first year of data collection, the data was not considered valid, so it was not possible to evaluate the number of cases for 2020. Within police crime statistics, knife attacks are defined as follows: ‘Knife attacks, as defined in police crime statistics, are acts in which a knife is used to threaten or attack a person directly. Simply carrying a knife is not sufficient for an incident to be classified as a knife attack’ (BMI 2021, 9). For the reporting year 2021, it was possible to evaluate the number of cases, and a total of 10,917 knife attacks were recorded in the context of violent crime, of which 7,071 cases could be attributed to serious and dangerous bodily harm offences (BMI 2022, 12). In subsequent years, no overall figures were recorded; instead, the number of cases was published with reference to the offences of serious and dangerous bodily harm and robbery. For the reporting year 2022, 8,160 cases of assault resulting in serious and dangerous bodily injury and 4,195 cases of robbery were recorded (BMI 2023, 15). In the 2023 reporting year, the number of cases of serious and dangerous bodily harm rose to 8,951, and the number of robbery offences rose to 4,893 (BMI 2024a, 15). In 2024, there was a further increase in the number of incidents recorded as knife attacks in the category of serious and dangerous bodily harm, rising by 10.8 percent to 9,917 cases. There was a slight decline in robbery offences to 4,768 cases. Furthermore, the total number of knife attacks classified as violent crime was revised to 15,741 cases for 2024 (BMI 2025, 20). Looking at the overall trend in case numbers within the police crime statistics, an increase in absolute terms can therefore be observed since 2021. In fact, however, violent crime has risen overall, so that in relative terms only a minimal increase in knife attacks can be observed.

Development of knife crime in weapon-free zones

As part of his investigation into the Hanover weapons-free zone, (Kollakowski 2024) conducted a situation assessment based on case figures provided by the Hanover police for the years 2021-2023, using a before-and-after comparison. The analysis therefore took into account all violent crimes involving knives that came to the attention of the Hanover police (Kollakowski 2024, 704). Despite the reorientation of the weapons-free zone, a further increase in the number of cases was observed in the period 2021-2023, with a peak in 2022. Based on the number of cases, no reduction in violent crimes involving knives could be determined for the area covered by the weapons ban in Hanover. Nevertheless, expert interviews revealed that the weapon-free zone alone does not prevent serious crimes, but it does help to reduce

patterns of violence when knives are not used in physical altercations (Kollakowski 2024, 705).

The evaluation of the Wiesbaden weapon-free zone shows that weapon offences across the entire city increased significantly in 2021 and 2022 and also rose considerably compared to the years before the coronavirus pandemic. However, this trend was not observed within the weapon-free zone. Violent crimes have increased both in urban areas and in weapon-free zones compared to pre-coronavirus years. This suggests that, despite the high level of violence, the searches in the weapon-free zone prevented worse from happening. However, no scientific causal link can be established between the acts and the searches (Bannenberg et al. 2023, 10 ff.).

DISCUSSION

The demand for weapon-free zones by politicians and the media has recently been justified by the significant increase in knife crime. The available data from crime statistics certainly indicate an increase in knife crime in this context. However, when viewed overall, this increase is far lower than is sometimes suggested by the media. Furthermore, there are various distortion effects that influence police crime statistics³. Thus, it cannot be said with certainty whether the media coverage of knife crime and the increased public debate on the subject have led to a greater willingness among the population to report knife offences. With regard to the effect of weapon-free zones on reducing knife crime, there is little evidence and the problem is that the different survey and evaluation methods used in the few studies available do not allow for scientifically sound comparisons to be made. Although (Kollakowski 2024) analysis of the case numbers does not reveal any reduction in violent crimes involving knives, (Bannenberg et al. 2023) study does indicate an increase in objective safety with regard to weapons offences and seizures, even though knife offences were not examined in detail. However, no significant reduction in crime in general could be observed in any of the studies examined. In general, some of the findings are scientifically unsound because most of the studies refer to a period during the coronavirus pandemic, when measures had a general impact on crime rate trends in public spaces, meaning that the interpretation of the results is debatable, to say the least. As a result, further long-term comparisons must be sought in order to obtain detailed results.

CONCLUSION

The examination found that there has indeed been an increase in knife crime in Germany. However, based on the studies conducted to date, it is at least questionable whether the establishment of weapon-free zones has led to a reduction in violent crimes involving knives. In fact, a considerable number of knives are seized and isolated effects on crime are evident. However, the available data does not provide conclusive evidence of a significant reduction in crime. All studies assume that seizing knives prevents serious injuries during altercations. However, this cannot be scientifically proven. However, it is also clear that with every knife that is seized, one

less person can be injured. Furthermore, it is clear that a weapon-free zone can only contribute to reducing knife crime as part of a comprehensive prevention strategy that also addresses the root causes. Knives are used by people. Even if the number of offences can be reduced within weapon-free zones, there will be no lasting effect on the likelihood of offences being committed outside these zones. In order to combat knife crime, it is therefore necessary to establish weapon-free zones, exercise strict controls, ensure cooperation between authorities and implement prevention strategies.

NOTES

1. <https://www.dw.com/en/solingen-main-suspect-behind-deadly-attack-in-cus-tody/live-70038019#liveblog-post-70039413>
2. Detailed information on influencing factors (BMI 2025, 7)

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ЗОНИ БЕЗ ОРЪЖИЯ В ГЕРМАНИЯ. НОВОТО ЧУДОДЕЙНО ОРЪЖИЕ СРЕЩУ ПРЕСТЪПЛЕНИЯТА С НОЖОВЕ?

Резюме: Целта на тази статия е да разгледа и отговори на въпроса дали и до каква степен престъпленията с ножове могат да бъдат сведени до минимум чрез създаването на зони без оръжия в Германия. Освен това ще бъде проведен анализ, за да се определи дали действително е налице увеличение на броя на престъпленията с ножове. В рамките на литературния преглед беше проведено вторично проучване, за да се отговори на изследователските въпроси. Акцентът беше поставен върху оценъчни проучвания, научни статии и полицейска статистика за престъпността (статистически преглед на престъпността в Германия). Проучването показва, че през последните години в Германия наистина е налице увеличение на насилието с ножове. Въз основа на наличната литература обаче е най-малко спорно дали създаването на зони без оръжия е довело до намаляване на насилието с ножове. По-скоро става ясно, че на увеличаването на престъпленията с ножове може да бъде противодействано само с комплексни стратегии за превенция. Създаването на зони без оръжия може да бъде една от частите на пъзела в този контекст, но само по себе си не е панацея.

Ключови думи: престъпления с нож; насилствени престъпления; полицейска статистика за престъпленията; превенция на престъпността

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