

PRESS RELEASE

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UNDERAGE KNIFE SALE PENALTIES FAIL TO DETER RETAILERS

- **One in four teenage mystery shoppers bought knives on high street in 2017 without age checks**
- **Pass rates are little better than 10 years ago despite rising test volumes and new voluntary agreement**
- **Online retailers and delivery companies failing to act responsibly on underage sales**
- **Serve Legal calls for harsher penalties for retailers breaking the law**

Knives were sold by high street retailers to one in four teenage mystery shoppers last year without proof of age being requested, according to new data from Serve Legal, the UK's leading retail age check company.

In over 2,350 knife sale test visits undertaken by the company across the UK in 2017, 26 per cent of sales went unchallenged. This comes despite the fact that prominent retailers have signed the government's [voluntary agreement](#) on underage knife sales. Selling a knife*, blade or axe to a person under the age of 18 years is illegal in England and Wales. In Scotland, the law allows those aged 16 and over to buy kitchen knives. All young people attempting to buy a knife in person should be asked to show official identification such as a passport, photocard driving licence or PASS-accredited (Proof of Age Standards Scheme) identification.

Homeware and DIY stores were the worst high-street culprits, selling knives to four in ten (41 per cent) young mystery shoppers without requesting age identification. Supermarkets fared better but still failed one in five (21 per cent) age check tests. London had the UK's highest pass rate at 82 per cent – a likely outcome of Operation Sceptre, the Metropolitan Police's anti knife crime programme - but retailer commitment to testing fell by five per cent vs. 2016 (232 tests in 2017 vs. 245 in 2016). Scotland and Northern Ireland had the UK's lowest knife test pass rates at 59 per cent each.

While retailers have increased their commitment to age check testing for knife sales in the last ten years (Serve Legal undertook 2,357 knife sale tests in 2017 vs. 1,003 tests in 2009), staff performance has failed to keep step. Test pass rates decreased by one percentage point in 2017 compared to 2016 (75 per cent)

and were only one percentage point higher than nine years ago when Serve Legal's test programmes began (74% in 2017 compared to 73% in 2009).

Alcohol sale test pass rates, by comparison, have been 80 per cent and over for the last five years, with nearly twenty times as many tests undertaken by Serve Legal on behalf of high street retailers as knife sale tests (49,067 alcohol sale tests in 2017 vs. 2,357 knife sale tests).

Knife crime in England and Wales increased by 22 per cent in 2017 according to the Office of National Statistics (ONS)¹. Ministry of Justice² data shows that children under the age of 18 carried out 21 per cent of the nearly 21,000 offences committed in England and Wales in 2017 involving a knife or offensive weapon. NHS England data shows that 15 per cent of those admitted to hospital for assault by sharp object in 2016/17 were under the age of 18³.

Ed Heaven, Director of Serve Legal said: "Against a backdrop of rising knife crime, news headlines about school-age victims and perpetrators are shockingly frequent. Our latest retail test data reveals that despite the principles of the government's voluntary agreement on underage sales, which many retailers have agreed to adhere to, complacency on the high street could well be contributing to a deadly societal problem, with knives being sold to young people in plain sight."

"The fact that so many high street retailers and their staff are prepared to take the risk of putting deadly weapons into the hands of young people is proof that the threat of a fine and six months' imprisonment if convicted is not a punitive deterrent. A review of penalties for underage knife sales is well overdue and should be part of the Home Office's new Serious Violence Strategy, with tougher penalties for any retailer not able to demonstrate the requisite due diligence if they fail a local authority or police knife test. The only way that retailers can be sure that they are operating responsibly and within the law is to independently test the performance of their staff, training, systems and operations. We have never failed to see a retailer improve its pass rate once it commits to a rigorous, regular testing programme."

¹ Crime Survey for England and Wales year ending 2017, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingdecember2017>

² Ministry of Justice, Knife and offensive weapon sentencing quarterly October to December 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/knife-and-offensive-weapon-sentencing-quarterly-october-to-december-2017>

³ NHS Digital, Hospital Admitted Patient Care Report, 2016/17, <https://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB30098>

Online retailers came under scrutiny too. In 1,600 online test sales of age-restricted goods - including knives - last year, 59 per cent of Serve Legal's mystery shoppers were handed age-restricted goods on the doorstep unchallenged. The test purchase pass rate for online retailers has been falling since 2014 and their commitment to testing is extremely low.

Ed Heaver said: "We are the only organisation operating at scale in the UK to audit online retailers' performance around age-checks, both at the point of purchase online and at the point of delivery. Our data presents a worrying picture with no progress on pass rates in recent years. It isn't enough for online retailers to have age identification checks on their websites - responsible behaviour should be guaranteed throughout the sale and delivery process. If there is confusion amongst retailers and their delivery companies about where responsibility lies for checking a young customer's age on the doorstep, the Government must clarify, and then more aggressively enforce, legislation."

The Home Secretary's new Offensive Weapons Bill brings forward plans to ban home deliveries for knives bought online. Under the new legislation, customers will have to collect their purchase from a designated collection point. Details of how this will work in practice and how age checks will be enforced, however, are yet to be announced.

- Ends -

* Excluding folding pocket knives if the cutting blade is less than 7.62cm (three inches) long.

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Notes to Editors:

Serve Legal provides an independent test purchase service for retailers of age restricted products across the UK to check staff are checking young people for ID. Using a database of mystery shoppers, the company conducts around 100,000 tests a year across the UK for both major blue-chip multiples and single site independents.

To pass a test, Serve Legal visitors purchase an age-restricted item (knife, alcohol or tobacco) and record key information about the transaction, including whether ID was requested, a description of the server, a till receipt and other key facts. All visitors are young-looking 18 and 19-year olds and should be asked to provide ID to complete the transaction. If a visitor is required to provide official ID to complete the transaction, the site passes. If items are purchased without ID being requested, the site fails. Only passports, photocard driving licences or PASS-accredited identification is accepted.

www.servelegal.co.uk