

## Why stopping acid attacks is a matter of chemical weapons control

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## THE CONVERSATION

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# Why stopping acid attacks is a matter of chemical weapons control

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Wise up. YegoeVdo22 via Shutterstock

The use of acid as part of violent crime is apparently on the rise in the UK, and various efforts are being made to reverse what's become a very disturbing trend.

The Daily Express has started a campaign to “end the evil of acid attacks”, hot on the heels of a similar initiative by **The Sun**. Both campaigns focus on restricting access to the types of acid most commonly used in such attacks. The Express has launched a petition demanding that “the sale of any acid which could be used as a weapon be properly licensed”.

These campaigns are noble enough – but they raise some rather difficult questions.

Would such controls be practically feasible? Obviously, for this proposal to work, it would need to be substantially refined in terms of scope and implementation. This might mean the identification and restriction of specific products, or of ways to purchase acid that are particularly concerning.

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Without refinement, we risk a situation in which the very idea of licensing is discounted as unfeasible, without due consideration being given to more modest and realistic proposals.

It's worth noting, for example, that **Acid Survivors Trust International** has already demonstrated the value of curbing availability in countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In the UK, a sustainable approach to dealing with acid violence will need to involve a web of measures, not just one or two new laws or regulations. This means tightening up existing health and safety and product legislation if necessary, as well as getting producers, suppliers and retailers on board and supporting the accreditation of responsible business practices. Nonetheless, a determined individual would always be able to identify and purchase one of the wide range of products that contain strong acid.

But there's another problem besides. If we treat this as a simple material control issue, focusing exclusively on the weapon, we risk neglecting both the motivations behind acid attacks and the obligation to support survivors.

## **On the rise**

The reported rise in attacks in Britain, and elsewhere in the world, cannot be explained by increased availability alone.

Media coverage, for instance, plays an obvious part. It is of course important to stigmatise and punish those who commit such acts of violence, but the use of sensational language and graphic images of injury may perversely increase the appeal of these weapons to those who would use them. This is in addition to discussions of whether certain types of coverage might further stigmatise victims.

We have had a similar debate time and again in relation to school shootings; it's time to have one about acid violence.

The need for tighter regulation mustn't obscure the urgent imperative to provide support. That's especially true in parts of the world where medical care may not be available and where survivors may face social, psychological and economic consequences which need direct responses; and which could be alleviated in the long term through public education.

Finally, we must reflect on how society should respond to this issue at national and international level. The development of national strategies on this issue will undoubtedly be important. And some of these strategies will need to be tailored to the specific groups who are targeted – such as women and girls.

## **Acid is a chemical weapon**

For example, in 2010, the British government set up a new national strategy on combating **Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)**, focusing mainly on domestic and sexual violence, but also on other forms of harm including stalking, forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

A key question is whether the government will commit to specifically tackle acid violence against women and girls, in terms of regulating access to acids, as well as support to victims.

It is also essential to remember that these debates are international and act accordingly. One particularly well placed organisation could be the **Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)**. Acid violence shares many characteristics with traditional chemical warfare agents in terms of its effects on the human body.

However, the fact that acid violence attacks are rarely associated with mass casualty events has made them all too easy to ignore. As a result, it the OPCW seems not to have dealt with the issue in any depth.

But things can change. The Nobel Peace Prize winning organisation has long dealt with the prevention of other kinds of chemical violence, and has experience in controlling chemicals which can be used for hostile as well as peaceful purposes. Moreover, the OPCW advocates the provision of support for victims of **chemical warfare**. It strikes us that the OPCW could be the right place to foster a meaningful international response.

It's not possible to simply regulate acid violence out of existence. We must take a much closer look at the causes and consequences of these crimes – and do everything we can to foster a sense of global responsibility to those affected.

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