

Self-defence? No, this is murder

Extreme self defence courses are increasing in popularity. Will Pavia joins the office workers across Britain who are learning how to burst eardrums and break ankles

Adrian Siman is a former kickboxer from Transylvania with crew-cut hair, a short, muscular body and an imagination that would keep half-a-dozen airport thriller writers busy for the rest of their lives.

"Imagine the top of a 24-storey building," he shouts to his ten students. "You fall off. No parachute. Problem! And now an attacker is going for your neck."

We are in fact on the ground floor of a gymnasium in Central London where Siman is teaching Krav Maga, a form of self-defence initially developed for the Israel Defence Forces and adapted for use by various law enforcement agencies and

others who work in dark and delicate professions and seldom carry business cards.

This evening, however, the class includes marketing executives, IT workers, company directors and a quantity surveyor from Croydon. They work in well-lit offices in a stable part of the world with active health-and-safety directives. None has yet been called upon to take down a rogue combatant on a rooftop.

In the past four years the class has grown from a handful of self-defence fanatics to more than 20 ordinary-looking office workers. Siman travels up and down the country teaching other weekly classes.

"When I started there were around 50 Krav Maga instructors in the UK," he says. "Now there are nearly 200."

The extreme self-defence business is booming. Precisely how many more people now know how to gouge an eyeball

or burst an eardrum is hard to quantify, but Krav Maga and other schools are flourishing too, boosted by a perception that random acts of violent crime are on the increase.

Proponents of each discipline argue that fighting techniques developed to defend castles from advancing samurai are no good against a knife-wielding crack addict in inner cities. Instead of martial arts, they

teach ever-evolving "systems" that sound like the titles of Steven Segal films: Tactical Edge, Combat Self-Defence or Target Focus Training.

Usually they claim some link to the military, or better, the Special Forces; they teach participants to deal with situations of extreme violence by using extreme violence: by bursting eardrums, rupturing testicles and breaking ankles. They teach



their adherents to prepare for the worst. All over the country, office workers are learning how to defend themselves on the edge of rooftops.

Siman's students divide into two groups: half play the crazed attacker, the rest play Jason Bourne, throwing wrist blocks and walloping their assailants with an open palm.

In the next horrifying scenario the students were in an alleyway. "Someone can come up behind you, arm round your neck, put you in the van," says Siman. He did not specify what sort of van. The class commenced strangling each other. "Remember safety in training guys!" he shouts. "Don't bite properly."

"This is the difference between martial arts and Krav Maga," Siman says after the class. We are sitting in a nearby noodle restaurant, and he is pouring an entire dish of blood-red chilli sauce on to his Singapore Fried Rice. "It's very realistic. This is the reality. It's what can happen on the street."

One of his students, Paul Riches, 46, who runs a recruitment company, jumps in. "Someone was shot dead outside Kennington Underground station last week," he says. "People are frightened of some nutter coming towards them."

The British Crime Survey, based on interviews with a representative sample of people in England and Wales, suggested the violent crime rate is stable: longer term, the number of violent incidents has fallen by half since 1995. But 75 per cent of people thought that crime was rising and even more people were convinced that serious violent crime was up. Why is this?

"By most objective indications England is one of the safest nations on Earth," says Lawrence Sherman, a professor of criminology at Cambridge University. To explain what he sees as the yawning gulf between perception and reality, he refers to the theories of the 19th-century French sociologist Émile Durkheim. "Whenever the borders of a society become unclear, whenever there is increased uncertainty about what it means to be French, or British, whenever there is increased immigration, people fear crime," he says.

The professor will, however, allow one caveat: "Victimisation surveys say that young males are three times more likely to be assaulted in Britain than in the US," he says.

Advocates of extreme self-defence

systems are able to point to some recent,

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high-profile crimes as evidence that innocents are sometimes caught in situations where a violent response is the only option. They include the brutal murder of the teenager Ben Kinsella, who was stabbed 11 times in the chest, shoulder and heart over a fight that he had nothing to do with, and the City lawyer Tom ap Rhys Pryce, who was stabbed to death at a Tube station even after he had handed over his mobile phone and his wallet.

Tim Larkin, head of the Las Vegas-based school Target Focus Training, referred to both cases when he arrived in Britain in September to teach a weekend course in Slough. The class begins with the screening of CCTV footage. "We show videos of people getting murdered... so people can see what we are talking about," he says. The problem, as he sees it, is that "in the past 30 years we have stigmatised violence to the point where the only people it's available to are predators".

His mission is to redress that balance. Learning to use extreme violence is, he says, rather like learning to swim: hopefully you will never have to swim for your life, but if it ever happens that you do, knowing instinctively how to react will be vital.

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e meet in St James's Park and retire to a dark alleyway. Spencer McGauley, 36, a sports thera-

pist and tutor of Larkin's methods in London, pins me against a wall and presses a rubber knife beneath my chin.

It is surprising how utterly disorientating this feels, even when you know your attacker is a mild-mannered gentleman who spends his days treating injured rugby players.

"If you go for the knife you are going to get stabbed," says Larkin. "You have to shut him down first." He teaches victims to lean in towards their attackers, giving them less room to manoeuvre, planting thumbs in eyeballs, bursting eardrums with hard slaps to the side of the head, punching for the throat to effect asphyxiation and grabbing "a good fistful" of testicles and "giving them a squeeze".

It was all deeply unpleasant — unglamorous, graceless, the precise opposite of a Bruce Lee film — but by such means, according to Larkin, a small woman can fend off a much larger man.

He says that around 70 per cent of those who attend his classes come because they have experienced a violent incident. At Adrian Siman's class it was less clear cut: a few people had stories to tell, often involving other people, but most began training out of a more general anxiety.

Stelios Papadopoulos, 34, who works in IT, had escaped from a brawl on a night bus. Liam Waltherman, 30, from Croydon, knew someone who had been stabbed to death on a night bus. "I know someone else

who got stabbed too," he says. "Although he was playing about with someone's missus".

Ayo Johnson, 37, originally from Nigeria, a huge man who runs a concierge company, had done a lot of weight training but felt that "there was no point being muscular and not being effective."

"I can't just walk down the street thinking: 'I'm a big man so no one is going to attack me,'" he says. Last year he went on a course that simulated attacks in different situations. "It was called City Extreme," he says. "It simulated what it was like to get attacked on a bus, on a train, on an aeroplane. Real-life stuff."

The thought of being attacked on a plane apparently caused many to take self-defence classes following 9/11. Before that, Larkin was mainly training police, military personnel and business people working in Third World countries.



"People said to themselves: 'What if I had been on the plane?'" he says. "Then they thought, 'What if it happens to me in a car park?'"

To prove that the training works, Larkin tells stories of former pupils who have fought off attackers: one is a startling account of a young female student who woke in her dorm room to find a serial rapist lying on top of her.

"She had one of those bunk beds that is built above a desk. She woke up and this guy was on top of her with a knife... she started gouging his eye, he had a violent reaction, she held on, they fell off the bed. There was a hard wood floor. Her arm goes under his neck, she lands on top of him. She is like 110lb, this guy was 220lb, but she had broken his neck... By the time security got there he had asphyxiated. He was dead. He turned out to have previously committed six rapes."

He is very convincing and so are his fellow tutors. It's hard to argue with the assertion that waking up with a rapist on top of you is a "non-negotiable situation".

Still, I found all the eye gouging and throat punching troubling. Late that night I was standing at a bus stop in South London beside three young men, wondering what I would do if one of them attacked. I began to imagine bursting eyeballs and breaking ankles.

When we got on the bus I sized up my fellow passengers. I began to worry that I might misinterpret a situation and begin maiming everyone in sight, "shutting down human beings" and putting them in "a non-functioning state", as Larkin would say. Adrian Siman said Krav Maga enabled his students to live in a constant state of preparation: I'm just not sure I would want to live like that.

Back at the Cambridge Institute of Criminology, Professor Sherman was also unconvinced. "Does it teach you to protect yourself or does it cause recklessness?" he asks. His own self-defence mantra for any young man growing up in Britain runs as follows: "You must understand the difference between a culture of honour and a culture of dignity. A culture of honour says leave no insult unchallenged, a culture of dignity says leave no insult acknowledged."

One could equally make a case for studying the British Crime Survey itself, and attempting to live by its lessons. The surveyors found that one's likelihood of

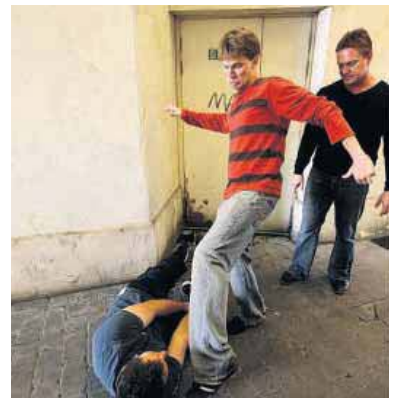
becoming a victim of violent crime was "likely to be related to lifestyle".

People who visited nightclubs more than once a week in the month before interview were at greater risk (12.4 per cent) of suffering an attack than those who visited nightclubs less than once a week; for them the risk was 6.6 per cent. Those who never visited nightclubs had a risk of only 2.2 per cent. So if you really want to avoid violence, don't go clubbing. It's murder on the dancefloor.





Above, a Krav Maga (close combat) training session; right, Will Pavia gets stuck in at Target Focus Training



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