Policing the Crisis in the 21st Century; the making of "knife crime youths" in Britain

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Abstract

The terms 'knife crime' and 'knife culture' were first established in British crime discourse at the turn of 21st century and represent a particular re-making of youth in post-industrial Britain. The generational impacts of advanced neoliberalism have intensified conflict between marginalised young people in the UK as they compete for success in high-risk informal economies and navigate the normalised brutalities of everyday violence. However, the impact of extreme inequality and structural violence on children has not been central in the response to youth-on-youth knife homicides in the 2000s and 2010s. Instead, these decades have been characterised by punitiveness and surveillance, increasing discriminatory stop and search practices and extending powers that target and control young people. Through conjunctural analysis of the making of 'knife crime youths' in the UK, this paper considers how shifting forms of cultural racism have been able to rearticulate child violence as cultural deficit, using race once again to work through the contradictions of late capitalism. Applying a radical criminological understanding of deviance labelling as a specific response to crime, this paper asks: To what extent is the construction of 'knife crime' a continuation of *Policing the Crisis* in the 21st century? And why has this process been relatively uncritiqued by practitioners and academics that contribute to 'knife crime' discourse? Using document, archive and discourse analysis this paper presents a social history of 'knife crime youths', depicting the formative interactions that have so far been obscured by the matter-of-fact dominance of the label and its practices.

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Introduction; rethinking 'knife crime youths'

The term 'knife crime' is selectively used in British media to refer to a particular type of criminality. When used by the press, politicians, police and other authorised spokespeople, the label infers a particular context and demographic that has now become common knowledge in public discourse. As such, when 'knife crime' is mentioned in Britain, it will likely be assumed that we are talking about a type of crime that is distinctly youthful, that this is a problem located in the inner-city (particularly London), and that this crime type is characterised by youth culture disproportionately represented by Black or Asian young people. This article will retrace the interactions and communications that gradually assigned these associated meanings through the 2000s, arguing that the construction of 'knife crime youths' has performed a crucial hegemonic function by both facilitating cohesive social outrage and justifying the extension of police powers in post-industrial Britain.

The utility of 'youth crime' in political and social management has previously been detailed by sociologists and criminologists, recognising the cross-party commitment to 'law and order' political strategies from the 1970s onwards (Cohen, 1972; Gilroy, 1987; Hall et al., 1978; Muncie, 2009; Pitts, 2001). The discourse of 'youth crime' has been described as 'electoral glue' (Pitts, 2001, p. 2) due to its capacity to construct consensus through fear, binding together the priority interests of different social classes, as well as presenting party unity through a clear common cause (ibid.). Existing research demonstrates how this cohesive collective anxiety requires routine renewal, through the emergence of novel moral panics (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978). Some of the most effective and enduring of these, are those that concern the eroding morality of today's youth.

The concept of 'youth' is itself a social construct. Its meaning has evolved and adapted over time, reflecting the cultural, political and social context of its use (Jones, 2009). Anthropological studies of 'youth' have found it to be a shifting cultural category depending on socio-political circumstances, often telling us more about the society in question than about the youths themselves (Bucholtz, 2002). Whilst the term usually denotes a period of development that is between childhood and adulthood, there is no universal definition or age parameter for this distinction. Unlike 'child' and 'adult' the terms 'youth' and 'young people' tend to carry negative connotations; *''Youth' and 'adolescence' usually conjure up a number of emotive and troubling images… notions of uncontrolled freedom, violence, irresponsibility, vulgarity, rebellion and dangerousness to those of deficiency, vulnerability, neglect, deprivation or immaturity'* (Muncie, 2009, p. 4).

There is certainly no legal definition of 'youth'; in England and Wales a child legally becomes an adult when they turn 18 years old (Family Law Reform Act, 1969) with no intermediary terminology. In statutory youth services however, a 'young person' is defined as between the ages of 11 and 25 (Goddard, 2021). Whilst in healthcare, the label is used to imply knowledge and decision-making capacity, with practitioners advised by the General Medical Council that for those aged under 18, '*use the term 'young people' to refer to older or more experienced*

children who are more likely to be able to make these decisions for themselves' (GMC, 2013, Appendix 2). Somewhat ironically, the 'Youth Justice Board' of England and Wales, has distanced itself from the language of 'youth' and 'young people' in recent years, advocating a 'child first' approach that reinforces the legal 'child' status through language, and highlights the reduced risk assessment skills of those aged under 18 (Goddard, 2021). Reflecting this same imperative of recognising developmental and social vulnerabilities, this article uses the term 'young people' to denote a broad category of individuals aged between 11 and 25, and 'child' or 'children' is used when referring specifically to those aged under 18.

For a category of criminality so closely attached to 'youth', available data on 'knife crime' offences differentiated by age is surprisingly limited (Williams & Squires, 2021, p. 6). If we were to use a legal definition of adulthood beginning at age 18, statistics would suggest sharp instrument assault is predominantly an adult problem. Available recorded crime rates show that 10–17 year olds represent around one in five of knife crime perpetrators (Allen & Audickas, 2018) with the majority of knife possession offences recorded and those admitted to hospital for assault by sharp instrument being over the age of 18; 82% and 83% respectively (Allen & Harding, 2021). If we apply a broader definition of 'youth' to include those aged between 10 and 24[1] we find that young people admitted to hospital with sharp instrument assault injury in 2020/21 make up 41% of all admissions (NHS Digital, 2021). This figure is not significantly different to the 38% of admissions for the comparable age range of 25 to 39 (ibid.), suggesting that sharp instrument injuries are by no means limited to 'youth'.

Meanwhile, the highest rates of offences involving a sharp instrument in 2020/2021 were in the West Midlands, *not* London, with the highest proportional increase in Surrey (Allen & Harding, 2021). In the UK, Black and Asian families are twice as likely to live in disadvantaged areas than their white counterparts (Gov.uk, 2018) and are therefore disproportionately exposed to violence and crime in impoverished environments (Eades et al., 2007). However, once economic factors are accounted for, there is no correlation between ethnicity and knife offending (Eades et al., 2007; Williams & Squires, 2021; Smith, 2005; Haylock et al., 2020).

It is true however, that a minority of young people carry and use knives in conflict and the death of young people and children through interpersonal violence *is* a devastating reality in contemporary Britain. Each young life cut short is a tragedy that sends shockwaves of trauma and harm through families and communities that are impacted. To be clear, it is not the intention of this paper to deny this reality, but rather to acknowledge that the framing of this violence through a constructed idea of 'knife crime youths' has had deliberate and harmful consequences. For all the talk of 'tackling knife crime' we've seen very little change in rates of violence and homicide amongst young people. Recorded knife offences were reported as reaching a record high in 2019 with the Office of National

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[1] This the closest comparison to the 11 to 25 age category of 'youth' that available NHS data allows.

Statistics recording 45,627 offences, an increase of 7% from the year before and a 49% increase from 2011 (ONS, 2019). In 2021, London recorded its highest ever level of 'teenage homicides' in a single year (Slawson, 2021).

Over a decade ago, in 2008, the Met police declared 'war on knife crime' (Edwards et al., 2008), forming a specialist taskforce of one hundred and fifty uniformed officers targeting ten boroughs to conduct unlimited stop and search operations. Within a year, the use of controversial 'Sect. 60' searches, that do not require police to have 'reasonable grounds' for suspicion, underwent a six-fold increase to over 121,000 searches, whilst Sect. 1 searches (in which officers must have reasonable grounds for the search) doubled (Williams & Squires, 2021, pp. 207, 208). The total number of searches in London increased by 292% in 2008 with the proportion of Sect. 60 searches increasing from 26 to 59% of *weapon related* searches (Williams & Squires, 2021, p. 208). Racial disproportionality in stop and search more than doubled during this period. In 2007 Black people were 4.1 times more likely to be searched in London than white people, by 2008 they were 9.7 times more likely to be stopped (EHRC, 2012, pp. 24, 25). Whilst arrest rates, that are often seen as a measure of stop and search success, halved from 4 to 2% throughout this period (McCandless et al., 2016).

The strategy of extending police powers and targeting young Black people has been operational since 2008, and yet the recent figures of knife offences suggest this previous approach has been ineffective. Nevertheless, during the 2019 general election campaign Boris Johnson reiterates the same law and order response as 2008, promising a '*majority Conservative government would come down hard on the scourge of knife crime*' ('Boris Johnson: We will…', 2019), through more stop and search powers, faster processing through the courts and harsher sentencing (ibid.). After success at the polls, the subsequent Conservative government introduced Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPO) as part of The Offence Weapons Act 2019. Described as providing an 'additional preventive tool' for use by police, critics have argued that KCPOs '*explicitly target children, unduly affect Black children, and are disproportionate, stigmatizing, and restrictive*' (Hendry, 2022, p. 382). In 2022 there was a recommitment to Sect. 60 searches, despite their impact on disproportionality and community relations, with the Home Office extending the powers to search without the need for grounds to a greater number of officers for longer periods of time (Home Office, 2022). With no evidence of its effectiveness (McCandless et al., 2016; Tiratelli et al., 2018) this persistent commitment to a policing solution and the cyclical extension and retreat of policing powers in response to 'knife crime youths' requires further interrogation.

In summary, there is no statistical justification for the framing of 'knife crime' as a youth phenomenon and yet the construction of knife crime youths has been largely unchallenged and increasingly racialised in public discourse. This paper will consider significant events in the making of 'knife crime youths', first retracing the events that defined knife crime through age, and secondly through race. Applying a radical criminological understanding of deviance labelling as a specific response to crime (Becker, 1963; Hall et al., 1978; Cohen, 1972) this paper asks: To what extent is the construction of 'knife crime' a continuation of *Policing the*

Crisis in the 21st century? And why has this process been relatively uncritiqued by practitioners and academics that contribute to 'knife crime' discourse?

Research methods

This paper presents the results of document and archive, case studies and content analysis, depicting key moments in the construction of 'knife crime youths' in Britain. Secondary documents of news articles were identified for content analysis using the online database ProQuest, with the initial search criteria of news containing the exact phrase 'knife crime'. Significant events in the construction of knife crime identified through content analysis were then more closely analysed as case studies, searching for all related reports. The specific cases that will be considered in depth in this paper are the death of Luke Walmsley in 2003, a 14 year old boy stabbed while at school in Lincolnshire, and the murder of Tom Rhys Pryce, a 31 year old lawyer killed in North London during a robbery. The analysis uses methods of discourse analysis (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002) to look closely at how meaning is constructed through language during these key moments in the history of knife crime. Using a framework of conjunctural analysis, as set out by Hall et al. (1978) these events are then contextualised in their political moment. Applying an interactionist approach (Becker, 1963) that sees all parties fit for investigation, this paper considers the actions and interests of the state, police and the media in the making of knife crime youths. Aspects of the analysis presented here formed part of the author's PhD research and is expanded on in the author's contribution to *'Rethinking Knife Crime; policing, violence and moral panic?'* (Williams & Squires, 2021).

A brief history of knife crime in the UK

Although rarely acknowledged within its discourse, the label 'knife crime' as a crime category in England and Wales has a relatively recent history. Originally a descriptor of particular forms of violence in Scotland in the 1990s, the term was first publicly used in the early 2000s to refer to a perceived new crime phenomenon emerging in England. Since then, its authority of reference has grown in such magnitude that the history of the label has been obscured. It has become such a matter-of-fact term in contemporary use that it functions as both a collective noun for knife related offences and an adjective denoting a criminal culture. British news headlines commonly reference 'knife crime thugs', 'knife crime youths' or 'knife crime gangs' without justification of the label's meaning or the criteria of its attachment.

Meanwhile, government institutions, police, the justice system, and scholars, all consistently acknowledge difficulty in establishing a workable, evidence-based definition of 'knife crime' (Silvestri et al., 2009; Gliga 2009; Eades et al., 2007; Squires et al., 2008; Squires, 2011; Williams & Squires, 2021). It was made clear in the Home Office Select Committee report on Knife Crime in 2009, that not only was there no legal definition of knife crime, but the phrase has been constructed by the press as a specific youth issue. They write, '*[t]here is no Home*

Office definition of 'knife crime'. The phrase was adopted by the media and is now popularly used to refer primarily to stabbings but also to the illegal carrying of knives by young people in a public place or on school premises' (HASC 2009, para. 4). It is somewhat surprising then, that the phrase continues to be used with great influence and authority in popular discourse, policing strategy, legislation, academic literature, and public policy.

The introduction of the 'knife enabled' police crime code by London's Met Police in 2001 was an instrumental shift in the way offences with knives are recorded. This new 'tick box' in police crime recording systems became the statistical foundation for the crime category 'knife crime' that emerges in the early 2000s and begins a process of understanding youth violence through the weapon used for the first time in England and Wales. Along with blades, the definition of 'knife enabled' by the Home Office includes all sharp instruments such as screw drivers, broken bottles or glass and the data generated often makes no distinction between incidences of domestic violence, bar brawls, theft, sexual assault, or the age of the offender (Eades et al., 2007; HASC 2009).

The lack of a clear definition of 'knife crime', couple with the increased attention and proactive policing responses towards the phenomenon, have no doubt impacted on the data that is used to measure the problem. The police themselves have acknowledged that increases in stop and search can inflate official knife offence figures (Squires et al., 2008, p. 20) and the toughening and extension of possession laws targeting knife carrying has been found to increase the likelihood of knife offences being committed by expanding the range of behaviours and actions considered criminal (Eades et al., 2007).

It is a fact that across all ages, knives continue to be the most frequently employed murder weapon in England and Wales (Brookman, 2005). They were employed in just over a third of all recorded homicides, involving both male and female victims, throughout the ten years to 2019. The ONS data showed that knives were also the most frequently employed weapon in cases of domestic violence (ONS, 2019). On overage two women are killed by a partner or former partner every week in England and Wales (ONS, 2015), and statistically children are far more likely to be killed by a parent than another young person (Silvestri et al., 2009). But despite adult violence in the home (where knives and sharp instruments are readily available) producing a large amount of 'knife crime' data, it is not considered a dominant context for knife crime research or a policy priority (Cook & Walklate, 2020, p. 4).

It is also notable that homicide rates have steadily increased year on year since the 1950's. However, within these figures, killing with a sharp instrument has remained a relatively constant proportion of all homicides including during the decade in which the panic over 'knife crime' first emerged (Eades et al., 2007). Looking at offensive knife use as a percentage of all violent offences from 1997 to 2007 it remained between 5 and 8% throughout the first alleged 'knife crime epidemic' (Eades et al., 2007, p. 18). And examining the figures covering later phases of concern over 'knife crime' the same picture is revealed – between 2007–2017, knife use also remained between 5 and 8% of all violent offences (Allen & Audickas, 2018). Describing knife homicide and violent crime figures in isolation from their

proportion of the total or rates of violent crime and domestic violence, is one way in which 'knife crime' data is commonly misrepresented as a growing youth problem.

Whilst the data included in the 'knife crime' category is broad, its application has increasingly narrowed. From 2006 onwards 'knife crime' became a crime label predominantly attached to the actions of a particular demographic; young, Black, inner-city males. Nowhere is this clearer than when then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, stated during a speech in 2007; '*In respect of knife and gun gangs… we won't stop this by pretending it isn't young black kids doing it*' (UKPOL, 2007). With more violent overtones, in 2018 the BBC broadcast a Question Time audience member calling knife perpetrators '*a particular breed of human who… should be dealt with like the cancer they are and exterminated*' (Evans, 2018). The use of the label has become racially selective in the press, with analysis of 'knife crime' reports during the year of 2017 finding that in all national press other than The *Guardian*, the phrase 'knife crime' was only used to describe incidents when the victim was a 'Black teen' or child located in a city (Younge, 2018). If the label 'knife crime' is *only* applied to cases of knife enabled violence when the victim is young, Black and living in a city, it is not surprising that the category has come to be understood as a problem distinctly young, Black and urban – despite all evidence to the contrary.

Policing the crisis in the 1970s; 'mugging' revisited.

It is the argument of this paper that the construction of 'knife crime youths' since 2001 has combined existing social anxieties surrounding age and race to produce an enduring 'criminal Other' upon which state violence can be enacted and social order maintained. The construction of 'Black youths' as 'criminal Other' is a process that has been extensively researched elsewhere (White, 2020; Alexander, 2008, Elliot-Cooper 2021; Jefferson, 1993; Pearson 1983; Gilroy, 1987; Williams, 2015). With attention to police crime-work in particular, Jefferson (1993) argues that all available evidence, historical and contemporary, is only compatible with the notion that policing '*consists, essentially, of reproducing a criminal Other utilising a discourse of criminality rooted in notions of differential crime proneness*' (Jefferson, 1993, p. 27), in order to prevent oppressed groups become 'dangerous classes'. Moving through various groups since the birth of modern policing in 1829, the 'criminal Other' has been periodically defined and redefined through class, ethnicity, age and gender with the most recent of these groups being young Black males (Jefferson, 1993; Pearson 1983).

Nowhere has this process and its function been more meticulously documented than in the seminal work of Hall et al. (1978) in '*Policing the Crisis*; *Mugging, the state, and Law and Order*'. Here, Hall et al. (1978) unravel the construction of 'mugging' in the 1970s within the context of maintaining social order through moral consensus and public consent, despite the paradoxical inequality of social classes. The state's powerful innovation of the 'mugger' as folk devil takes place at a crucial historic moment at which a national crisis in hegemony occurs. Hegemony, or 'cultural hegemony' is a political theory developed by Gramsci (2005) that refers to the way in which the contradictions of class inequality are maintained through

a dominant culture that presents the interests of the powerful as inevitable social norms. By 'winning them over' hegemony exerts control over citizens without the need for direct force (Gramsci, 2005). However, the fragility of this coercion is prone to crisis and the management of hegemony requires constant adjustment.

The political decision made in the 1960s to commit Britain to prosperity through corporate neoliberal capitalism would guarantee the economic demise of the working class. Developing a Marxist and Gramscian analysis of hegemonic crisis in the 1960s, Hall et al. (1978) identify a major structural shift in the mechanisms of state intervention; '*the shift from a 'consensual' to a more 'coercive' management of the class struggle by the capitalist state*' (ibid.). Increasing the rate of exploitation and extending the existing inequality would threaten the stability of class relations. To manage this challenge to hegemony the state had two main strategies. The first was to subsume 'everyone into the 'higher' ideological unity of the national interest' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 236). This would combine the interests of labour and capital together as the interests of the state, making a social contract for 'the national good', thus the corporate strategy could be seen as in the interests of everyone (ibid.).

The second strategy involved the mobilisation of law and order into the spheres of civil society as the state of 'exception'; a transition 'from the 'moment of consent' through to the 'moment of force' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 239). The exceptional form of state intervention is the open recruitment of the law in the defence of class interests for the benefit of the bourgeoisie class. However, this involves a great deal of risk for hegemony. By '*making the "invisible" inequality of the real relationship between workers and capitalists manifestly apparent… it risks exposing the central ideological mystification of the system, on which the consent of the masses to the reign of capital rests*' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 303). Hall et al. (1978) argue that it is only by thinking within this historical moment that we can begin to understand the emergence of 'mugging' as a particular interaction between crime and control. Applying this same method of conjunctural analysis to the events that defined 'knife crime' reveal significant similarities which will be explored later in this article.

It is the argument of *Policing the Crisis* (1978) that the crucial aspect of the response that enables this social function to be performed through 'mugging' is that it came to be 'unambiguously assigned as a black crime' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 328). The construction of 'mugging' as a 'Black crime' happens through the amplification of incidents that fit this criteria and through targeted police mobilisation that geographically and ethnically locates the crime as 'peculiar to black youth in the inner-city 'ghettos'' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 329). Once assigned as a 'Black crime' the police maintain consent whilst using increasingly authoritative policing to preserve the class relations amid crisis.

Whilst the work of Hall et al. (1978) is widely lauded in criminology and beyond, their constructionist approach is crucially missing from our current understanding of 'knife crime'. With exception of a few notable contributions (Squires, 2009, 2011; Williams & Squires, 2021), existing academic literature on 'knife crime' assume the category as fact, paying little attention to the policing mobilisation that defines the emergence of the phrase (Williams & Squires, 2021). For example, when Eades et al. (2007) identify the non-existence of compiled 'knife crime' data prior to 2003 this is seen as an obstruction to quantifying the extent of the problem, rather than

evidence of the temporality and subjectivity of the category itself. To understand the construction of 'knife crime youths' the inquiry must move from the persons and behaviours labelled as deviant, to the political actions, media communication and enforcement activities that defined the response to the act. What are the pre-conditions and social context in which the label 'knife crime' was first used and by whom? The conjuncture of interest in this analysis begins with the election of New Labour in Britain in 1997.

New Labour and the contradictions of a socially democratic authoritarianism.

Replicating the successes of Clinton's Democratic Party in the 1993 US election, '*Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime*' was one of New Labour's election sound bites in 1997. Often referred to as 'the third way', New Labour offered a centralist political strategy that combined elements of the political left and right. Once elected, New Labour soon published their '*No More Excuses'* White Paper (Home Office, 1997), a policy reform that epitomised the party's dual ethos of individual responsibility and government intervention. In this, the government detailed a complete youth crime policy and policing overhaul; radical and systemic changes to the youth justice system and policing all with the core aim of 'tackling youth violence' with tough measures.

In a preface to the white paper the then home secretary Jack Straw described the changes thus:

> Today's young offenders can too easily become tomorrow's hardened criminals. As a society we do ourselves no favours by failing to break the link between juvenile crime and disorder and the serial burglar of the future… An excuse culture has developed within the youth justice system… implying that they cannot help their behaviour because of their social circumstances… we will refocus resources and the talents of professionals on nipping offending in the bud, to prevent crime from becoming a way of life for so many young people (Home Office, 1997).

The mobilisation towards youth surveillance and control, from the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) through to the Police Reform Act (2002), extended the capacity of the state to intervene and increased the range of behaviours considered criminal during this period. The emphasis on 'pre-criminal' behaviour and the increasing ease of issue and proliferation of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) during this period shifts the direction of policing, the justice system and youth services towards a younger and broader sample of children. In addition to this, the devolution of power to local authorities, youth offending services and housing associations increases the number of institutions involved in the management of youth behaviours and movement.

Concern over youth delinquency and the construction of particular sub-groups of youths as 'criminal Other' has been a consistent feature of modern society; '*there has been a marked and recurring tendency to demonise certain categories*

of young people… This is especially so in respect of the working class youth and of ethnic minorities' (Squires & Stephen, 2005, p. 29). But the introduction of ASBOs and referral orders, along with the removal of *Doli Incapax* for very young adolescents*,* reflects a political shift in the conceptualisation of the transient status of young delinquency. Unlike the home office report of 1988 that found; '[m]ost young offenders grow out of crime as they become more mature and responsible' (Home Office 1988, p 6, para. 2.15 quoted in Squires & Stephen, 2005, p. 31), the New Labour of 1997 claimed 'todays young offenders can easily become tomorrow's hardened criminals' (Home Office, 1997 quoted in Squires & Stephen, 2005, p. 32).

This intensification of youth crime policy can be seen to reconcile the contradictions of New Labour's dual strategy, an arena in which societal anxieties over youth provide a popular individualistic authoritarianism combined with proactive state interventions. At a pragmatic level, children are an advantageous subject group to be acted upon; they can't vote, are a relatively voiceless group politically, and remain a reliable source of emotive concern amongst the electorate (Pitts, 2001). But the symbolic potential of 'youth crime' in the hegemonic management of neoliberalism is exemplified in the 'no excuses' reform.

On the one hand, the hardening of state response to disorder in the streets appeals to a colonial nationalism of the past; an imperialist imagination of 'Britishness' as a civilising force (Gilroy, 1987). On the other, it appeals to the ideology of modernisation; a youth justice reform that increases efficiency and coordinates services in a more productive way. Beyond this, the devolution of youth justice to local authorities and YOTs acted to distance government from economic accountability whilst increasing the capacity for localised authoritarianism and prolonged institutionalised intervention.

It is significant to note however, that at no point in the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), The MacPherson Inquiry (1999), the 'Blueprint for Reform' White Paper (2001), the first National Policing Plan (2002), The Policing Reform Act (2002) or any of the parliamentary acts of this period do the words 'knife crime' appear. But behind the scenes there are early signs of a mobilisation specifically towards knives (e.g., the 1997 Knives Act that outlawed the marketing of knives for combat and authorised the use Sect. 60 'no grounds' searches when 'knife enabled violence' was anticipated). Perhaps the most significant change occurs in 2001 when a new policing 'feature code' is introduced to the police system of the Met Police to specifically register 'knife enabled offences' (KEO) on computerised crime records.

Prior to the feature code of 'knife enabled offence' being added, crimes that had included or intimated a knife would have been recorded and prioritised base on the intent referenced in the 'opening code'. For example; Burglary, theft, sexual assault, drugs or criminal damage would be the defining category of the offence. But after the feature code of KEO is added data analysts and police supervisors are able to extract crime figures from across different opening codes to prioritise those with a feature code for 'knife enabled'. For the first time it is possible to redact crime data based on whether a 'knife' was present, used or intimated during various different crime contexts.

The data collected from this new crime code is immediately put to use and is reported on by police and the press as early as 2002 (Alleyne, 2002; Bamber, 2002).

By the end of 2003 there is a discourse emerging that identifies 'knife crime' as a distinct category for concern in England and Wales. The analysis of the label's first uses suggests that three combined factors are influential in this development. Firstly, the rural school setting of a teen murder in November 2003 will secure national interest and invigorate coverage of knife-related crimes within particular contexts. Secondly, high news value is sustained and cultivated for this emerging category by the focus on younger children and a broad range of authorised spokespeople. Thirdly, the narrative that links crime through the knife insinuates or openly identifies a criminogenic 'knife culture' amongst young people that becomes an argument for proactive interventions at that time. A significant case in the early public use of the phrase 'knife crime' is the murder of Luke Walmsley in 2003, a close analysis of the evolving reports of this incident demonstrates how the label came to be defined through 'youth'.

Making of knife crime youth; the case of Luke Walmsley

On 4th November 2003, the murder of 14-year-old Luke Walmsley in a school corridor in rural Lincolnshire becomes a catalyst for a co-ordinated response to a perceived culture rising amongst young people across the country. The day following his death, the case is given high news status in both national and regional papers. Headlines include:

'BOY, 14, KILLED IN SCHOOL ATTACK: He ran .. then he fell ; PUPILS FLEE IN TERROR AS LUKE KNIFED ON HIS WAY TO LESSON' (McComish et al., 2003) in The *Daily Mirror*
'A scuffle, then panic grips children and staff at village school; Chief constable pledges support for community in shock' (Laville, 2003) in The *Daily Telegraph*.
'Youngsters Caught in Tide of Horror' (Barker, 2003) in The *Sun.*

The tabloid language used to describe the incident, 'terror', 'panic' and 'horror', are embellishments that significantly sensationalise the coverage. Early reporting focuses heavily on school safety, seeking teachers' opinions on pupil violence and their powers to prevent another event like this. In an effort to include the 'teachers' perspective' and with no official statement from Luke Walmsley's school yet, the coverage the day after the murder widely quotes a response made by David Hart, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers. The full quote reads:

My reaction is one of utter horror. To think a youngster can be stabbed to death in a school in a relatively quiet part of the country will send shockwaves through the school system. It does demonstrate very clearly the fact that although this level of violence is very rare, there are an incredible number of youngsters who are willing to sign up to the knife culture and bring an offensive weapon into school (David Hart quoted in 'Classmates See…' 2003).

As the only official statement available, this immediate anecdotal connection made by Hart between the isolated incident of Luke Walmsley and a 'knife culture' with 'incredible numbers' or young people willingly 'signing up', instigates a public debate on what the national response to Luke's death should be. Within two days of Luke's murder the conversation shifts from the incident at a school in Lincolnshire to include knives and schools in general. On the 6th of November, The *Guardian* reports 'Unions call for review of security' with representatives of teachers split on what the course of action should be.

The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NAS-UWT) warned that crime involving weapons was 'spilling over from the streets into schools' and that a working party on school security should be assembled. Parent-teacher associations were equally pro-active, suggesting the installation of metal detectors in schools to stop students 'attempting to smuggle in knives and guns'. Police demonstrate their position with action, deploying 100 extra officers to '*patrol the playgrounds of British schools identified as breeding grounds for young offenders*' (Goodchild, 2003).

The evocative and metaphoric language used by reliable spokespeople at this time is widely reported and is indicative of a developing narrative—In which the knife is seen as an outside threat, based in the street, but 'spilling into' or being 'smuggled' in to the safe spaces of schools. The police describing schools as 'breeding grounds' for criminality is an early indication that the perceived threat of contagious influence from one type of young person will be formative in the response that will come to define 'knife crime'.

Other public voices presented disagreement with the proactive measures taken and feared that the frequency of violence in schools was being exaggerated in the hastiness of the response. The then Schools Secretary Minister, David Miliband, was reported as cautioning against 'knee-jerk reactions' to the school-time incident, stating; '*the death of Luke Walmsley at his Lincolnshire school was not evidence of rising violence throughout the education system*' ('Call for Caution…' 2003). The general secretary of the National Union of Teachers concurred, saying *'This is an absolutely tragic incident, but there are 7.5 million children in our schools 190 days a year and our surveys show the number of weapons being brought into our schools is absolutely minuscule'* (ibid.). The chairman of the Youth Justice Board warned that over-reacting could exasperate the issue saying; *'it's a great tragedy when you start making schools into fortresses. It creates a fear culture and this can beget even more problems'* (Goodchild, 2003).

What is significantly absent in these debates on the urgency of the problem, is supporting data. Although plenty of anecdotal evidence is offered, the early reports lack any statistics that present knives as specifically a 'youth' or 'school' problem. There is concerted effort by journalists across the country to produce valid evidence of the scale of the problem whilst public concern is still high. Birmingham city council announces their investigation to find out if violence is increasing in schools ('Call for Caution…' 2003). The *Sunday Mirror* runs their own experiments in Bristol, Cardiff, Birmingham, Newcastle and Liverpool; Sending children to buy knives at high-street shops and publishing the results (Ellam, 2003). The BBC online publishes the article; 'Is knife crime really getting worse' (Lane & Wheeler, 2003) in an

attempt to collate available data. Meanwhile, The *Observer* is conducting its own investigation and publishes its findings on the 23ʳᵈ of November 2003 (Townsend & Barnett, 2003). This is the *first* news article reporting on Luke Walmsley that uses the phrase 'knife crime'.

Opting for the sensationalist headline; '*Scandal of pupils aged five carrying knives*' the findings of the *Observer* investigation consolidate the idea that Luke wasn't the victim of an isolated attack, but the latest casualty in a national 'epidemic' in which 'nowhere is safe' (Townsend & Barnett, 2003). Amongst other shocking statistics the *Observer* lists four other young people involved in knife related news since Luke's death, two stabbings, one knife carrying in school and one court case currently at trial. The specific circumstances of these incidents are not described, the cases are not viewed in isolation but as one collective crime; 'knife crime'.

In the chain of events from Luke Walmsley's death to the collective grouping of incidents as 'knife crime', what is striking is the constitutive power of 'youth' in the making of the label. It is the school setting and the notion of a threat to children that provides the initial momentum that will eventually link crimes together by virtue of age and type of weapon. Rather than acts of 'knife crime' being a phenomenon exclusive to youths, they are actions only defined as phenomenal when connected to young people.

Exploring this aspect further it has been evidenced through media studies that violence continues to hold a dominant news value but not as much as it used to;

> …violence has become so ubiquitous that – although still considered newsworthy it is frequently reported in a routine, mundane manner with little follow-up or analysis. Unless a story involving violence conforms to several other news values or provides a suitable threshold to keep alive an existing set of stories, even the most serious acts of violence may be used as 'fillers' consigned to the inside pages of a newspaper (Jewkes, 2015, pp. 63,64).

Many instances of non-fatal stabbings, threatening with knives, knife carrying and knife homicides were not considered to have news value before the emergence of 'knife crime'. However, in the early stages of the phenomenon building, the age of the victims and perpetrators seems to get younger and younger and with this added value the breadth of actions considered newsworthy increases. Luke Walmsley was 14 and this was an alarming fact, but by the end of the same month headlines are connecting the case with 5 year olds carrying knives (Townsend & Barnett, 2003). This pursuit of youth in the making of 'knife crime' reflects the evolving priorities, sensitivities and interests of media audiences and news reporting techniques as much as it does any changes in youth crime.

In the days following the stabbing, news headlines of national newspapers, in response to Luke Walmsley, focus on 'kids', 'children' and 'school' as they extrapolate from one case to a national crisis. Within one week the headlines included:

> '*Kids carry knives and hammers: they have to look after themselves*' (Johnson, 2003a)
> '*Is your kid taking a knife to school*?' (Johnson, 2003b).
> '*Shops, stalls and web illegally sell knives to children* (*Woolcock, 2003).

> '*SOLD.. TO A 12-YR-OLD; Shop charges £25 for this 12in blade. Boy of 14 is stabbed to death but stores still flout law on children buying knives.*' (Ellam, 2003)**.**
> '*Not even your school is safe*' ('Not Even…' 2003).

The case of Luke Walmsley in 2003 triggers a media response that brings together authorized spokespeople, such as high-ranking police officers and heads of teaching associations, providing a public definition of 'knife crime' for the first time. Sustaining news value, the media utilizes photographic imagery and newly available crime data, propelled by proactive policing operations, to 'keep the story alive'. At this stage in the history of the label it is predominantly young age and a public setting that defines the parameters of the category, but this begins to change over the following years as 'knife crime youths' are increasingly constructed as Black and located within inner cities. A significant turning point identified in this research, is the reporting of the murder of Tom Rhys-Pryce – a white lawyer killed in north London by two young Black men in 2006.

Making knife crime a 'Black crime'; the case of Tom Rhys-Pryce

It is widely recognised that the syntax of British racism is complex and ever changing (Gilroy, 1987; Solomos & Back, 1996), producing symbolic representations of difference that evade scrutiny through everyday use and sensibility. 'Race' itself has no ontological or biological meaning, only that which is continually assigned and reassigned through processes of racialisation or 'race making' (Murji & Solomos, 2005). In other words, racial difference exists only so long as it is produced and reproduced in daily encounters, language, and interactions. The analysis presented here will suggest that 'knife crime' became a vessel for contemporary racism through a veiled and discreet language of cultural deficit—an adapted form of 'slippery racism' (Solomos & Back, 1996) equipped for policing the crisis in the 21st century.

It is not until 2006 that 'knife crime' is frequently and openly defined through ethnicity and begins to be understood as a 'Black crime'. Earlier mentions of race were more likely to insinuate a racial dynamic such as; a think piece that centers on a youth project that specializes in working with Black adolescents (Lane & Wheeler, 2003), describing a victim as a 'Somali boy' despite not including the nationality or ethnicity of others in the article (Johnston, 2001), or criticizing Black music genres for promoting 'gangster' culture and glamourizing knives (Weathers, 2005). But at the end of 2006 there are increasing discussions of 'knife crime' in relation to 'Black communities' within arguments for the reinstatement of stop and search to its pre-Macpherson freedoms.

The analysis of the articulation of 'knife crime' during 2006 suggests that one catalyst for this narrative shift is a growing social anxiety amongst suburban middle classes. This increasing concern is exemplified in the intensification of 'knife crime' news in response to a particular murder in London in January 2006. Tom Rhys Pryce was a wealthy white lawyer killed by two working class Black teenagers near his home in north London. The

disproportionate amount of coverage given to this case is so extreme at the time that the new police commissioner Ian Blair, evoking the language of the MacPherson inquiry (MacPherson, 1999), accuses the media press of 'institutional racism'. He cites the deaths of several victims from ethnic minorities that happened on the same day that only 'got a paragraph on page 97' in comparison (Gibson & Dodd, 2006).

In attempt to find witnesses, the police release a statement to the press describing the suspects as two Black males. Below are the headlines that were published within 24 hours of the incident, followed by how the article included the ethnicity of the suspects.

The Evening Standard 13ᵗʰ January 2006:
'CITY LAWYER IS MURDERED BY MUGGERS; Call to fiancée, then attack on way home'…

'Police said members of the public witnessed the struggle between two black men and the victim' ('City lawyer…' 2006)

Birmingham Post 14ᵗʰ January 2006:
'Muggers Brutally Murder Lawyer…'.

'Detectives believe he had been trying to defend himself when the two young black men launched their "ferocious" assault. They stabbed him in the head, torso and hands and left him dying on the pavement' (Dean and Marsden, 2006)

The Daily Mail 14ᵗʰ January 2006:
'NO MERCY; Highflying young lawyer knifed to death outside his flat AFTER handing everything to muggers…'

'Police said the lawyer was ambushed by two black men as he walked home from a local station after attending a social event with colleagues on Thursday night' (Wright & Koster, 2006)

The Daily Mirror 14ᵗʰ January 2006:
'HIS LIFE; He gave muggers all his possessions but they wanted more…'

'Officers were yesterday retrieving CCTV footage from several cameras in the area in a bid to trace the killers - two black men thought to be in their 20s' (Edwards and Parry, 2006)

The Sun 14ᵗʰ January 2006:
'Mugged… and then stabbed to death…'

'Smartly-dressed Tom had been stabbed in the head, body and hands. He had been robbed of his wallet by two young black men as he walked to his home in Kensal Green, North West London, from the local Tube station. Police say the killing was unprovoked' (Sullivan, 2006)

Only one of the papers references the ethnicity of the perpetrators in connection with the police investigation to find the killers (Edwards and Parry, 2006)

The others use 'Black' as part of the description of the incident – none of them mention the ethnicity of the victim, his whiteness is assumed. Unlike the death of Luke Walmsley, where news value was increased by the young age of the victim and school setting, Tom Rhys Pryce is front-page worthy because of the contrast between his social class and the setting of his death. It is more shocking (and thus more newsworthy) for a 'smartly-dressed', 'highflying', 'city lawyer' to die in a public rupture of violence given that the privileges of his class should protect from such scenarios (Gekowski et al., 2012). However, the middle classes in London were increasingly finding themselves confronted with the conditions of disadvantage on their doorstep. This murder is symbolic of a particular anxiety and sociological dilemma during this moment.

At the time of Tom Rhys-Pryce's murder, London is experiencing a period of fast-paced gentrification across many prime commuter areas of the city that were previously dominated by publicly owned housing stock. The mass movement of affluent middle-class families to working-class areas of the city was facilitated by the 'right to buy' initiatives, started by the Conservative government in the 1980s, but extended under New Labour 'regeneration' housing policies of the late 1990s and 2000s. Giving council tenants the 'right to buy' council houses transferred housing stock to private ownership or private sector management.

Once locations were targeted for regeneration the number of council owned properties rapidly decreased. Between the 1981 and 2001 census the number of households in council owned properties in the Borough of Tower Hamlets reduced from 82 to 37.4%, whilst Lambeth dropped from 43.2 to 28.5% (Watt, 2009). Gentrification was actively encouraged by New Labour, depicted as a solution to the 'social ills' of previously 'hard-to-reach', deprived urban neighbourhoods, especially public housing estates (Watt, 2009). This state led 'affluent drift' into deprived urban areas in conditions of 'managed decline' (Beaumont, 2006), was also racially distinct. The areas typified by 'intense and extensive deprivation' were also areas of London with a 'large black African/Caribbean population' (Watt, 2009).

The murder of Tom Rhys Pryce takes please in Kensal Green within the Borough of Brent, a district selected for state-led gentrification in 1999 under the New Deal for Communities (NDC) funded development scheme. Within this scheme, the reduction of crime rates in the gentrified area is considered a key indicator of success (Batty et al., 2010, p. 24). The privately and publicly funded project boasts 'an enhanced police service and neighbourhood warden scheme' (Batty et al., 2010, p. 15) in its districts. Implementing a partnership with local police the NDC '*supplemented mainstream police budgets in order to fund more police and police community support officers, and to provide a flexible additional resource through which the police can respond to trouble 'hotspots''* (ibid.).

There are two articles in the *Evening Standard* on 16th January 2006 that recognise the gentrification context of the murder in Kensal Green but to different effect. In language that conjures images of gentrifying as brave new settlers on the London's uncivilised frontiers, Gilligan writes:

As the middle classes have pressed ever westward, the onward march into new territory has brought prosperous, professional London hard up against the toughest areas in the capital. For all the political flannel about inclusiveness and multiculturalism, London has some of Europe's most savage inequalities of status and wealth. Sandwiched between North Kensington and Harlesden, Kensal Green puts those inequalities side by side (Gilligan, 2006).

Gilligan goes on to point out that the area has always had violent stabbings, but without the 'men in suits [they] did not attract the attention of the media' (ibid.). In contrast Paul Barker, writing in the same paper, suggests the presence of men in suits increases the frequency of jealous violent crime:

Some social changes make confrontations more likely. Entire swathes of London - where once you'd have to scour around to find a single middleclass achiever - are busily being gentrified. This puts the well-off bang next door to the envious poor or the wholly criminal (Barker, 2006).

However, as Gilligan pointed out violent confrontations were not 'more likely', only *more likely* to involve the middle classes – and therefore more likely to be reported; both to the police and in the press. Barker goes further in this article, proposing the best solution for supressing the poor from attacking the wealthy is to '[s]tep up stop-and-search', on the basis that '*[a]fter the stabbing by muggers of lawyer Tom Rhys Pryce, we shouldn't be afraid to extend controversial police powers on our streets'* (Barker, 2006). It is this latter response to crimes within areas in the process of gentrification that will gain momentum by the end of 2006, endorsing and expanding policing operations and search powers in identified 'knife crime hot spots'.

This is a significantly different moment in London's social history then that which Hall et al. described in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), and yet here the continuations between 'mugging' and 'knife crime' are apparent. It is these same inner rings of London that are in contestation. These are the previously 'sub-standard and decaying' areas, the only spaces made available to the newly arrived Caribbean workforce invited to rebuild post-war Britain in the 1950s and 1960s (Hall et al., 1978, p. 342). Treated with such hostility and racism by the English these areas were transformed into enclosed safe spaces for Black families and communities; 'for a '*West Indian Culture' to take root and survive in Britain, it required a solid framework and a material base: the construction of a West Indian enclave community – the birth of colony society'* (Hall et al., 1978, p. 344). The 'colonisation' of streets, neighbourhoods, markets and cafes in the 1960s suburbs were features of a community defending itself from the public racism on the outside.

In the story of 'mugging' this collective capacity for a Black social and cultural existence is considered by the powerful to be a dangerous consolidation of class and race, geographically facilitated by 'colony life' into a revolutionary 'militant consciousness' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 326). It is this anxiety for which the label 'mugging' became a means of justification, proving a reason to enter, supervise and brutalise young Black people in these communities (Hall et al., 1978, p. 351). Thirty years later these culturally rich urban areas, with colourful markets and lively high-streets,

now become attractive to the commuter-class looking for large family homes within a short train ride from the city centre. Under the new label 'knife crime', police re-enter the former-Black colonies on behalf of the new white settlers, facilitating the occupation through interrupting and hassling young Black men in the street and searching their bodies in ritual humiliation. To some extent 'knife crime' has always represented an anxiety about the control of public spaces, but the resurgence of stop and search in *these* areas at *this* time is a clear performance of who is welcome and who is not, who is citizen and who is '*Other*'.

The reporting of the case of Tom Rhys Pryce is a pivotal moment in 'knife crime's social history, in which the ethnicity of the assailant becomes formative in the explanation of the crime in the press. This crucial shift towards 'knife crime' as a racialised crime category becomes embedded in the rhetoric of a 'knife culture' in following years (Sveinsson, 2008). By insinuating race in discussions of 'knife crime youths' and 'knife culture' from 2006 onwards, the label becomes a mechanism for communicating racial difference in more 'politically correct' language – a form of 'new racism' (Barker, 1981) or 'cultural racism' (Gilroy, 1987) where inferiority is inferred as cultural deficit rather than biology or genetics.

Conclusion; policing the crisis in the 21st century

Using a radical criminological understanding of 'knife crime' as a particular response to criminality, this paper has analysed the significant events that constructed 'knife crime youths' in Britain. In many ways, 'knife crime' can be seen as a continuation of *Policing the Crisis* as detailed by Hall et al. (1978), renewed for the 21st century. As with 'mugging', 'knife crime' is presented as a new crime category on the rise, despite sharp instrument offences making up a consistent proportion of violent crime for the past two decades. As in the 1970s, the gradual construction of 'knife crime' as a racialised crime type works to justify the extension of police powers and maintains hegemonic consent, even as the generational harm of neoliberal social policies become increasingly apparent.

The explicit racialisation of knife crime from 2006 onwards makes the application of the label even more narrow, with knife crime now overtly considered a 'Black youth crime'. The abstraction of race from other factors such as poverty, geographical location, social environment and marginalisation, reinforce a sense of racial neoliberalism (Kapoor, 2013). In which disadvantaged young Black people are considered the cause of their own misfortune and perceptions of cultural deficit are used to justify the structural violence of extreme inequality. This is particularly significant considering the deepening inequality in the UK over past decades (Berry, 2016) and demonstrates how constructs of 'Black criminality' can be 'put to work' yet again, to manage the contradictions and crises of neoliberal capitalism.

However, there are also distinct differences between the 1970s and the 2000s. More so than 'mugging', the conceptualisation of 'knife crime' relies on its association with younger aged youths. It is the sustained news value achieved by combining youth and knife violence that established this crime label in the first instance. Knife crimes committed by adults, even when they are against children or young people, do not qualify

for the same attention as those between 'youths'. Also, unlike 'mugging' in the 1970s, 'knife crime' can be seen to navigate the new terrains of acceptable racisms through a language of difference attributed to 'culture'.

The distinct change in political direction heralded by New Labour in the 1990s may have continued the same underlying neoliberal conjuncture that preceded it, but the re-articulation of consensus through the 'third way' presented new challenges for hegemonic management. New Labour's 'tough on crime' youth policy reforms worked through many of the contradictions of a social democratic authoritarianism. However, it is through race, yet again, that consent for exceptional policing can be found. Excessive and disproportionate policing powers, justified through fear of 'knife crime youths', continue to be mobilised against working class communities. Thus, the widely unchallenged racialisation of 'knife crime' remains vital in hegemonic management of 21st Century Britain.

The analysis of the formation of the 'knife crime' label depicted here suggests several reasons why this construction has received relatively little critique by practitioners and academics since its conception. The gradually narrowing definition of the label from a 'youth problem' in 2003 to a 'young, Black, inner-city problem' by 2006, made the construction less noticeable and appear more common-sensical. In addition to this, the analysis has retraced the mobilisation towards 'knife crime' within the broader political context of vast youth policy reform by New Labour, that centred 'nearly criminal' or 'pre-criminal' youths. Within this discourse 'something had to be done' and proactive policing strategies targeting young people had become normalised with cross-party consensus. Finally, it has been argued here that overtly racist language around 'Black criminality' had evolved into more discreet forms at the start of the 21st century. In the new terrains of 'multiculturalism' and 'political correctness', 'knife crime youths' became a synonym for 'Black youths' without the need to explicitly mention race.

As the neoliberal conjuncture extends uninterrupted into the 21st century, the deepening inequality and the increased suffering of the working classes in Britain requires ongoing ideological management. The construction of 'knife crime youths', first through age and then through urban location and race, has been a highly effective means of social management; providing consent for police occupation of newly gentrified areas of the neoliberal city and continuing public support for the state of exception through times of economic instability. The introduction of KCPOs in 2019 and the extension of Sect. 60 search powers in 2022 suggest we have not seen the end of 'knife crime youths' as a mechanism for *policing the crisis*.

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