A Political Economy of Knife Crime: Male Youth and the State

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Abstract

This thesis develops and employs a political economy of knife crime perspective to better understand the nature of knife crime in contemporary times. Use of this perspective exposes the social construction of the dominant state narrative, depicting knife crime as predominantly a youth issue, with a particular focus on young black men in urban settings. The thesis demonstrates that the state's racialised youth narrative, fuels a law-and-order agenda that advocates excessive use of police powers, against already marginalised communities. It explores the role of the state in diverting attention from the neo-liberal policies that have fuelled a rise in poverty amongst those young men that are affected. Using a political economy analysis, the author stresses the importance of economic structural barriers, explaining their relationship to other social and cultural factors, including increasing availability of illegitimate pathways to economic security, including gang membership and county lines. Finally, use of the political economy perspective enables a thorough evaluation of the development of state policies to prevent and respond to knife crime. Particular attention is paid to the potential benefits of a properly targeted 'public health' approach. The thesis concludes that a political economy of knife crime perspective can help expose the social construction of knife crime and the flaws in policies that emanate from it.

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Chapter 1: Introductory Chapter

1.0: Introduction

Knife crime is considered one of the most pressing social issues in the United Kingdom. It has been the subject of growing public concern, rising media attention and government focus (Haylock et al, 2020). This attention stems largely from the harm it causes to individuals and communities. Knives are used in a variety of offences, involving a range of perpetrators and settings (Cook and Walklate, 2020). However, the state focus and its corresponding dominant narrative has centred on young men and community settings (HM Government, 2018). Some academics and researchers argue this focus distorts reality, constituting a moral panic around youth, and young black men in particular (Williams, 2023; Williams and Squires, 2021). Such a focus has fuelled government knife crime prevention and response policies, including the expansion of stop and search and other police powers via Serious Violence Reduction Orders, Knife Crime Prevention Orders, surveillance technology and the increased use of youth custodial sentencing (ibid). This has distracted from state accountability for economic issues including significant rises in cost-of-living, poverty and inequality in the UK (ibid, House of Commons, 2023b; House of Commons, 2024a; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024).

The limited attention afforded to the state construction of knife crime as a predominantly youth-based phenomenon is somewhat surprising (Williams, 2023). This thesis seeks to contribute to the work of a minority of researchers who have challenged the state's construction of knife crime, by drawing on the political economy concept from radical criminology (Taylor et al, 1973). The thesis will argue that the state has generated and racialised a moral panic about young men as perpetrators of knife crime, and in doing so the extent and nature of the problem, as well as proposed solutions, have become distorted. At the same time, this stance has diverted attention from the socioeconomic challenges facing young men, particularly within economically deprived areas. Whilst some young men are involved in knife crime (albeit not to the extent suggested by the state), this thesis will explain how such occurrences can be understood with recourse to a socio-economic interpretation of the political economy. In this regard, significant attention shall be placed upon the importance of economic structural barriers and the accountability of the state in their growth. Finally, the thesis will consider the efficacy of current state prevention policy in response to knife crime, making recommendations for improvements. Before discussing these issues in more detail, it is necessary to understand what knife crime is, why it has emerged as a key issue, which demographics are involved, and how the key debates have played out over these issues.

Knife carrying is a significant problem as it potentially leads to an increased likelihood of serious harm being inflicted, including increased likelihood of death due to serious injury

(Brennan et al 2006; Wells and Horney, 2002). Knives are the most commonly used weapon for homicides in England and Wales (Brookman, 2005), used in over a third of homicides from 2009 to 2019 (Williams, 2023). Data for the year ending March 2021 demonstrates that there were 224 homicides involving a knife or sharp instrument (House of Commons, 2023a). In the year ending March 2022, there were at least 261 homicides using a sharp instrument or knife (ibid). Figure 1.1 below demonstrates the increase of knife crime homicides in the last decade.

Figure 1.1: Knife Homicides Victims, by Gender: E&W Years ending March 2010 to March 2019 (Source: Williams and Squires, 2021)

[Image redacted, third party material]

What is Knife Crime?

The concept of 'knife crime' is relatively recent. Historically, it has been used to refer to certain acts of violence. Used in Scotland in the 1990s, it began to be used in England in the early 2000s in order to describe emerging violence involving the use of knives (Williams, 2023). Overall, it acts both as a noun for a category of knife crime offences and as an adjective for the reflected criminal culture behind it (Williams and Squires, 2021). There are significant concerns with the use of an adjective for describing the phenomenon of knife crime, particularly when attributed to young black men, involving exaggeration and distortion of the issue (ibid).

It should firstly be recognised that there are difficulties in understanding the exact parameters of the knife crime definition within public discourse. Indeed, researchers, police and government figures have acknowledged the challenges in establishing a *"workable, evidenced-based definition of knife crime"* (Williams, 2023, p. 5). Many academics appreciate that the term 'knife crime' has largely been shaped by the media when referring to youth behaviour; *"there 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"* (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2009, para 4). The inherent focus on youth has influenced contemporary usage and understanding of the term.

Turning to how knife crime is recorded by the police, the separate recording of knife crime stems from the London Metropolitan Police's decision in 2001, using a knife enabled offences category (KEO), with the Home Office also subsequently adopting the same approach (Williams, 2023). Prior to this, crimes which included the usage of a knife would be recorded in light of the motivating offence, such as *"burglary, theft, sexual assault, drugs or criminal damage"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 132). The Metropolitan Police Authority produced a

report which explained their usage of this code (Metropolitan Police Authority/Commissioner MPA, 2005), it was said that *"knife enabled crime is defined as any offence within the categories of violence against the person, sexual offence, robbery, or burglary that has been recorded on the Metropolitan Police Service's crime recording system with a feature code that shows specifically that a knife was used in the commission of the offence"* (ibid). It was further stated that this approach was beneficial since it *"enables the MPS to monitor the impact of the use of weapons, particularly guns and knives in a consistent way"* (ibid).

Currently, knife crime is recorded under multiple categories. The first category includes any offence involving the use of a knife or a sharp instrument, otherwise referred to as knife enabled crime which covers an array of offences which involve a knife or a sharp instrument within commission, ranging from carrying the knife with intention to commit harm to its actual use in threatening or committing violence. Examples of offences include assault with injury and assault with intent to commit serious harm, robbery, and threats to kill. Less frequently occurring offences include sexual assault, rape, attempted murder and homicide (House of Commons, 2019a; ONS, 2024a).

The second category includes the possession of a knife or a sharp instrument (House of Common, 2021a; House of Commons, 2023a) which is recorded as a separate offence category by the police. This offers a distinction between the knife crime offender who uses the knife in relation to a specific crime, or alternatively an offender on the street where the knife rests in their back pocket (Eades et al, 2007). This distinction is necessary given the variation in severity (ibid). There is also a third category which includes the illegal sale or supply of knives (House of Commons, 2021b). However, this thesis solely focuses on the first two categories, as the latter is outside its scope given that it gives rise to a range of separate issues regarding the black economy.

What is the legislative framework governing knife crime offending in England and Wales?

If a knife or a sharp instrument is used in the commission of a different offence, such as GBH, murder, robbery etc, offences would be dealt with under those respective offences, including Homicide Act 1957, Offences against the Person Act 1861 or the Theft Act 1968. At the same time, prosecutors could seek to bring charges for possession or threatening use of the knife under either the Prevention of Crime Act 1953, the Criminal Justice Act 1988 or the Offensive Weapons Act 2019.

Section 1 of the Prevention of Crime Act 1953 criminalises possession of an offensive weapon in a public place. Section 1 (4) of the Act defines an offensive weapon as *"any article made or adapted for use for causing injury to the person or intended by the person having it with him*

for such use by him or by some other person". Section 139 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 criminalises the offence of possession of a bladed article in a public place. Section 139A of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 creates a specific offence of possession of an offensive weapon or bladed article on school premises.

The aggravated possession offences are supplemented by section 142 of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) which imposes mandatory custodial sentences for offenders aged over 16 in certain instances. The first instance is where they are convicted of possessing a bladed article or offensive weapon in a public place or school premises and they have at least one previous relevant conviction of knife possession or threatening with the weapon. The second instance is where the person is convicted of one aggravated possession offence. In both these instances, the court needs to impose a detention and training order with a minimum of 4 months in cases where the offenders are 16 or 17. Alternatively, if the offender is 18 or older, then a custodial sentence with a 6-month minimum duration should be applied (House of Commons, 2019b).[1] The following table provides a summary of key knife crime legislation applicable in England and Wales.

Table 1.1: Key Knife Crime Legislation in England and Wales

Knife Crime Act/Legislation	Explanation
Prevention of Crime Act 1953	The Act prohibits knife possession in public as a weapon and their use to threaten
Restriction of Offensive Weapons Act 1959	Restricts importing, selling and gifting specific knives such as flick knives
Criminal Justice Act 1988	Restriction of carrying and threatening with knives, and restriction of possession of knives in places such as schools. The Act was amended in 2016 through the inclusion of zombie knives
Offensive Weapons Act 1996	Restricts possession of knives in school premises. Age restrictions also imposed upon the sale of knives
Knives Act 1997	Prohibition on sale of combat knives and restrictions also introduced on sale of knives
Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006	Further stricter age restrictions introduced on the sale of knives. In addition, the Act increased penalties for knife possession
Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO)	Section 142 of LASPO created the offence of aggravated possession imposing mandatory custodial sentences
Serious Crime Act 2015	Restriction imposed upon the possession of knives in prisons
Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015	Introduction of minimum custodial sentences for repeated knife crime possession and offences which included threatening with a knife.

[1] further information for sentencing guidelines and offence framework can be found at https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/offensive-weapons-knife-crime-practical-guidance and https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/offensive-weapons-knives-bladed-and-pointed-articles and https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/offensive-weapons-table-offences-defences-and-applicability

Offensive Weapons Act 2019	Restrictions imposed upon possession of 'offensive weapons' in private. The Act also introduced the Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs)
Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022	Moving towards a multi-agency approach to reduce violence through introducing a serious violence duty. The Act also introduces Serious Violence Reduction Orders, expanding stop and search powers.

What is the contemporary scale of knife crime in England and Wales?

Knife crime had been increasing at a consistent rate prior to the pandemic (ONS, 2021b), described as reaching record levels (HM Government, 2018). There has been an overall increase in the number of knife crime offences in the last decade which is depicted in Figure 1.2 produced in a House of Commons (2021b) report on knife crime.

Figure 1.2: Recent increase in Knife Crime in 1000s in England and Wales, Excluding Greater Manchester (Source: produced by House of Commons Library (2021b), obtained from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation Study (2022)

[Image redacted, third party material]

The majority of knife crime offences were associated with various levels of assault and robbery. For instance, for the year ending March 2020, 44% of offences involving a knife or a sharp instrument constituted "assault *with injury and assault with intent to cause serious harm*" and "*Robbery"* (ONS, 2020). Increases may be due in part to improvements in police offence recording (HM Government 2018; ONS, 2023a), since *"the Home Office and police forces have continued to roll out a new methodology for identifying recorded offences involving knives or sharp instruments"* (ONS, 2023a).

ONS (2021a) data demonstrates that knife crime offences decreased during the pandemic. For instance, *"There was a 15% decrease in knife-enabled crime recorded by the police in the year ending March 2021 (44,286 offences) compared with the previous year. The largest decreases were seen in April to June 2020 and January to March 2021 with offences down by 20% and 22% compared with the respective periods in the previous year. These periods coincided with national lockdowns and the highest levels of restrictions."* (ONS, 2021a). In addition, *"Police recorded "possession of an article with a blade or point" offences also fell by 11% to 20,465 in the year ending March 2021"* (ibid). Rises in knife crime appear to have been temporarily hampered due to consequences of the pandemic, such as the disruption of county lines, reduction in the presence of street gangs and gang activities (Brewster et al, 2021).

Nevertheless, it can be said that there has been an overall increase in the number of knife crime offences in the last decade as depicted in Figure 1.2 above. Post-pandemic the rate of knife crime has increased again (ONS, 2022). In 2023, the ONS compared the current rates

of knife crime with pre coronavirus level, with rates increasing, but not reaching pre pandemic level (ONS, 2023a). For the year ending December 2022, knife-enabled crime recorded by police in the year ending December 2022 were found to be 9% lower (49,265 offences) in contrast to the year ending March 2020 (54,230 offences) (ONS, 2023a). Considering possession offences, they have arguably matched pre pandemic levels since *"Police recorded possession of article with a blade or point offences were 17% higher in the year ending December 2022 (26,514 offences) than the year ending March 2020 (22,730 offences). This is a 15% increase compared to the year ending December 2021 (23,017 offences)"* (ONS, 2023a).

Considering the most recent data in 2024 (ONS 2024a and 2024c)*, "Knife-enabled crime recorded by the police in year ending (YE) June 2024 increased by 4% (50,973 offences) compared with YE June 2023 (49,187 offences)"* (ONS,2024c). Additionally, *"Police recorded "possession of article with a blade or point" offences decreased by 4% in YE June 2024 (27,553 offences) compared with YE June 2023 (28,582 offences)",* although the report recognises this is following considerable increases in recent years (ONS,2024c).

However, there are limitations on the nature of the data and how it is interpreted. For instance, it is suggested that as a significant percentage of knife carrying remains hidden, it may be considerably more prevalent than what is represented in police statistics (Eades et al, 2007; McVie, 2010). Accident and Emergency data have previously been suggested as a supplement to police data (Shepherd and Brennan, 2008), although it can be difficult to distinguish injuries sustained by sharp instruments from those resulting from accidents in some circumstances. Additionally, as A&E departments are now obligated to report knife injuries to the police, this could potentially result in certain victims avoiding A&Es, thus reducing the rates reported (Williams and Squires, 2021, see further Chapter 5, § 2-3).

Whilst knife crime offences appear to be increasing, they only make up 5-8% of violent offences overall (ibid) and there remains considerable uncertainty with a Home Office/ACPO report in 2007 claiming that violent offences involving knives were stable (ACPO/Home Office, 2007, p. 4). The ONS data mentioned above cannot therefore be accepted at face value, it must instead by subjected to scrutiny due to state actions. It is argued here that the collection and production of the data needs to be contextualised within the broader awareness of the state driven moral panic on this issue (see later discussion in this Chapter on this issue).

The utility of official data can also be questioned, since crime is essentially a social construction (Hall et al, 1978). Ultimately it is the state which determines what constitutes a crime, and whether an offence needs to be recorded or not. For example, at state direction, the police have been told not to issue cautions for knife crime offences and instead record the

offence (Ministry of Justice, 2016), further contributing towards the increase in recorded offences. Moreover, the introduction of additional crime categories such as the 'aggravated possession' offence, further contribute towards this perception of knife crime rates increasing. Therefore, whilst the ONS data indicates an increasing trend, this may be partly attributable to how the state has chosen to report such offences. Consequently, whilst this thesis makes use of ONS data, it recognises their limitations and the need for improvements with regards to generation of certain types of data (see further Chapter 5).

Who is involved in Knife Crime offending?

It is difficult to determine accurately the precise extent of 'youth' involvement since the very term 'youth' is arguably a social construct, with its meaning evolving over time, according to the prevailing societal circumstances (Jones, 2009). It is contended that there is no legal or universal definition of this term, and therefore no agreed age range for this term (Williams, 2023). Nevertheless, the term 'youth' has cultural denotations, taken to include those under 18 as well as young adults. For instance, the UN outlines that this term includes persons aged between 15 to 24 years (United Nations, 2023), whereas the term 'young people' has been defined in youth services as encompassing the ages of 11 to 25 (Goddard, 2021). It can be said that this broad spectrum of the nomenclature is problematic due to the overlap and lack of differentiation between children and young adults. Recognising these challenges, Williams (2023) points to the fact that the Youth Justice Board in England and Wales now largely refrain from using the terms of 'youth and 'young person,' electing to refer to people under 18 as children (Goddard, 2021) since it reiterates their *"legal child status"* (Williams, 2023, p. 3).

Notably, the knife crime data detailed earlier does not differentiate between perpetrators based upon age (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 6). Yet the data seems to indicate that the knife crime primarily concerns adults since it has been observed that only one in five knife crime offenders are aged between 10 to 17 years old (House of Commons, 2018). The majority of knife crime possession offences are committed by those over the age of 18 (82%), alongside the numbers of people registered in hospital that are victims of assault by a knife or sharp instrument (83%) (House of Commons, 2021b). Younger people between the ages of 10 to 24 constituted 41% of hospital admissions, in relation to knives or sharp instruments assault injuries in 2020/21 (NHS Digital, 2021), whereas adults aged between 25-39 made up 38% of admissions for this injury (ibid). Therefore, the knife crime phenomenon applies to a range of different age demographics and is not solely attributable to those defined as young people (Williams, 2023). The data needs to be contextualised in light of the issue of social construction, bearing in mind the moral panic and the related over policing of younger and black ethnic demographics. Such factors may ultimately contribute towards how the media and public have come to perceive the nature of the knife crime 'problem'.

Researchers have also contested supposed rises in knife crime homicides since the 1950s, suggesting instead that the number of homicides involving a knife or sharp instrument have been proportionate to the general increase in homicides (Williams, 2023). It is argued that there is a need to contextualise knife crime offending statistics within violent offences overall. Between 1997 to 2007, it was observed that knife use was between 5% to 8% (Eades et al, 2007) and again between 2007 to 2017 (House of Commons, 2018). Williams (2023) points out that looking at knife crime data without contextualising it within an awareness of violent crime data overall, is a method of distorting statistics and exaggerating it as a youth crime.

Looking beyond the involvement of youth and community settings, it is important to highlight that the nature of knife crime offending varies across different contexts from public spaces to private settings. A significant proportion of knife crime occurs in domestic environments amongst adults (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022), and particularly in domestic violence cases (ONS, 2019). Indeed, in these instances kitchen knives are one of the most commonly used weapons (Hern et al, 2005). Knife use is prominent amongst both men and women in spousal homicides (Aldridge and Brown, 2003; Swatt and He, 2006), and also in matricides (Fegadel, 2014). Additionally, knives are also frequently used in relation to robberies (Kershaw et al 2008), certain sexual offences (Woodworth et al, 2013), terrorism, and hate crimes (Gruenewald, 2012; Gruenewald and Kelly, 2014) as well as attacks by the mentally ill (e.g., Nottingham triple knife crime murders in June 2023, see Johal, 2024). Overall, the evidence indicates that knife crime is not predominantly youth based, apparent from a number of recent high profile attacks, including the attack in Leicester Square upon a young girl and her mother (Jackson et al, 2024), a knife related homicide in Northampton (Heath, 2024), and the murder of a woman in Wales by her husband using a kitchen knife (Hume, 2024).

Recent events have shown that women and girls may be victims of knife crimes in public settings (as opposed to domestic settings). The Southport stabbings resulted in the murder of three young girls aged 6, 7 and 9 as well as injuries sustained by their female teachers (Wright, 2024). In other cases, women or girls are offenders, as in the recent stabbings of a pupil and two teachers committed by a 13-year-old schoolgirl in a school Ysgol Dyffryn Aman in Wales (Morris and Sinmaz, 2024). A woman in Nottingham was also recently arrested for a community-based stabbing (Nottinghamshire Police, 2024). Many other examples of knife crime can also be found to illustrate the wide-ranging scope of knife crime. Clearly, knife crime is multifaceted in the sense it comprises a variance of settings and demographics, as illustrated in the crime data. Notwithstanding, this variance does not seem to be a priority for knife crime research or a focus of prevention policy (Cook and Walklate, 2020; Williams, 2023). Rather, the overall state focus around knife crime has been almost entirely on young men and knife crime in community rather than domestic settings.

Despite the evidence above, the term ‘knife crime’ is predominantly used by the media to explain criminal behaviour with connotations of it being *“distinctly youthful”* (Williams, 2023) and also male centric. As previously stated, these impressions have influenced contemporary definitions of the term. Notwithstanding, the extent of youth involvement in knife crime, remains a contentious issue, with some researchers accusing the state of incorrectly labelling it as an almost entirely youth phenomenon. In challenging this, Williams and Squires (2021) point out that the majority of knife crime offending is committed by those aged over the age of 18. The government focus involves a negative mischaracterisation of a *“modern youthful propensity to violence”* (ibid, p.12); largely depicted as disproportionately involving Black and Asian youth. Indeed, it is argued that the media and the state possess a pivotal role in depicting this image of black criminality, particularly in relation to knife crime and gang involvement (Malik and Nwonka, 2017).

This practice is often quick to manifest; the perpetrator of the recent Southport attacks was a 17-year- old black UK national of Rwandan parents who has been in the UK since he was a young child (Wright, 2024). At the time, a 17-year-old male was arrested, but was not named in line with reporting restrictions (ibid). Subsequently, misinformation spread involving speculations that the individual was a refugee and Muslim. Fuelled by anti-migrant sentiments, violent riots spread through different locations in the county with reports claiming rioters were chanting *“stop the boats”* (ibid).The destruction of property, violence against ethnic minorities and police, culminating in hundreds of arrests is arguably indicative of a decades long state and media hate-driven narrative of immigrants as a contemporary ‘folk devil’ responsible for crime, decline in access to public social services, and other economic challenges facing the country. The riots demonstrated the significant detrimental repercussions of the state’s racialised moral panic in fuelling racial hatred and violence.

A moral panic arises when a *"[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.“* (Cohen, 1972). In this instance, *“the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, other right-thinking people and socially accredited experts”* (Newburn, 2017, p. 90). Cohen’s observation and characterisation of this phenomenon originates from his analysis of the ‘mods and rockers’ in the 1960s, which focused on fights and conflict between groups of youths congregating in holiday locations. Cohen asserted that that the media created a moral panic of these youth groups through various stages. Firstly, through the exaggeration and distortion of the events with regards to the extent of violence and the number of youths involved (Cohen, 1972; Newburn, 2017). In turn, the media would engage in ‘prediction’ about continuation of the violence, predicted how and where the events would be repeated. This contributes to a

process of ‘symbolisation’ in which the cultural signifiers of the groups become negatively linked with delinquency (Cohen, 1972).

Key to explaining the moral panic concept is the process of deviancy amplification which is described as a snowballing effect of the moral panic, in which the reaction to the behaviour reinforces the relevant conduct (Cohen, 1980; Melville and Marsh, 2011). An example can be found in Jock Young’s (1960) study on marijuana users in Notting Hill, the social reaction to it and the overall resulting moral panic on drug use (Young, 1973). The punitive response of the police and the increasingly harsh sentences imposed contributed towards the marginalisation and persecution of this subculture, leading to the symbolic value of drug usage to the group, often termed ‘a self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Newburn, 2017; Melville and Marsh, 2011). In a contemporary context, there has been an overwhelming focus on young people in respective moral panics, predominantly involving use of the gang narrative. Deviancy amplification was also evident through the media’s account of the rises in ‘acid attacks’ which was quickly labelled as a ‘gang related’ practice, involving youths, whilst data indicated that it actually involved a wide range of offences, motivations, offenders and victims, with many incidents having no gang associations (Trickett and Young, 2017).

Youth groups have historically been victim to the moral panic with regards to criminality (Cohen, 1972). Researchers have explored the benefits that can be derived from labelling a crime as a ‘youth crime’. It has been referred to as *“electoral glue”* (Pitts, 2001, p. 2) that achieves political ambitions and strategies since it facilitates societal consensus on a common cause based upon fear (Williams, 2023). It is argued that this societal consensus is used to facilitate punitive policy, which needs to be consistently reinforced via the introduction of moral panics (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al, 1978).

Moral panics are often intimately connected to race, with black males frequently emerging as folk devils. Hall et al (1978) examined the social reaction to a ‘mugging’ committed by three black boys, the coverage of the process, the wider social reaction of commentators and the mobilisation of the police against this demographic in order to alleviate fears. Consequently, the label of mugging was attached to this demographic of ‘black youth’ through a process of racial criminalisation (Williams and Squires, 2021). Hall et al (1978) reiterates that the moral panic on mugging and its racialisation was utilised as part of a wider political agenda to justify more severe policing and harsher sentencing of black people. This involved increased attention placed upon events involving black individuals in order to cement racist beliefs regarding black criminality (Gilroy, 1987). Police mobilisation was followed by broader criminal justice and state responses, increasingly racialised and distorted media responses, which in

turn led to the sweeping use of stop and search via the SUS Law derived from section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824 (Brogden, 1981).

Hall et al's (1978) analysis can be contextualised within broader political and socioeconomic conditions. Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' is utilised to illustrate how issues such as class and racial inequality have been maintained through a culture of norms which are derived by the ruling class as crucial to maintaining the status quo (Gramsci, 2005). Black youths were constructed as a challenge to societal values (Williams and Squires, 2021). Building upon this, Hall et al's concept of 'authoritarian populism' refers to the economic decline of the United Kingdom and growth of socio-economic problems being attributed to increased immigration. In this respect, the 1970s was a period of time where supposed black youths' predisposition towards crime was increasingly alluded to through politicians, police and the media overall (Palmer, 2023). This focus was also an illustration of the animosity against immigrants by the state, with black British men, the particular subject of animosity (Pitts, 1988; Palmer, 2023).

Furthermore, black immigrants have historically been targeted and demonised as attributable for economic decline and hardship (Gilroy, 1987). Authoritarian populism has become increasingly prevalent and is continually utilised in response to a range of social problems. It is argued that the construction of a *"black urban underclass"* represents a readily available folk devil to blame for urban street crime since they have been conveyed as not adhering to British cultural norms (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 18). In contemporary times, this issue persists within the broader issue of an increasingly hostile response to immigration both in the UK and elsewhere as evidenced by the far-right riots in the summer of 2024 (discussed above).

Since the 1970s there has been significant debate regarding the relationship between race and crime, featuring explanations for a perceived overrepresentation of the black demographic of the population in the criminal justice system (Palmer, 2023). There have been two explanations for this overrepresentation. The first involves the prevalence of racism and discrimination throughout the criminal justice system (Bowling and Phillips, 2007) in which black people have an increased likelihood of being arrested and subjected to more severe sentencing on the basis of their race (Hallsworth and Young, 2008; Palmer, 2023). In contrast, some authors have suggested that this overrepresentation may actually be due to increased offending (Dodd, 2010). However, it has been argued that these explanations are not mutually exclusive; in that an apparent increased offending rate may be due to racism in criminal justice focus, but is also exacerbated, through structural racism in other areas, including increased exposure to socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and employment. Structural racism is

a key feature of wider society and the criminal justice system (Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Palmer, 2023).

In addition to the so-called 'mugging' crisis in the 1970s, the following decades of the 20th century provide further examples of the racialisation of certain violent offences, prior to the current focus on knife crime. In the 1990s there became an increasing focus on gangs, guns and violence within the context of race enabling the state's justification for the authoritarian growth of police powers (Williams and Clarke, 2018). For example, Operation Trident was launched in London in 2000, explicitly seeking to tackle 'black on black ' gun crime (Squires and Kennison, 2010; Williams and Squires, 2021, p.126).

Arguably, the gang phenomenon is still depicted as an ethnic and black issue (Miller, 2023; Hallsworth and Young, 2008), with policing *"focussed towards black and brown bodies"* (Andell, 2023, p. 355). The racialisation of gangs in recent times will be further explored in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, at this stage it can be recognised that the moral panic and deviancy amplification process is clearly evident as *"public debates around gangs and youth violence are viewed and projected through the lens of race and ethnicity"* (Andell, 2023, p. 355). The labelling of black people as deviant, in turn subjecting them to increasing state punishment contributes towards the process of deviancy amplification (Joseph and Gunter, 2011), where the status of gang membership becomes associated with black youth.

The racial stereotypes around young black men as offenders was poignantly illustrated following the murder of Stephen Lawrence. In this pivotal case, police failings to investigate this racist murder, were initially due to categorising the victim as a gang member. An independent inquiry into the police failings, published as the Macpherson Report, highlighted the prominence of institutional racism amongst the police (Macpherson, 1999), defining it as:

"The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people" (Macpherson Report, 1999, paragraph 6.34, p. 369).

According to Macpherson, institutional racism, not only results in the over-criminalisation of black people, but also contributes to the denial or marginalisation of their victimisation. The report highlighted the ingrained racism within the institution of the police (Henry and Smith, 2007). This was a major contribution to the police failings in the murder investigation and service provided to Stephen's family. Decades later, as the previous discussions indicate, the prominence of institutional racism persists as illustrated by the continued discriminatory authoritarian policing of young black men. It is contended that a continuing issue concerning

knife crime prevention policy appears to the discriminatory use of prevention methods against black ethnic minorities (see further Chapter 5).

Returning to the depiction of the offence and usage of the 'youth' and 'black' label given to knife crime phenomenon. First, it is argued that the terms 'youth' and 'young people' *"tend to carry negative connotations*" (Williams, 2023, p. 2), through being associated with terms such as violence, irresponsibility, immaturity and rebellion (Muncie, 2009). Knife crime offending provides a prominent example, with London Metropolitan police commissioners openly claiming that "*knife crime is almost exclusively a young people's phenomenon"* (Williams and Squires, p. 188). This is despite the evidence discussed earlier in the chapter demonstrating that the knife crime phenomenon applies to a range of different age demographics and not solely those defined as young people (Williams, 2023). The newsworthiness of the association of youth and children with knife crime was utilised to achieve shock value in the wider audience, thereby racialising the offence and attributing responsibility to young black men as the criminal 'other' (Williams and Squires, 2021).

In contrast to academic researchers who argue that the media, government and police focus on young black men as knife offenders has elements of moral panic, other researchers have indicated that the ONS police data demonstrates that there is an overrepresentation of certain ethnic minorities as knife crime victims and offenders (Haylock et al, 2020; Silvestri et al, 2009). Ethnicity in itself is not a risk factor for knife crime since it has been shown to have no significant statistical relationship with weapon carrying (Brennan, 2018). Nevertheless, the claims of government, police and media relying on contested police and Home Office data require scrutiny.

The explanations put forward to explain the perceived knife crime overrepresentation in relation to black men varies. The main explanation here is that Black and Asian families often live in economically deprived areas, largely due their increased exposure to economic deprivation (Haylock et al, 2020) and structural racism (Williams and Squires, 2021; Palmer, 2023). Moreover, living in such areas means they are disproportionately exposed to crime and violence (Eades et al, 2007). Arguably, these relationships culminate in the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities as offenders and victims of weapon related crime. However, it must be noted that gang memberships tend to *"mirror the demography of the community they associate with"* (Haylock et al, 2020). Thus, gangs comprise youths from a range of different ethnicities dependent upon the composition of the area (ibid).

Once economic and structural factors have been accounted for, there is no known correlation between ethnicity and crime more generally, and none have been identified in the knife crime literature (Eades et al, 2007; Haylock et al, 2020; Williams and Squires, 2021; Williams, 2023).

Researchers have also questioned the validity of data indicating overrepresentation of black ethnic men. The disproportionate use of stop and search carried out on this demographic significantly contributes towards this overrepresentation (Tiratelli et al, 2018). Furthermore, it is contended that the targeted and over policing of this community exacerbates the idea that particular crimes are excessively committed by black males (Bowling and Phillips, 2002; Long, 2018, Williams and Squires, 2021).

Overall, insufficient attention has been afforded to the fact that in some areas, it is other ethnic groups that are more likely to be the perpetrators and victims of knife crime. For example, Bailey et al's (2020) study of knife crime in Thames Valley London found that 16–34-year-old white males were at a greater risk of becoming victims, offenders and victim/offenders of knife crime. It is clear that the contemporary knife crime phenomenon is not exclusive to any particular ethnic group, lending further credence to the notion that the state's characterisation is incorrect and inaccurate.

The role of the state in the creation of the knife crime moral panic is also illustrated by the expansion of the offence category. Interestingly the knife enabled crime code introduction by the MPS occurred before knife crime was included in legislation or defining the offence category. This pattern is similar to the moral panic of mugging decades earlier in the 1970s (Hall et al, 1978; Williams and Squires, 2021). As a novel method of recording the crime came into prominence, it led to the perception of increasing rates of crime (Cohen, 1972). As the knife crime code began to become regularly used by police, the phenomenon gains further attention, and the public became more likely to report this offence category (Williams and Squires, 2021). This spiral involved the government, media and the police beginning to depict knife crime as a youth phenomenon, a construction that has become *"increasingly racialised in public discourse"* (Williams, 2023, p. 4). Since 2006 the term 'knife crime' became a prominent label for young black males from urban areas. Williams (2023) reiterates that no event is more indicative of this than the former Prime Minister Tony Blair stating in 2007 *"In respect of knife and gun gangs… we won't stop it by pretending that it isn't young black kids doing it"* (UKPOL, 2007).

Williams and Squires (2021) further point to how Trevor Phillips, former head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, encouraged Government ministers and policymakers to consider the significance of the racial impacts of knife violence in 2019 (Sharples, 2019). It is argued that Phillips described the black community as being at the centre of higher rates of crime, suggesting that black communities were themselves responsible for the violence (Williams and Squires, 2021). This point is heavily associated with the notion that the usage of knives is not an English or British behaviour (Dennis et al, 2000). For these authors, this

behaviour went against the ethos and values of British culture, reiterating an incorrect assertion that knife crime was a foreign or un-English behaviour (ibid).

In terms of moral panic in the media, it was observed that in all national press excluding *The Guardian*, 'knife crime' was only used to describe events where the victim was a black teenager or child in an urban area (Younge, 2018). Williams (2023) provides an analysis of the case of Tom Rhys Pryce, a white lawyer, murdered by two black teenagers in 2006. It is argued that this case received a considerable disproportionate coverage, compared to the deaths of numerous victims of ethnic background occurring on the same day which received very little coverage (Gibson and Dodd, 2006; Williams 2023). Furthermore, numerous newspapers appeared to refer to offenders as being black, not explicitly in relation to the police search for the offenders, but instead because race of the offenders in conjunction with the social class of the victim, contributed towards the newsworthiness of the incident (Gekowski et al, 2012). Effectively, this case provides a pivotal example of moral panic, where the ethnicity of the offender became the dominant narrative and characteristic of knife crime in the media, enabling the offence category to become increasingly racialised (Sveinsson, 2008).

This article is also indicative of the media's role in the over policing of black communities; various media articles put forward assertions justifying the increased use of stop and search against black youths (e.g., Bailey, 2006; Evening Standard, 2006). The press argued for a return to increased use of stop and search on the basis that it supposedly benefited black communities since they are supposedly most at risk of knife crime victimisation. Certain sections of the press contended that the black community had two clear choices, either acknowledge that black men would be subjected to increased stop and searchers or instead allowing them to be knife crime victims (Evening Standard, 2006). However, these assertions made by parts of the press were challenged on the basis the evidence contradicted the extent of black youth involvement in knife crime. For instance, the Metropolitan Police Knife Crime Report in 2004 found that white male youth constituted the majority of knife crime carriers (TPHQ, 2004).

The state characterisation of knife crime as a youth problem has provided the state with significant opportunities to extend police powers (Williams, 2023; Williams and Squires, 2021). Whilst the contemporary moral panic around young people and knife crime has facilitated this implementation of punitive knife crime measures (Williams, 2023), including the expansion of police stop and search powers and the removal of the requirement for police to have 'reasonable grounds' for their search. The UK continues to indicate high rates of racial disproportionality in black people being stopped in comparison to other ethnic groups in the population (Williams, 2023). It needs to be appreciated that "*young people, the economically*

disadvantaged and people from some minority ethnic groups" are more likely to be stopped in comparison to rest of the population (Bradford, 2017). The most recent data in the year ending March 2024, demonstrates that black people had a 5 times greater likelihood of being stopped. (Gov UK, 2024c). Such research is arguably indicative of the prevalence of stereotyping by police when interacting with ethnic minorities and the increased racialisation of the implementation of the stop and search method (Long, 2018). The issues with policing and prevention methods and their racially disproportionate impact shall be expanded upon in Chapter 5.

Whilst recognising the moral panic about young black men and boys and the state's exaggerated focus upon them, it is conceded that some young men are involved in knife crime which have resulted in deaths, largely of other young people (Williams and Squires, 2021). As Cohen (1972) and Hall et al (1978) noted, academic discourse on moral panics do not reject the existence of the violence but are rather focused on the specific societal reaction to the act and the accuracy of its depiction (Squires, 2009, p. 129).

Secondly, research has identified age/adolescence as a risk factor, since weapon carrying reaches its peaks at the age of 15 (Home Office, 2018a; Brennan, 2018). A positive association has also been found by some researchers between knife crime and adolescence (Hayden 2010; Densley and Stevens 2015; Alleyne et al 2014; Falshaw et al 1997; Barlas et al, 2006; Alleyne and Wood, 2010). In addition, there is an increased likelihood that carriers aged 17 will continue to carry knives into their adulthood (McVie, 2010). Furthermore, it has been found that those at risk of knife use are most likely aged between their late teens to early twenties (Browne et al, 2022). Whilst it is rightly recognised that young people have been disproportionately affected through their overrepresentation as offenders and victims (Browne et al, 2022), they still constitute a significant proportion of knife crime offenders and victims (HM Government 2018; Sethi et al 2010; Grimshaw and Ford, 2018).

Indeed, the notion that knife crime is significantly affecting young people remains a prominent issue. For instance, London has recorded its peak year for teenage homicides in 2021 (Slawson, 2021), which falls within the trend of increasing homicides involving knives, (see Figure 1.1 on homicide rates in last decade). This demonstrates a continuation of the violence from the prominent years of 2007 and 2008 which depicted significantly high rates of violence amongst youth and knife homicides in London (Wood, 2010), with 24 teenagers killed by knives in that year (Barr, 2017). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that younger youths aged between 10 to 17 are also affected by the phenomenon as both offenders and victims (House of Commons, 2023a). For instance, in 2007-08, in London half of the younger people killed were victims of other teenagers (Wood, 2010).

Knife crime often involves repeat offending including a 'cycle of violence' due to individuals who carry weapons, becoming increasingly prone to knife victimisation (Pickett et al, 2005), increasing their likelihood of becoming repeat victims (Richardson et al, 2016). All of this explains why previous victimisation has been associated with knife crime offending (Haylock et al, 2020) and the victim/offender overlap demonstrates that many of the young knife crime offenders are also victims of the offence (Bailey et al, 2020).

McNeill and Wheller's (2019) indicate that a significant proportion of knife crime offenders and victims are males in their later adolescence. Supporting this, males in general have constituted the majority of knife crime homicide victims through the last decade (see Figure 1.1, p. 2), whilst also having a higher likelihood of committing knife crime offences within community settings (Browne et al, 2022). Consequently, a further consideration of the importance of gender and masculinity may be required to understand male involvement in knife crime offending.

In the paragraphs above, it has been established that there is certainly an overrepresentation of male youths engaging in knife crime offending. State assertions exaggerating youth involvement are factually incorrect. Nonetheless, it can be still said that there is a degree of youth involvement in knife crime offending (Williams, 2023)

Furthermore, the state focus on youths has been largely on those from economically deprived backgrounds (HM Government, 2018), despite the fact that the vast majority of youth from this demographic do not engage in knife crime offending. Yet, there are examples of individuals from middle class families not exposed to poverty and economic deprivation, also engaging in knife crime (Lavrut, 2022, see earlier discussions on range of examples of knife crime offending). This has, unfortunately, received little attention and is relatively unexplored. In community settings, it is largely argued that the affected demographic mainly involves young men and boys from economically deprived backgrounds (Haylock et al, 2020).

In light of state's focus upon youth from economically deprived backgrounds the following section shall further consider the argument that there is an overrepresentation of male youth from economically deprived backgrounds engaging in knife crime, and in doing so, shall also explore the importance of economic structural factors and social class.

The importance of economic structural factors

Much of knife crime in a community setting occurs in economically deprived areas (Kirchmaier et al, 2020) and affects those experiencing economic deprivation (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). Knife crime research has uncovered a range of socioeconomic risk factors which may also act as underlying causes such as, economic deprivation, inequality, living in

economically deprived areas, and poor educational attainment (Haylock et al, 2020; these factors shall be expanded upon and investigated in Chapter 3). Researchers have pointed towards austerity measures, including reduced public spending (Pitts 2023a, Pitts, 2023b; Harding 2020a; Harding 2023) including cuts to youth and education services more specifically (Williams and Squires, 2021), and the effects of these measures on young people, particularly black ethnic groups (ibid).

There also needs to be a greater emphasis and exploration of the economic decline of the United Kingdom in a more general sense, and the resulting harsh economic reality facing poorer younger men across England and Wales. They are living in a society with growing inequality (ONS, 2023b) and poverty is a prominent issue (House of Commons, 2023c), a cost-of-living crisis exists where there has been a decrease in real wages, the decline of the pound, record levels of inflation, increasing energy and food costs (House of Commons, 2023b; House of Commons, 2024a). Chapter 4 shall provide a more expansive discussion on these issues and further key applicable areas.

Overall, policy approaches have failed to address the socio-economic plight of poorer younger males in the UK, particularly barriers to economic survival and how this can lead to pathways of knife crime and violence. Furthermore, there is a lack of awareness of the role of the state in the creation and exacerbation of key underlying economic structural factors and their contribution to the contemporary knife crime moral panic. In this respect, it is argued that the emphasis upon race in the depiction of knife crime, rather than raising an awareness of poverty, marginalisation and the environment reiterates a *"racial neoliberalism"* where economic inequality is justified (Williams, 2023, p. 18) and where economically deprived young black people are held responsible and attributable for their own economic plight. Consequently, Williams (2023) argues that this depiction of *"Black criminality"* is utilised in order to *"manage the contradictions and crisis of neoliberalism capitalism*" (Williams, 2023, p. 18) evidenced by the increasing inequality in the UK (Berry, 2016).

A further question concerns the manner in which youths are drawn into knife crime offending. Knife crime is often thought to involve gang-related activity (peer group gangs or county lines), or alternative group related anti-social youths. However, there is considerable debate over whether the modern face of youth violence is best described as gang-related behaviour or alternatively as involving anti-social youths (Whittaker et al, 2020a). This debate will be explored in Chapter 3. Nonetheless, it is argued that the austerity policies post-2010 have had the effect of diminishing legitimate pathways out of poverty for younger people and instead pushed them towards more economically appealing illegitimate means offered through drug dealing (Pitts 2023a). Once entering these pathways many young people are then exploited

by gangs in county lines via a range of coercive practices concerning financial exploitation, cuckooing and debt bondage (Harding, 2023; see further Chapter 4).

Despite the case being made above regarding the importance of economic structural barriers, there are other pathways outside of gangs and county lines and further motivations for knife crime offending. Extensive literature (i.e. Wilkinson et al, 2024, Browne et al, 2022, Haylock et al, 2020) and recent knife crime murders in 2024 (i.e. Southport, Leicester etc) have underlined the importance of considering trauma, mental health, adverse childhood experiences. Consequently, in reiterating the importance of the economic factors, this thesis does not discount the role of non-economic factors and how they potentially intersect (see Chapter 3 § 3.1, 3.2 and Chapter 5, § 5.3 for relevant discussions on the significance of societal, peer group, relationship, community, psychological and individual domains and motivations).

The need for a political economy of knife crime perspective on male youth offending

The lens of political economy is a particularly useful tool in enabling us to explore in further detail the questions outlined. In the field of criminology, the political economy perspective can be clearly understood and defined through the following quote from Reiner (2012) *"the title 'political economy' is intended to signify a broader approach than simply spotlighting the significance of the economic factors. The economic factors must also be seen as part of a complex set of interdependencies with individual, moral, cultural, and other social dimensions."* (Reiner 2012, p. 2). Prominent texts discussing and applying this political economy approach include *The New Criminology* (Taylor et al, 1973), *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978) and *Anomie* (Merton,1938). Within this approach there is an inherent focus upon relevant economic factors whilst placing an emphasis upon the cultural meanings of economic factors and their relationship with crime (Reiner, 2012). Furthermore, within the political economy, there is an inherent focus upon the role of the state in their depiction of the offending, their responsibility for the underlying causes and the efficacy of their responses (Hall et al, 1978; Taylor et al 1973).

There is currently a lack of research which questions the role of the state over their construction of a moral panic, by depicting the knife crime phenomenon as being predominantly youth based (Williams, 2023) and use of black male youth as a contemporary folk devil, utilised to police the crisis (ibid). In light of this, the political economy perspective possesses significant explanatory potential in contributing towards developing thought by placing a significant focus upon the role of the state in their depiction of the phenomenon, the extent of its accuracy, the extent of youth involvement, the key drivers for involvement of certain youths, the importance of economic factors, the role of the state in relation to the

development of these economic factors and the overall efficacy of their policy focus and response.

Separately, there is also a lack of knife crime research which seeks to understand the cultural meaning and understanding of the economic factors. There is very limited research applicable to knife crime which seeks to use the political economy perspective explicitly or implicitly, (e.g., Williams and Squires (2021). Additional research is nonetheless needed since the socioeconomic scope of the existing knife crime research is yet to be fully considered in light of the explanatory potential of the political economy perspective.

Although *'Rethinking Knife Crime Policing, Violence and Moral Panic?'* (Williams and Squires, 2021) has provided significant inspiration for this work, the originality of this thesis is located in its applications of the political economy concept to the study of knife crime. This research challenges the state construction of the knife crime phenomenon, evidencing its moral panic around black male youth involvement, in order to police the crisis through the introduction of severe police powers. It further challenges the efficacy of the prevention policies.

However, it does not claim to provide a comprehensive account of the history of the knife crime moral panic, since that task has been admirably accomplished elsewhere (e.g., Williams and Squires, 2021; Williams, 2023). Drawing inspiration from the argument that the state has used the current moral panic as a means to distract from their role in the development of underlying socioeconomic issues (ibid). This thesis interrogates the explanatory potential of selected risk and motivational factors, whilst also putting forward a more comprehensive account of the importance of economic factors and the significance of key drivers such as county lines and gangs. Further engaging with contemporary prevention policy and its methods in order to develop key recommendations to address the socioeconomic challenges facing young men, particularly within economically deprived areas.

In summary, the research employs the political economy perspective in the study of knife crime in order to better understand the knife crime offending phenomenon arguing that there needs to be a greater emphasis and exploration of the economic decline of the United Kingdom and the resulting harsh economic reality facing poorer younger men across England and Wales. The contemporary social, economic and cultural reality of those poorer younger males that are involved in knife crime must be at the forefront of knife crime research.

It is contended that both academic research and policy focus must be upon the following six factors: the overall neglect of the role and accountability of the state, the lack of emphasis on the cultural meanings of economic structural factors, the emergence of susceptible criminal subcultures, the root causes of inequality and poverty, the growth of a proportion of economically deprived male youths and the increase in gang involvement, fuelled by the ever-

growing drug market via county lines in the United Kingdom. This thesis will demonstrate the state's role in the development of these underlying economic problems and how it has created a knife crime moral panic as means to 'police the crisis' of knife crime and to distract from key socioeconomic issues. As such, this thesis makes an original contribution to knife crime literature through applying the political economy lens to knife crime to provide a further understanding of this small but significant proportion of younger males in England and Wales.

1.1: Methodology I Research Questions and Aims

Research Aims/Questions

The aim of this thesis is to provide a contemporary socioeconomic account of male youth involvement in knife crime offending to better understand the causes of offending and the types of policy interventions which may help to reduce it. The study is underpinned by four main research questions.

Firstly, how is knife crime defined and understood? In order to address this question, there are various themes and issues to be investigated including how the state has framed and depicted the phenomenon against a contemporary moral panic regarding the involvement of male youth in knife crime.

Secondly, what are the key explanations for involvement of young men in knife crime?

Thirdly, which are the major economic structural barriers to obtaining economic survival which may lead some young men towards the knife crime pathways of gangs and county lines?

Fourthly, how effective are contemporary crime prevention policies in addressing the phenomenon and lowering the risk of male youth engaging in knife crime? Relatedly, what might alternative policy approaches entail?

1.2: Methodology II Literature Selection Strategy

This desk-based research relies upon a broad range of primary and secondary sources (quantitative and qualitative) consisting of a wide inclusion criterion for knife crime/youth violence crime literature. As such, it is acknowledged that the study is limited insofar as it does not claim to be a systematic review (Onweugbuzie and Frels, 2016), nor does it present new empirical data. Rather, the thesis is narrative in nature, drawing on a wide range of sources identified through literature searches. These searches began with a 'start set' of leading authoritative literature identified, comprising of academic texts and peer reviewed journal articles. 'Snowballing' (Wohlin et al, 2022) was then applied to identify further leading literature from the materials engaged with via the starting set. A variety of databases were relied upon including the University Library's 'One Search' tool, JSTOR, ProQuest and Google Scholar. In order to identify the peer review journal articles, efforts were made to filter results. Boolean

searching strategies were also employed to search for relevant materials where appropriate, through utilising relevant specific search terms and Boolean Operators such as “AND, NOT, OR” to broaden or narrow the searches where appropriate (Carlock, 2020).

The arguments within the thesis rely primarily on authoritative sources including peer-reviewed studies, academic texts, and research reports. The use of further sources such as government reports/statistics and non- peer reviewed research by third parties are considered to be informative but will not always be treated as authoritative. In particular, government-sourced reports and other materials will be treated with some degree of caution, since certain state materials may attempt to promote a political agenda (Carlock, 2020; see earlier discussion regarding state-produced data on knife crime). Concerns have also been aired concerning overreporting, underreporting and further inaccuracies in relation to police data (Newburn, 2017). Finally, the use of non-authoritative materials such as media sources may occasionally be used as illustrative examples of how knife crime is depicted and perceived.

Sye (2003, p.6) argues that there are “*five criteria that users should use to evaluate online sources: accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage or scope”* (see also Metzger 2007, p. 2079). In respect, of these considerations, when considering the authority of identified resources efforts were made to achieve a selection of literature which meets this standard. In relation to accuracy, authority and reliability, peer reviewed academic journal articles and academic texts constitute a high standard in these respective areas (Carlock, 2020).

The author was fully aware of the risks of selection bias, in this respect efforts were made to include a wide range of literature on the topic, including a range of views which may challenge any potential subjective biases of the author, and ensuring that selection was not limited to a singular observation of the knife crime phenomenon. In relation to the issues of objectivity and bias, it was earlier acknowledged that any usage of government reports and materials, must be carried out with an awareness of the risk of agenda bias since certain state materials may be attempting to promote a political agenda (Carlock, 2020).

1.3: Thesis Structure

This introduction (Chapter 1) has set out the context of knife crime offending by male youth. The discussion considered how knife crime is defined, the extent and nature of the phenomenon and specially, the particular extent of male youth involvement. It illustrated that the majority of those male youths involved in knife crime offending are from more deprived socio-economic backgrounds. The concept of the political economy has been shown to have significant explanatory potential in evaluating the extent and nature of male youth involvement in knife crime, the significance of economic factors, the efficacy of prevention policy and the

role of the state. The chapter also outlined research aims and questions and explained the methodology adopted to analyse relevant resources.

Chapter 2 shall illustrate the development of the political economy of knife crime perspective. The chapter begins by outlining a brief history of the political economy and its application to the study of crime through discussing key examples of its implementation in criminological literature including anomie (Merton, 1938), previous editions of *The New Criminology* (Taylor et al,1973) and potential applications of Hall's (1978) work. This section also provides an expansive account of the limitations of the political economy concept itself. A case is made for the strengths of a potential political economy of knife crime perspective. It then proceeds to explore selected examples of the political economy's application to the study of crime, including the significance of contemporary research such as William's and Squires (2021) use of Hall's political economy of reaction in their analysis of the contemporary knife crime moral panic.

Chapter 3 interrogates the evidence base concerning explanations behind male youth involvement in knife crime. The chapter provides an examination of underlying causes, risk factors, the key motivations for turning to knife crime and considers the direction of contemporary research.

Chapter 4 focuses on the potential perceptions and understandings of young men at risk of knife crime around economic survival. The chapter argues that there needs to be an increased focus on economic barriers and their role as potential underlying causes. Throughout this discussion, there shall be a considerable emphasis upon the role of the state in the development and exacerbation of these socioeconomic issues, which have been hidden from sight. It is argued that the state has diverted attention from these factors and utilised the moral panic on knife crime and the general demonisation of youth as a distraction tactic, absolving themselves of responsibility for economic conditions, whilst enabling them to 'police' the depicted 'crisis'. The chapter also explores the relationship between the economic structural barriers with key examples of selected knife crime pathways identified, such as gangs and issues around county lines.

Chapter 5 explores the state's interventions through considering knife crime prevention and response strategies. It outlines the development policy in this area, including the recent turn to a 'public health' approach. It is questioned whether the state's application of this policy can be accurately construed as being based upon public health ideology considering the manner of its implementation. The chapter also considers the efficacy of both non-enforcement and enforcement interventions, highlighting key necessary recommendations and finally establishing this thesis's overall position regarding the prevention policy.

Finally, Chapter 6 extrapolates the conclusions of this research, summarising the key findings of the thesis and considering how the research questions have been addressed. The chapter provides an analysis of the findings of the thesis, reiterating their significance and implications, while acknowledging their limitations. The conclusion will draw out the key implications and explanatory potential of the political economy for informing our understanding of the extent and nature of knife crime offending of younger males in the United Kingdom and the implications for future research and policymaking in the area.

Chapter 2: The Development of a Political Economy of Knife Crime Perspective

2.0: Chapter Overview

Notwithstanding the moral panic around knife crime and youth, there is evidence to suggest that some young men from poorer urban areas are involved with knife crime. Given this, it is necessary to focus upon the role of economic factors, and their interpretation by the demographic of young men living within deprived urban areas. The role of the state, in exacerbating economic barriers affecting such young men, is much neglected. In turn, the racialisation of moral panic, depicting black youth as the main perpetrators of knife crime, has arguably served to distract from government responsibility for the growth in economic deprivation and inequality affecting young men living in urban areas. Additionally, there is a need to examine the nature and overall efficacy of prevention policies. This is particularly important given how the extension of punitive authoritarian prevention methods and police powers has benefited from the moral panic around youth. Overall, Chapter 2 seeks to outline how the political economy concept can be used to develop a political economy of knife crime that sheds light on these issues.

Firstly, the chapter provides a brief history of the political economy perspective and its application to crime more generally. Key examples of literature shall be explored such as *Anomie* (Merton, 1938), *The New Criminology* (Taylor et al, 1973), *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978), *Penal Systems: A Comparative Approach Penal Policy* (Cavadino and Dignan, 2006a), *Penal Policy and Political Economy* (Cavadino and Dignan, 2006b) and Lynch's work on the political economy and violent crime, see (Lynch, 2013a; Lynch, 2013b). This section concludes with an explanation of the explanatory potential of the political economy in furthering our understanding of youth involvement in knife crime, the importance of structural factors, the growth in knife crime pathways, and the role of the state as a contributor to these factors. Key criticisms and limitations of the political economy concept will also be examined (section 2.1).

Secondly, the chapter evaluates selected works such as *The New Criminology*'s social theory of deviance, considering which aspects remain useful. The work of Hall et al 1978 in 'Policing the Crisis' as the first exponent of the political economy of reaction will also be examined. Within this chapter, at various stages, there is also an appreciation of contemporary works, such as Williams and Squires 2021; Williams, 2023, who have engaged with the political economy concept in their seminal academic text on the contemporary knife crime moral panic (section 2.2).

Finally, the chapter proceeds to define this thesis's interpretation of a possible political economy of knife crime perspective (section 2.3) including interpretations of a political economy of knife crime and potential reactions.

2.1: Background, History and Development of the Political Economy in Criminology

Key works in the 20th century which are illustrative of the development and variations of the usage of political economy in criminology, can be traced back to Durkheim's concept of *anomie* (Durkheim, 1898), further developed by Merton (1938) (see relevant discussions on anomie concept later in this section). Although such works do not explicitly refer to political economy, contemporary authors such as Reiner credit this work as being an implicit illustration of the perspective (Reiner, 2017). Of particular relevance to this thesis, Hall et al (1978) put forward a political economy of the social reaction to mugging in 1970. Considerable attention must also be paid to the birth of Radical Criminology since the New Criminologists also used the political economy to build an all-encompassing *"fully social theory of deviance*" which included a political economy of action and reaction (Taylor et al, 1973).

Notably, the *New Criminology* remains one of the most prominent texts to inform how the political economy lens can be applied to the study of knife crime. The explanatory potential of this text shall be considered fully in section 2.2 due its significant influence upon this thesis. In terms of a contemporary academic understanding of the political economy, it can be said there is no set structure for using this perspective, rather there are derivations, as explored below. Notwithstanding, a key characteristic of this approach as noted in the previous chapter, it essentially encapsulates how economic factors intersect with social, cultural and other relevant circumstances. There are many examples of when the political economy has been employed in the study of crime. However, for pragmatic purposes a selection will be focused on here to explain its explanatory potential; Reiner (2012, 2017 and 2018) provides a fuller review.

Considering the history and development of the political economy perspective in criminology, the term 'political economy' gives rise to different meanings depending upon the relevant field of study. For instance, economics as a discipline arose from the concept of classical political economy in the 19th century, it should be noted that the contemporary field of economics is quite distinct from its origins. An early pioneering text is Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) which looked at the role of economics in the functioning of the state (Haakonsen, 2006). This informed the development of 'classical political economy' used by pioneering economists and scholars such as Malthus, Ricardo, James Mill and John Stuart Mill (Reiner, 2017). At the end of the 19th century, economics emerged as a separate discipline from political economy resulting in a separation of the two subjects (Reiner, 2012; Reiner, 2017).

The political economy itself is a theoretical concept which focuses on the economic and political system of a state and its influences upon social structures (Reiner, 2007). In the study of crime, this framework highlights an interdependence between macro, meso and micro-

processes, as a result of which social structures in society can create an environment which is conducive to crime (Engels, 1845) through the impact of capitalist oppression upon the underclass. Thus 'structural factors' such as poverty and inequality (Quinney, 1980) are emphasised over unit-level factors which are attributable to the individual. However, there is no set structure for the application of the political economy concept. Rather, it provides a useful lens through which economic and structural factors can be viewed, whilst also recognising their social and cultural dimensions.

Beccaria was an early proponent of the *Political Economy and Science of Police* arguing that crime and criminal justice were a part of the political economy (Beccaria, 1764), as demonstrated through the 'science of policing'. The latter referred to the role of police in focusing upon the underclass and preventing them from falling into 'indigence' such as 'unwillingness to work' (Reiner, 2017). In England, Patrick Colquhoun[2] advocated the 'science of police' in which the prevention and control of crime were connected to the political economy. He argued that the underlying causes of crime within the structure of society arose due to cultural and social dimensions rather than solely due to economic factors. Poverty in and of itself did not cause crime (Colquhoun,1800). Rather it was negative indigence's such as an unwillingness to work in response to negative economic events (Colquhoun,1800). Indeed, controversially poverty could usually be viewed as a positive outcome since it created the pressure to work (Reiner, 2017). Whilst, this can now be viewed as an outdated and regressive argument, Colquhoun did at least consider the social and cultural interpretations of economic factors and their relationship to criminality.

One of the earliest applications of the political economy perspective to the study of crime in the 19th century involved the writings of Karl Marx, albeit minimally in relation to crime. Marx was heavily inspired by this perspective in the development of Marxism, and as expressed by Reiner (2017), viewed himself as an heir to this tradition. His key use of this concept comes under chapter 10 of *Capital* (Marx, 1867/1976) which focuses on the role of Factory Acts being introduced in England during the beginning of the 19th century and the relevance of corporate crime and the exploitation of factory workers (Reiner, 2017). Marx recognises the impact of structural factors including the increasing of hours by factory owners, risking the health of workers and ultimately the means of production. In response to this, Marx argued that progressive factory-owners, workers and factory inspectors should argue for the necessity of the new laws in the Factory Acts which restricted the autonomy of the factory owners and manufacturers. Therefore, Reiner (2017) argues that this chapter is a key example of a political economy of crime and control, through Marx's emphasis upon macro level factors, the

[2] 18th/19th Century Magistrate.

incidence of particular events and consequently human action (Marx, 1867/1976; Reiner, 2017). As a result, Marxism has become synonymous with the political economy.

Whilst the work of Marx arguably has application to criminology, it remained relatively ignored prior to the 1960s since it was generally viewed as being economically determinist. In defence of Marx, it has been suggested that this criticism fails to take account of his acknowledgement of the convoluted interactions between structures and individuals (Reiner, 2012, see also his analysis above on the Factory Acts).

An early pioneer who used Marx's work in relation to the study of crime was Willem Bonger who put forward the first Marxist analysis of crime (Bonger, 1916/1969). Bonger argued that the economic system of capitalism gives rise to pressures and conditions that can give rise to crime (ibid). Bonger also argued that capitalism was related to crime in that it created a culture of egoism within society. This in turn created an inherent motivation of an attainment of material desires through consumerist marketing (Bonger, 1916/1969, p.108). Bonger recognised the relationships between the structural impositions of capitalism and particular forms of criminality, outlining the relevance of class, power, and the level of control that the wealthier classes had upon the legal systems (Reiner, 2017). Although, it should be noted that Bonger's work has also been criticised as being economically determinist, it can be defended on the basis there is an appreciation of the role of choice and the significance placed on individual autonomy and moral responsibility. Therefore, Reiner (2017) argues that Bonger's work substantially informed the emergence of radical and critical criminology (Moxon, 2014). For instance, Bonger recognised the harm of traditional crime upon oppressed groups, including women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities (Bemmelen, 1960).

Indeed, the political economy played a pivotal role in the development and growth of Marxist-influenced radical criminology, that became prominent in England throughout the 1970s. For instance, in *The New Criminology* (Taylor et al, 1973); the authors put forward a 'fully social theory of deviance' (Taylor et al,1973, pp. 268-80) comprising a political economy of criminal action and reaction, alongside other components, to be explored extensively in section 2.2 of this chapter.

The second key text is *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978); which applied *The New Criminology* to the so-called phenomena of 'mugging' in Birmingham, focusing upon young black men. Hall examined the moral panic on mugging in the 1970s and the emergence of the black male as a folk devil. Arguably, this text is the fullest attempt to apply *The New Criminology* to a particular offence (Reiner, 2017).

In putting forward an analysis of British economic, political, social and cultural history, post-Second World War, the authors contextualise a single example of street robbery in

Birmingham, and the moral panic around ‘mugging’ that ensued, within the impact of a changing political economy. From a specific example of robbery in Birmingham, labelled as ‘mugging’, the analysis moved to the significance of moral panic, the media and police reactions, and sentencing.

The author considered macro-level factors, using British economic, cultural and political history to identify the underlying issues relevant to mugging as a ‘new’ phenomenon (Reiner, 2017). Hall et al therefore considered the relevance of race through outlining how the political economy affected young black males and how this contributed towards the formulation of subcultures, contributing to higher rates of robbery. Hall also looked at the effects of the stigmatised label of 'mugging’ being placed on young black men, as they became a demonised group. The continued and particular form of state attention placed upon events as involving a black demographic reinforced racist stereotype pertaining to black criminality (Gilroy, 1987).

Hall et al’s (1978) analysis of the state’s depiction of black male youths as folk devils through use of the ‘mugging’ label was contextualised within a broader political landscape where the state directly benefitted from this mischaracterisation. Black youths were firmly depicted as a direct challenge to societal values (Williams and Squires, 2021). Hall et al (1978) argued that the moral panic on mugging and its racialisation as a black male urban youth offence was utilised to justify more severe policing and harsher sentencing. For instance, increasing discriminatory stop and search practices as a result of the SUS Law was directly derived from section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824 (Brogden, 1981) (see Chapter 1, § 1.0 for more expansive discussion on this text with regards to the moral panic of black male youth).

At this stage, Hall et al’s (1978) work is clearly demonstrative of the necessity of a political economy analysis of crime, outlining that the state’s depiction of offending cannot be taken at face value, but that the accuracy of events must be established, and social constructions must be challenged. Indeed, Hall et al’s analysis of the so-called ‘mugging’ phenomena indicates the crucial need to subject state depictions of criminality to scrutiny, whilst also examining, state obfuscation of increasing structural inequality. Hall’s work is a pioneering example of how *The New Criminology*’s theoretical concepts can be employed in the study of the construction of a particular crime. Specifically, the manner in which the academics were able to consider macro-level social, economic and cultural issues and translate their influences upon micro-level behaviour and reactions to it. Hall et al’s theoretical foundations have influenced contemporary knife crime research. For instance, *Rethinking Knife Crime* (Williams and Squires, 2021), utilises one of *The New Criminology*’s concepts, since this text relies upon the theoretical foundations established in Hall et al (1978) concerning the ‘wider social reaction’ to knife crime (See Chapter 1, § 1.0 for further discussion on Williams and Squires 2021

seminal academic text). More broadly, Reiner (2017) argues that in the 21st century we can see a slight resurgence of macro level analyses on the explanatory potential of the political economy in relation to crime and criminal justice, (examples include Taylor, 1999; Young, 1999; Garland, 2001), as in more recent times, the proponents of ultra-realism (Hall and Winlow, 2015).

The political economy perspective has also informed developments in the study of penology. Rusche and Kirchheimer's research on penology (Rusche and Kirchheimer, 1939/2009), identified cultural and political influences, demonstrating that the historical development of penal policy was linked to the supply and demand for labour. These insights were built upon by researchers in the 21st century (i.e., de Giorgi 2012; Lacey, 2008); an example includes *The Culture of Control* (Garland, 2001), which looked at the transition from welfare penal policy to increasingly punitive penal and prevention policies, further recognised in more modern works (i.e., Pratt, 2006; Matravers, 2009; De Giorgi, 2012; Lacey, 2013).

Arguably, the most well-known research relying upon a political economy framework in the study of penology has been *Penal Systems: A Comparative Approach* (Cavadino and Dignan 2006a). This study looked at the penal systems in 12 industrial liberal democratic countries and compared their penal policies in the context of their respective political economies. The authors argued that there are four categories of political economies in capitalist systems. Firstly, neo-liberalism, where there is an existence of significant wealth and income inequality, right wing dominant presence, growth of social exclusion, restricted social rights and entrenched formalised egalitarianism, with a limited welfare state (Reiner, 2017; ibid). A clear example is the USA, but other countries also fall under this model of political economy, including the United Kingdom. Secondly, conservative corporatism, where there is a status-related welfare state, wherein there is some degree of income and wealth inequality, but it is not extreme, social rights are moderately present, and the politics are centrist, e.g., Germany. Thirdly, social democratic corporatism consisting of expansive welfare state, limited income inequality, egalitarian system, wide social rights, limited social exclusion, and dominance of left-wing politics, e.g., Scandinavian states. Fourth, oriental corporatism which has characteristics of paternal welfare system, limited income inequality, exclusion of outsiders, centre-right political position, e.g., Japan (Cavadino and Dignan, 2006a; see also Reiner, 2017).

By putting forward these various political economies, Cavadino and Dignan (2006a) argue that a state's type of political economy in turn leads to differences in state penal policy. For example, in relation to imprisonment rates, neo-liberal political economies have the highest imprisonment rates, the USA exemplifying highest use of incarceration, imprisoning 701 per

100,000 of the population, with Australia being the lowest at 115 per 100,000 of their population. The latest data for England and Wales indicates 134 prisoners per 100,000 of the population (House of Commons, 2024d). It is contended that neo-liberal economies tend to emphasise crime prevention policies of 'law and order', a key observation in England and Wales, which shall be later explored in chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

Following on from this, conservative corporatists are the second most punitive in their prison populations since there is variance from 93 to 100 per 100,000. Thirdly, social democracies come next, although they are significantly less punitive with 70 to 73 per 100,000. Fourthly, the model of oriental corporatism, since Japan has the least with 53 per 100,000 (Cavadino and Dignan, 2006a). Nonetheless, the researchers recognise that there are overlaps between the respective groups (ibid).

Another crucial use of the political economy perspective outside the Marxist tradition relates to the notion of *anomie*, referring to a state of normlessness where the social norms become unclear. Consequently, trust in the state is lost, resulting in an environment that arises which facilitates crime (Reiner, 2017). Durkheim's concept emerged at the end of the 19th century (Durkheim, 1897), putting forward the argument that societies require a regulation of aspirations and a clear defining of them. In instances where there is rapid social change, including sudden economic shifts, *anomie* can result, which in turn has the capacity to contribute towards an increase in crime (ibid). Merton later built upon this in his own analysis to demonstrate that anomie it did not simply arise from the strain of cultural goals and minimal legitimate options, but also due to certain goals being encouraged and promoted in materialistic cultures (Merton, 1938; Merton 1957). In this respect, cultural goals are viewed as the economic ambitions of particular demographics of a population, whilst the legitimate options constitute the legal methods for economic attainment such as education and employment.

It is argued that materialistic societies such as the USA are more susceptible to *anomie*, especially if a greater emphasis is placed upon the monetary goals rather than the legitimate means available to attain these goals, whilst the legitimate opportunities themselves are scarce. This culture is prone to the problems of moral regulation and crime at all levels (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2006). Overall, it is argued that Merton's *anomie* provides a framework for a political economy of crime through explaining the relationship between the regulation of morality and the cultural meaning of economic factors due to the emphasis on there being unclear social values in the state (Merton, 1938). It is not specifically the presence of economic inequality or economic deprivation which give rise to *anomie*, rather it is the

cultural meanings and interpretations of economic factors and barriers to economic goals which give rise to *anomie*.

In certain cultures*, "[a] society combining cultural encouragement of common material aspirations by a mythology of meritocracy, and a structural reality of unequal opportunities, generates anomic pressures, leading to a variety of deviant reactions"* (Reiner, 2012, p. 14). The concept of *anomie* is a revolutionary phenomenon in criminology which has often been taught through explanations of 'strain theory.' Strain occurs where a lack of opportunities combined with the encouragement of materialistic ambitions, means that some people cannot attain the societally encouraged cultural goals of success through legitimate means. Crime then provides an alternative way of doing so. It has been argued that this literature provides an example of the political economy perspective being implemented (Reiner, 2012) in relation to crime, since Merton places importance upon the cultural meanings of the economic factors. Therefore, Merton's *anomie* theory is arguably the most influential formulation of a political economy of crime.

Merton argues that there are five different reactions to the state of *anomie*, and the majority of these do not include committing crime (Merton, 1938; Inderbitzin et al, 2014). Firstly, there is the adaption through 'conformity', which the majority of people from poorer backgrounds would choose, in which there is an acceptance of the cultural goal of success and there is an attempt to achieve this through legitimate means, such as education or employment. Secondly, the response of 'innovation' where the cultural goal of success is accepted, but people are attempting to achieve this through illegitimate means (ibid). Thirdly, the response of 'ritualism', whereby people reject or abandon the cultural goal of wealth attainment but maintain using the legitimate means. Fourthly, the response of 'retreatism', whereby individuals reject cultural goals of success and also reject the legitimate means. Fifthly, the notion of 'rebellion', whereby the goals are rejected and replaced with different goals, using legal and illegal means to achieve them (ibid). It should be noted that these categories are quite limited in their scope and also arguably outdated. Nevertheless, Merton's five adaptations offer an interesting starting point of understanding the potential responses to the 'structural impediments' that poorer adolescents face in the UK and how they may manifest in pathways to knife crime.

In more recent times, development of a psychological analysis has furthered understanding of *anomie* (Teymoori et al, 2017). Psychologists have referred to it as *"[t]he shared perception that society is breaking down*". This interpretation has led to a *"lack of integration between societal and individual level analyses"* of *anomie* (Teymoori, et al 2017) resulting in "the concept of *anomie* becoming clouded" (ibid). Research on the psychological negative effects of *anomie* upon the individual, include alienation (Srole,1956), helplessness,

meaninglessness (Thorlindsson and Bernburg, 2004), rejection of social norms (Bjarnason, 2009), withdrawing from civic engagement (Norasakkunkit and Uchida, 2011), and suicide (Heydari et al, 2014). This indicates the importance of sociopsychological factors and the role of mental health when considering anomie.

In the history of the development of *anomie*, there have thus been a variety of definitions that have been described, ranging from analysis of the social structure (Durkheim,1897) and its impact, in addition to the cultural and social values of cultural goals of success (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2006). In other words, *anomie* is experienced across society, across different classes and groups, meaning it can be experienced by different groups with a low socio-economic status to different extents. Overall, therefore, whilst *anomie* is a macro-level phenomenon which has constantly been linked with economic inequality, within periods of rapid social change, it is not these factors in themselves which contribute towards the development of *anomie*, but the interpretation of them. The shared perception and reaction to *anomie* plays a role in reinforcing it. In the UK, we are witnessing growing social inequality, due to rising cost of living, increases in unstable and poorly paid employment, and lack of affordability of housing (House of Commons, 2023b.) It can be argued therefore that *anomie* affects the working class and poorer demographic more than others, and of that section of the population, some respond to *anomie* through lawlessness. It can be further contended that the development of gangs and youth knife crime is indicative of the changing perception of these social issues, in some sections of the population, which is indicative of the risk of the UK moving from a state of low *anomie* to high.

In support, it is argued that the contemporary emergence of a more globalised neoliberal political economy includes social and cultural factors which have the capacity to increase crime (Reiner, 2007). The growth of consumerist and materialist culture alongside increased social inequality and exclusion, and reduction in legitimate opportunities are arguably indicative of a contemporary *anomie* (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2012; Reiner, 2017). Promotion of a culture fixated upon consumerism and fulfilment of material desires, that are inaccessible by legitimate means, leads to the increased attraction of illegitimate means offered by crime to some (Hallsworth, 2005; Hall et al, 2008; Winlow et al, 2015).

Contemporary researchers have tended to adopt the political economy lens to focus upon violence more broadly (see Lynch 2013a and 2013b). Lynch put forward a political economy of violence in the USA wherein he discusses the impact of macro-level events such as the decline of manufacturing industry and the increase in unemployment, alongside the rise of violence in urban cities (Lynch, 2013a). Lynch's research has been of significant influence in illustrating the relationship between the macro-level nation state and the behaviour of violence.

Additionally, the political economy lens has recently been employed in the study of gangs in England and across certain states in Europe. For instance, *"The Political Economy of Gangland*" by Pitts (2023a), considered by many to be a key work in gang research. Despite the recognition here that younger people involved in European street tend to be economically disadvantaged, gang researchers have arguably afforded insufficient attention to political, economic and social factors (Pitts, 2023a). Despite the influence of such work, broadly speaking, the political economy approach has been unpopular in criminology since the 1970s. The following section sheds light upon the reasons behind its apparent unpopularity.

Why was the political economy an unpopular criminological approach? A consideration of its limitations and significant explanatory potential

It has been suggested that *"The Political economy was expelled from criminology after the mid-1970s by a set of pincer movements."* (Reiner, 2012). Yet, following a gradual decline of this approach up until the end of the 20th century, in the last decade there has been a recent resurgence (see earlier examples discussed). In the 1980s, critiques of the concept emerged from all sides of the dominant schools of thought in criminology. In particular, left realism played a significant role in ousting the political economy (Reiner, 2012). Consequently, in order to understand the decline of the political economy in the 1980s, it is necessary to consider the simultaneous growth and emergence of left realism. Referred to as a "revolution within radical criminology itself" (Downes and Rock, 2003, p. 284), it is said *that "Left realists are former radical or critical criminologists who have recognized the reality of crime and have softened their critique of capitalist society and the criminal justice system"* (Akers and Sellers 2008: 260).

Over time, key radical criminologists appeared to distance themselves from the political economy school of thought (Lea, 2016). For instance, Jock Young, known as a key proponent of radical criminology (e.g., Taylor et al, 1973), shifted his position to become a central figure in the birth of left realism. Left realism emerged in a period where there was a crisis in radical criminology, due to increases in crime, poverty and unemployment (Reiner, 2018). In addition, the critical and radical criminology perspectives of the time were increasingly unpopular amongst policy makers across Europe. Mainstream criminology was becoming increasingly focused upon what works, seeking practical methods which facilitated realistic solutions. There was a rejection of perspectives which placed macro level social economic issues as underlying causes (Wilson, 1975; Reiner, 2018). The analysis of the political economy in section 2.1 is demonstrative of this notion being a central theme amongst this analysis in criminology. Consequently, an alternative school of thought was needed in order to facilitate immediate achievable policy changes (Reiner, 2018).

Left realism began in the 1980s in response to prominent debates surrounding street crime and the pursuit to develop a socially democratic crime control strategy for working class communities; a criminology which recognises the realities of those living in economically deprived areas in the United Kingdom. In this respect, it was argued that criminology in the past had failed to recognise these realities (Lea, 2015). Left realists in this time period observed that certain realities at the time challenged key presumptions regarding criminality. For instance, the notion that increases to relative income combined with decrease in relative poverty would collectively lead to a reduction in crime. However, in response to this assertion, it was contended that overall increases in income, often served to disguise increasing inequality and poverty within specific localities (ibid). In turn this led to the increased exclusion of economically deprived communities as a key cause for crime increasing (Lea and Young, 1984).

It was noted that crime was mainly intra-class where both the offenders and victims were living in economically deprived areas (Lea, 2015). Yet, it was contended that certain left radical criminologists termed as 'left idealists' disregarded this reality or simply argued that it constituted rebellion against the confines of the capitalist system (Young, 1986). The key critique was that left idealism *"centres around the nature of the state and its impact upon citizens"* (Young, 1986, p. 17), focusing on criminalisation but failing to explore why individuals became criminals or the impact of intra-class crime on victims (Young, 1986).

On the other hand, conservative perspectives on crime at the time leant toward administrative criminology which neglected the causes of crime and instead focused largely upon prevention methods. With regards to tackling causes of crime, administrative criminology only sought to tackle those *"causes which can be altered without making social changes which would be politically unacceptable, [and] which stresses the individual rather than the social causes of crime"* (Young, 1992, p. 31). In comparison, left realism emphasised the importance of concentrating upon the difficult reality facing poorer communities in the pursuit "*to develop knowledge-gathering tools undistorted by the statistics of meaningless national averages"* (Lea, 2015, p. 168).

For example, the Islington Crime Survey in 1986, conducted in a borough with significant levels of economic deprivation, was one of the most innovative local victimisation crime surveys. Firstly, it demonstrated that crime in these communities cannot simply be expressed as rebellion since there were significant public concerns amongst residents regarding the increasing levels of local crime. Second, it had the further benefit of empowering the local community to build on their own understanding concerning crime in their locality. In turn, this contributed towards an emphasis on police accountability, wherein people of the borough were

able to put forward their concerns around crime, expectations of the police and feedback to police on their methods and performance data (Lea, 2015). Core characteristics for effective policing were emphasised including effective transmission of information pertaining to crime between communities and the police (Lea, 2016).Trust in police would be facilitated by enhancing democratic accountability of the police to communities (ibid).

A key component of the left realists works concerned their square of crime framework for both crime control and the analysis of crime. This involved a criminological study consisting of four key participants and their interactions; firstly, the role of formal control, through the state including criminal justice agencies, secondly, actors of informal control such society/public and communities, thirdly, the offender and fourthly, the victim (Lea, 2015; Lea, 2016). It was contended that this framework gave scope for analysis beyond the separate focus on the offender and victim as the action of the crime and the reaction of the state and public. Rather than solely focusing upon the action or reaction, there was a need to appreciate the interactions between all four components (Lea, 2015; Lea, 2016).

To truly achieve crime prevention, intervention is required at each corner of the square of crime, as levels of crime are associated with the interactions between each aspect (ibid); including factors that give rise to the offender, the informal systems, victim factors, and issues with the formal system such as insufficient policing (Young, 1988b, p. 41).

Within their analysis, there is a need for a deconstruction of all elements of the square of crime in understanding the action between the offender and victim, as well as the reaction, involving the police and community. In terms of how a square of crime analysis can be achieved, Young set out the need for recognising *"the form of crime, the social context of crime, the shape of crime, its trajectory through time, and its enactment in space"* (Young, 1992, p. 26).

In setting out the meanings of these concepts, Lea (2015) explains that the square provides a means of analysing all components of crime. The social context of crime concerns an awareness of the broader social structure applicable to all four parts of the square. The shape of crime constitutes an exploration of the interactions between various kinds of crimes. The trajectory of crime consists of an awareness of the associations inside the square of crime and an exploration of how individual, actions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours interact with regards to the crime. The spatial dimension concerns *"the distribution of the square of crime through space, again changing for different types of crimes"* (Lea, 2015, p. 173).

Furthermore, expanding upon the methodology of the square of crime framework, it is said that *"fundamentally, realist criminology involves an act of deconstruction. It takes the phenomenon of crime apart, breaking it down to its component pieces and sequences*", it then *"places together these fragments of the shape of crime in their social context over time*"

(Young, 1987, p. 337). Lea (2016) further explains that *"the deconstruction process applies equally to the other parts of the square: victims, communities and criminal justice processes as they interact with each other and to wider forms of social structure and power relations involving class, gender, ethnicity, politics, law and the state and, of course, the economy" (*Lea, 2016, p. 59). However, despite the contended explanatory potential of a framework with an incorporation of all four components of the square of crime (Lea, 2015), it is difficult to explore examples which fully applies this formulation. Since *"it is extremely rare to find an approach that examines the changing nature of crime by incorporating all four dimensions into the analysis"* (Matthews, 2009, p. 346). It is further contended that left realism has not produced a developed application of the square of crime framework (ibid); instead examining crime through analysing two or three components of the square of crime.

Interestingly, it should be recognised that Jock Young expressly linked the square of crime framework with the New Criminologists 'fully social theory of deviance' (Lea, 2015). The left realists advocated the necessity for an account which integrates structural and subcultural perspectives which has the capacity to *"reveal the dynamics of power in order to change them"* (Lea, 2015, p. 174). The explanatory potential of this association and linkage with the political economy concept shall be further considered after considering limitations of the political economy overall.

Whilst discussing the emergence of left realism, it is also necessary to further explore reasons behind the political economy's decrease in popularity as an explanation for deviance. For instance, it was argued that the concept of political economy was indicative of an economic determinist perspective; it was suggested that the earlier research *"was conducted within an implicit (or sometimes explicit) economic determinist model*" (Reiner, 2012), including *"the proposition that economic life is fundamental and therefore, the determining influence, upon which all social and cultural arrangements are made"* (Taylor, 1997, p. 266). In particular, criticisms levelled against the New Criminology included deterministic tendencies through its emphasis upon structural factors such as inequality between the classes as being the determining factor for crime being carried out (Newburn, 2017), and lack of emphasis on individual choice.

A further critique concerned a contention that *"it remains a fundamentally structuralist perspective, precluding adequate exploration of the psychodynamics of crime and control"* (Reiner 2012, p. 6; Jefferson, 2008). Further criticisms are that the state is construed as the offender, the offender as the victim, whilst the actual victim is forgotten. The approach has been critiqued for 'romanticising' the actions of the perpetrator as a form of rebellion against

the confines of the capitalist system (Hirst, 1975b), a perspective with dangerous consequences (Hirst, 1975a).

In this respect, it was also argued that there was a neglect of the reality of intra working class crime. The term 'left idealism' was used to refer to left radical criminologists who either ignored this reality or rationalised it on the basis of it being tantamount to rebellion (Young, 1986). Crucially, there was focus upon the manner in which the state criminalises individuals, at the expense of an exploration of why individuals became criminals (Young, 1986). Consequently, the lack of understanding or investigation of intra-working-class crime and its impact, contributed towards the birth of left realism discussed earlier. Young posited that there were no issues with regards to the focus upon the state and its impact upon crime, but rather concerns were that it had neglected the consequences of crime for the victim. It was said that *"radical analysis also lost touch with the most obvious focus of criminology- crime itself. It became an advocate for the indefensible: the criminal became the victim, the state the solitary focus of attention, while the real victim remained off-stage"* (Matthews and Young, 1986, p. 1).

A further critique concerned the lack of practical crime policies being proposed from researchers using this approach (Reiner, 2012) (see earlier discussion above regarding the decline of radical criminology and the rise of left realism in response). Additionally, another key critique of the political economy concerned a supposed lack of empirical support. It was argued that it could not provide an explanation behind lower crime rates in a few capitalist countries (Klockars, 1979). Furthermore, the perspective, due to is Marxist connotations has been heavily criticised for not recognising the level of harm caused by crime in societies which ascribe to Marxism (ibid).

Taking these criticisms in turn, firstly turning to the issue of economic determinism, this thesis does not put forward the proposition that all social and cultural arrangements in relation to knife crime can be explained by economic factors. Rather, it argues that the nature and combination of such factors are paramount in their explanatory potential. Nor does this thesis seek to provide an all-encompassing account which puts forward a holistic explanation of knife crime offending. To an extent, there is an attempt at recognising social, cultural and psychological dimensions, but a key focus remains on the significance of the economic explanatory potential of the political economy, in furthering our understanding of the contemporary phenomenon.

It is necessary for a political economy approach to address the critique of 'analytical individualism' through relying upon a combination of qualitative and quantitative knife crime research. In the past, research which has used the findings of 'positivist empiricist' studies often faced the accusation of 'analytical individualism' in which there is a reliance on

demonstrating causal/correlative relationships, such as demonstrating a significant association between factor *x* and *y.* This thesis seeks to mitigate this critique through relying upon a range of qualitative and quantitative research and literature for the purposes of putting forward a 'political economy' perspective of knife crime.

In relation to the absence of the 'psychodynamic' approach, this thesis seeks to demonstrate an awareness of social psychological literature and the relevance of the factors of mental health, trauma and adverse childhood experiences in the following chapter 3. However, a recognised limitation of this thesis is that it does not seek to provide a psychological account of the affected demographic, nor does it incorporate social or community psychology literature. Despite this, there will be some attempt to recognise the impact that the effects posed by poverty have upon mental health and cognitive reasoning of knife crime offenders. Finally, addressing the criticism of the political economy perspective resulting in the construction of offender as victim, this can be countered on the basis that a focus upon the role of the state and structural factors does not disregard the 'rational choice' made by the individual, rather it demonstrates the constraints of the available choices and the allure of illegitimate opportunities as a rational choice.

Regarding the critique of romanticising offending as a form of rebellion against the inequity of the capitalist system, it is not contended that knife crime should be depicted as a form of rebellion. Rather that there has been a significant growth of key criminogenic underlying socioeconomic causes which have significant explanatory potential with regards to some of the reasons behind youth involvement. The political economic perspective helps to explain the significance of key causes, their capacity to inform rationale, and to examine the efficacy of prevention policy in response. To critique the inequities of the capitalist system and the state's socioeconomic policies does not, in itself, imply a romanticisation of offending.

The political economy has been criticised for insufficiently exploring why individuals became criminals, instead being preoccupied with the manner in which the state criminalises people (Young, 1986). In contrast, this thesis's significant focus on the role of the state in exacerbating social inequality, significantly contributes towards the explanations behind intra class working class offending.

With regards to critique of neglect of the victim, it is acknowledged that this thesis primarily focuses upon explanations behind offending due to practicality. Nevertheless, it is recognised in Chapter 3 that many of the youths engaging in knife crime offending, are also victims. The level of serious harm imposed upon families and communities through injury and death are recognised from the outset in Chapter 1, although there is scope for a further future

scholarship in this area (for example, by reviewing knife crime victimisation risk and protective factors).

Whilst this over-focus on the state has been subject to critique in the past, this thesis argues for a return to the criminological lens upon focusing on the role of the state since it has played a pivotal role in putting forward a distorted racialised depiction of youth involvement as part of its moral panic on black male youth. Additionally, Chapter 5 will be exploring the notion that increasing numbers of prevention methods have also become racialised with regards to their discriminatory and disproportionate use against black youths in particular. Considered alongside its role in creating and perpetuating structural factors such as inequality and economic deprivation, it is clear that the role of the state is paramount.

Despite, the left realism critique of 'left idealism', contributing to the decline in popularity of the political economy perspective (Reiner, 2018), left realists continued to recognise its importance. For instance, various later works from left realists made efforts to incorporate perspectives derived from the political economy. Examples include the use of anomie in the 1980s (Lea and Young, 1984). In the 1990s, many left realists utilised macro level socioeconomic perspectives in the study of criminality and criminal justice (see Currie, 1997; Taylor; 1999, Young 1999). Additionally, in recent years, the political economy has informed 21st century critical perspectives such as Ultra-realism (e.g., Hall and Winlow, 2015). Reiner describes this development as a paradox, the school of thought which sought to exclude the political economy, simultaneously contributed towards the growth of economic research on crime (Reiner, 2012).

Arguably, a further example of this paradox can be seen in *The Exclusive Society* (Young 1999). This provides an influential example of a macro level economic analysis where Jock Young explores the economic transition post the Second World War. Where working-class communities in the United Kingdom once faced a working landscape providing plentiful levels of industrial level employment, this deteriorated into insufficient employment opportunities and exclusion. Within this capitalist system, it was contended that *"the winner takes all, society which allows enormous wealth at the top of society and excessive wealth amongst the upper middle classes is not subject to political scrutiny"* (Young, 1999, p. 152).

A significant area of left realist work concerns their focus upon relative deprivation as a key motivation for crime (Young, 2003) and also as a causal factor (Webber, 2022). Relative deprivation concerns the notion that individuals can feel as though they are deprived compared to other demographics in the population (Webber, 2022) (ibid). Furthermore, relative deprivation offers significant explanatory since it has the capacity to explain crime that is carried out by all, it is not limited to the economically deprived (ibid).

Thus, similar to literature discussed in section 2.1 regarding the political economy, it can be contended that economic significance was deeply engrained in examples of future left realist work. In this respect, it is contended that left realists acknowledged that economic systems must facilitate meritocracy. When analysing the Blair government, Young (1999, p. 152) argued that "*even the restricted notion of meritocracy as reward by merit in terms of one's occupation alone is, strangely, muted. Thus, welfare to work schemes would seem to believe that the mere fact of achieving employment at a rate over the minimum wage is an end goal*". Young's later works further demonstrated an awareness of poverty and social exclusion, in which he recognises the importance of poverty and marginalisation in society (Young, 2007). In more recent times, it is further contended by left realists that *"modern capitalism thus remains, at the end of the day, an exploitative and criminogenic system"* (Lea, 2015, p. 176). There is recognition of the economic decline of the United Kingdom and its devastating impact upon working class communities. In particular, the effects of de-industrialisation, measures of austerity, cuts to social services, low wages for youth and their inability to access housing (Lea, 2016). In this respect, there are critiques of inequities arising from the capitalist system, it is contended that *"as long as capitalism imposes a particular social division of labour, most useful goods will exchange as commodities and, for similar reasons, many acts of harm and violence will be dealt with as crime"* (Lea, 2016, p.59).

As already mentioned, Jock Young explicitly linked his key left realist formulation of the square of crime framework to the social theory of deviance derived from the political economy (Lea, 2015). In particular, he expressed: *"Such an agenda was set out within The New Criminology, (Taylor et al. 1973) namely, that the immediate social origins of a deviant act should be set within its wider social context and that such an analysis should encompass both actors and reactors. Realism takes this a stage further, insisting not only the actions of offenders and the agencies of the state must be understood in such a fashion, but that this must be extended to be in formal system of social control (the public) and to victims"* (Young 1992, p. 28). Consequently, it is necessary to recognise whilst the fully social theory of the *New Criminology* is arguably the most significant explicit formulation of the political economy, it has also been engaged with by other schools of thought, such as left realism.

Additionally, left realists such as John Lea have advocated the radical potential of the square of crime research, since it provides a framework to integrate both structural and subcultural perspectives, contending *"the integrative potential of Left Realism for criminological theory, yet alone for linking criminology to a wider sociology of social structure and a political economy of the state has remained relatively underdeveloped"* (Lea, 2015, p. 174). Therefore, left realists still acknowledge the importance of the political economy and its explanatory potential. The shift from radical criminology to left realism was driven primarily by the need for a school

of thought which could achieve policy change (see earlier discussion on the birth of left realism). As a result, it can be said the shift in ideology may have been a necessary practical step due to unpopularity of state-level macro-analyses of crime, heavily disliked by policy makers.

It has been argued that there is an association between crime prevention policies implemented by Labour governments under Tony Blair and left realist discourse (Burke, 2005; Walklate, 2007, pp. 78-80). Left realists argued for the need for policy to demonstrate an awareness of all characteristics of the square of crime. In particular, a *"democratic control of policing, a community debate on crime involving all sections of the community, and of course empowering the victim as part of that process"* (Lea, 2015, p. 174). It is contended that New Labour did indeed employ policies demonstrating an awareness of the square of crime, yet paradoxically, sought to achieve this through punitive measures which undermined the left realist ideologies concerning social democratic community involvement (Lea, 2015).

Overall, the government engaged in a form of pre-emptive policing through criminalising behaviours likely to cause alarm. Consequently, left realists such as Young criticised the actions of the state in contributing towards the social exclusion and marginalisation of youth (Young, 1999). Young recognised the importance of protecting victims, conceding that the increased use of CCTV and electronic tagging has the potential to protect victims, only if used on the basis of inclusive and rehabilitative ideologies (Young, 1999, p. 192-193). However, he argued that the ideologies and agendas driving these measures were nothing of the sort. It was said that it was *"not an inclusionist philosophy which embraces those found guilty of an offence and attempts to reintegrate them into society. Rather it is an exclusionist discourse which seeks to anticipate trouble, whether in the shopping mall or in the prison and to exclude and isolate the deviant"* (Young, 1999, pp. 44-45). Young pointed towards the use of CCTV surveillance as contradictory to facilitating community trust, since it instead encouraged suspicion in local communities (Young, 1999, pp. 44-45). As discussed earlier, a core tenant of this perspective concerned the effective transmission of information pertaining to crime.

In this respect, New Labour's 'community safety' strategy, by appearing to involve consultation with local communities, appeared to chime with the left realist emphasis on democratic of policing and involvement of local community. Yet, their overall strategy focused upon the marginalisation of groups deemed deviant rather than integrating them within society (Lea, 2010). Young observed that the policy attempted to utilise local communities through gathering information, in order to marginalise those deemed to be engaging in disorder. This in turn undermined notions of democratic police accountability. Overall, this is demonstrative of an inability of left realism to facilitate their ideas into desirable policy change, despite a Labour

Administration, notwithstanding their efforts to step outside an analysis that solely focused on the state, to incorporate intra working class crime and victim impact.

On the other hand, the significant influence of right realism upon criminal justice policy, has outplaced left realism. It became increasingly popular during the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, associated with the politics of 'law and order'. The emphasis has been upon rational choice theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979) and control theories (Gottsfredon and Hirschi, 1990) focused on individual choice rather than the importance of structural factors. Here, there would appear to be an acceptance of the state's definition for crime (Matthews and Young, 1992).

Additionally, a reliance on crime prevention methods based upon zero-tolerance, punitiveness and deterrence. Overall, within right realism, there are key omissions such as the disregard of economic structural factors, the mere acceptance of state driven data without scrutiny and overall neglect of the role of the state. Consequently, the right realist school of thought has dominated criminal justice policy for the last few decades. Overall, it is apparent why the state retained preference for such right realist ideologies, taking state depictions of offences at face value, supporting punitiveness and expansion of police powers. Unfortunately, it is a pattern and influence which left realism has failed to challenge. Consequently, it is necessary for a return to radical criminological perspectives such as the political economy, to truly facilitate change and challenge dominance of right realism.

A further critique of left realism pertains to their emphasis the agency of younger black men in reaction to socioeconomic barriers. It is construed that there is too much of an emphasis on class at the expense of key issues of race (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2004; Burgess-Proctor, 2006). This can be contextualised within a broader hiatus of literature in criminology which failed to recognise the oppression and subjugation faced by black youth (Palmer, 2023). Racial subjugation, oppression and identity have since been identified as core characteristics for overall offending of black male youth (Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Williams, 2015 ; Palmer, 2023).

In contrast, a small selection of key works have applied the political economy lens to reiterate the significance of race and ethnicity with regards to the state's racialised depiction of street criminality (e.g., Hall et al, 1978, Williams and Squires, 2021). As discussed in Chapter 1, Hall et al (1978) demonstrated the 'othering' of the black demographic of the population, in the 20th century, as a readily available folk devil. Black youth were not only blamed for their own socioeconomic disadvantages, but also for street criminality and the broader economic challenges facing the country. In turn, enabling state facilitation of punitive prevention policies (see Chapter 1, § 1.0 for relevant discussion).

In recent years we are witnessing a continuation of the policing of the crisis where black male youth's involvement in crime is exaggerated and distorted, blamed for their own socioeconomic circumstances, or their reality simply being ignored. Justification for punitive measures including increased use of stop and search powers, use of imprisonment are part of a racialised law and order discourse. Moreover, the rise of the hostile environment around immigration has contributed to ethnic minorities being held accountable for economic issues.

In light of the racialised depiction of knife crime, in particular the marginalisation of black male youth, an appreciation of race and relevant issues is paramount. Overall, this thesis contends that there is significant explanatory potential in the political economy, to further explanations behind knife crime and scrutinise efficacy of prevention policies. The analysis in Chapter 1 demonstrated that the state plays a pivotal role in the development of moral panic about black male youth. This has facilitated the introduction and maintenance of punitive police powers, whilst distracting from the role of the state in their creation of economic structural factors which have detrimentally affected working class communities.

Consequently, there is a need for a perspective such as the political economy which returns the focus back on the role of the state, in terms of their potential accountability for the current knife crime phenomena. As part of this analysis, there needs to be an inherent emphasis upon the harsh economic reality that many young people face in poorer neighbourhoods, and their cultural meanings for those young people. Indeed, criminology has long found the variables of poverty, unemployment and inequality to be associated in some way with violent crime. For example, exponents of strain theory suggest unemployment may affect violent crime (Agnew, 1992). Blau and Blau (1982) have argued that whilst poverty per se is not the cause of violence, the perception of income inequality plays a part (see also Durkheim,1893; Merton (1957). Because of this, Messner (1982) and Williams (1984) have both argued that poverty and income inequality are both determinants of violent crime. In support, Hsieh and Pugh (1983) analysed 34 studies in which poverty and economic inequality were strong indicators of violent crime.

There is thus a need for a political economy where the cultural meaning of material factors such as poverty and inequality are paramount. This can help explain the contemporary increase in knife crime offending through placing an emphasis upon economic factors and their cultural meanings, which have the capacity to influence perceptions of economic barriers and solutions, which can potentially contribute towards involvement in knife crime pathways. Yet, these ideas have long been neglected in criminology (Reiner, 2017), notwithstanding that they may offer a credible and alternative explanation (Reiner, 2017; Lynch, 2013b). It has been argued that "*without the holistic sensibility that political economy connotes it is*

impossible to explain patterns and trends in crime and control" (Reiner 2012, p. 6). This thesis argues that the nature and depiction of the knife crime phenomenon, underlying causes, risk factors, motivational factors, prevention policies, and intervention methods can all be improved through development of a political economy of knife crime perspective.

In the previous chapter, there was significant recognition of the importance of economic structural factors such as poverty and inequality, affecting younger people at risk of more general offending, and need for incorporation into policy responses (e.g., Williams, 2023). Researchers have pointed towards the austerity measures, reduced public spending, especially on youth and education services and the increased effects of these measures upon black ethnic groups in particular (ibid). Research suggests that knife crime pathways may offer viable economic alternatives via gang membership and the drug market, as responses to difficult economic reality facing many young people in the United Kingdom (Pitts, 2023a; Harding,2020b). Some researchers have pointed towards the greater impact of these factors upon black ethnic groups in comparison to the rest of the population (Williams and Squires, 2021). Consequently, there is a need for a perspective in the study of knife crime which provides a further examination of these issues. In light of the discussions above, the thesis now proceeds to consider the work of the New Criminologists, their notion of a social theory of deviance, and how their work partially influences this thesis's formulation for a political economy of knife crime.

2.2: An Analysis of The New Criminology and their "Fully Social Theory of Deviance"

Prior to developing a contemporary political economy of knife crime perspective, this thesis shall analyse the work of *The New Criminology* authored by Taylor, Walton and Young (see section 2.1 for a preliminary discussion). This is considered as a revolutionary criminological text for offering an alternative explanation of crime through their advocation of a 'social theory of deviance' (Taylor et al, 1973). This theory is explored as the most prominent example of the political economy concept being used in criminology. The purpose of this section is to consider if it can be applied to knife crime, and if not in its entirety, to identify the underlying components/key concepts which can inform a contemporary perspective underpinned by the political economy. The theory arose in the first edition of *The New Criminology* (Taylor et al, 1973), whilst being developed in later editions (Taylor et al, 1973/2013). The New Criminologists obtained wide-spread recognition and acclaim for their development of this branch of left-wing criminology. Under their proposed theoretical framework for a *"social theory of deviance",* the commission of specific offences should be analysed within the context of their wider origins (political economy), along with the immediate origins (social psychology), and the social dynamics surrounding the offence (Taylor et al, 1973). The theory also focuses upon the reaction to the offence considering the wider origins (political economy) and

immediate origins (social psychology) of the social reaction, and interpretation of the social reaction upon future crime (ibid).

The theory offers significant explanatory potential since it outlines all the stages of offending, preceding the act whilst also considering the impact of the societal reaction to a crime. It therefore provides an example of both a 'macro' and 'micro' holistic approach which locates the causes of crime and criminal behaviour within a social hierarchical structure, whilst also appreciating the roles of choice and rationality (ibid). However, in future work, the New Criminologists arguably retreated from their argument for an all-encompassing theory, due to feasibility, criticisms of structuralism and the disregard of psychodynamics (see further criticisms in section 2.1). The final edition of the '*The New Criminology*' attempted to develop the theoretical components, rather than focusing upon its application (Taylor et al, 1973/2013), in part, to address the critique that it was a *"fundamentally structuralist perspective"* which insufficiently considers the psychodynamics of control, or provide effective crime control prevention policies (Reiner, 2012, p. 6; Jefferson, 2008). The following paragraphs explore *The New Criminology's* proposed framework for the study of crime, namely the components of their social theory of deviance as described through the six requirements in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Formative requirements for a contemporary *The New Criminology* framework (Source: Adapted from Taylor et al, 1973/2013)
[Image redacted, third party material]

Figure 2.2: Theoretical concepts within the formative requirements (Source: Adapted from Taylor et al, 1973/2013)
[Image redacted, third party material]

Figure 2.1 shows that *The New Criminology* framework is composed of formal requirements. The numbering of the theoretical concepts in Figure 2.2, directly corresponds to the numbering of the requirements in Figure 2.1. For example, the first requirement of the 'wider origins of crime' is explored through developing and putting forth a 'political economy of crime', and the immediate origins of crime, underpinned by a 'social psychology of crime'. It should be noted that this thesis does not seek to put forward a social psychology of knife crime. Rather, there is a focus upon the political economy whilst appreciating the role of psychodynamics. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show the requirements for the framework that were identified (Figure 2.1) alongside the theoretical concepts (Figure 2.2) underpinning them. In the following paragraphs, there shall be a discussion of these requirements and theoretical concepts, and how they can potentially be challenged, altered, and developed.

Requirement 1: Wider origins of the crime act: The first *New Criminology* component requires an explanation of the *"wider origins of the crime act*", underpinned by the concept of a *"political economy of crime"* (Taylor et al, 1973/2013, p. 287). This is to be achieved through an understanding of the sub-cultural and socio-demographic factors of individuals associated with the crime, such as gender and poverty, placing them alongside the notions of wealth, power and inequality (ibid, p. 287). Consequently, the interpretation of this stage is to explain these factors within the context of the political economy. As part of this analysis of the connections between the wider origins of a crime and the political economy, the *"structural demands*" that offenders face should be identified as barriers to fulfilling their human needs and achieving the cultural goals of success.

Requirement 2: Immediate origins of crime act: The second *New Criminology* requirement refers to the *"immediate origins of crime",* also referred to by the New Criminologists as the *"social psychology of crime".* The stage must also have the capacity to explain *"events, experiences or structural developments that precipitate the deviant act"* (ibid, p. 288). Specifically, the purpose of this stage considers the existence of the structural demands (identified in requirement 1) how the demographic at risk of offending react to, interpret, use and understand them (ibid, p. 288), and how this shapes their rational choice/reasoning' to undertake the specific offending. The 'New Criminologists' were outlining factors which social psychology can be used to address. For instance, it is specified that this stage requires *"A social psychology which recognises that men may consciously choose the deviant road" "as one solution posed to the problems faced within a contradictory society"* (ibid, p. 288).

When interpreting this requirement, it can be recognised that the New Criminologists did not seek to put forward an economic determinist formulation, on the basis they recognised that the structural barriers only have the capacity for interpretation, where some may choose crime as a solution. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that the New Criminologists' 'structural demand' terminology can be construed as problematic on the basis it has possible connotations with determinism (see later discussion in section 2.3 on more appropriate use of nomenclature).

Requirement 3: Crime Act: The third requirement of this framework solely focuses upon the 'crime act'. The formal requirement concerns elucidation of the ways in which the specific offending act can be explained by the 'rationality' of choice or alternatively the 'constraints of choice', at the time immediately preceding the offending (ibid, p. 288). Otherwise, summarised as an account of the 'real social dynamics' of the act, to understand the relationship between the 'optimum rationalisation'/core set of beliefs and the act being carried out. This stage can be understood as a thorough analysis of the motivational factors relevant to a particular category of offending and their associations with the constraints of choices available.

Requirement 4: Immediate origins of crime reaction: This requirement is described by *The New Criminologists* as a social psychology of the social reaction, "[a]n account of the contingencies and conditions which are crucial to act against the deviant" (Taylor et al, 1973/2013, p. 290). This stage requires an explanation of how the offender's family, social circle and local community react to their offending. Specifically, an understanding of the reaction of the immediate family or social circle of the offender, and the 'degree of choice' that they have in their response to the offender. For example, do families refer offenders to schools, police, psychiatrists? There may be variance in actions of the family/social circle of the offender, such as immediate referral to authorities, or instead electing not to. This stage also requires an understanding of the reaction of the 'formal agencies of social control' (ibid) such as the apprehension/arrest of the offender, sentencing, and punishment. The personal circumstances of the offender are crucial here since they assist in explaining potential variance in terms of how family and local communities respond to the offending.

Requirement 5: Wider origins of crime reaction: The formal requirement is for a *"political economy of social reaction"* (ibid, p. 292). A model which analyses both the political and economic factors which underpin, on one hand, the 'lay ideologies' of punishment and on the other hand, the 'initiatives' which emerge to control criminal offending (ibid,292). Crucial, this requirement also concerns an examination of the ideologies, agendas and initiatives underpinning and driving prevention policy. Previous applications of this requirement are also indicative of the fact that there is a necessity for an analysis of the state's depiction of the offence, and to expose any inaccuracies.

As stated earlier, Hall et al's (1978) research on the mugging crisis in the 1970s is an example of an implemented study informed by this factor. There is a single example of contemporary knife crime research in this vein. In "Rethinking Knife Crime" (Williams and Squires, 2021) rely upon the theoretical foundations articulated in *The New Criminology* and applied in Hall et al (1978) concerning the "wider social reaction" (see section 2.3 for further discussion). The current thesis seeks to further contribute towards contemporary use of the political economy of knife crime reaction, analysing the suitability of the public health approach with regards to knife crime prevention.

Requirement 6: The impact of the social reaction upon future offending: The framework also seeks to understand how the offender behaves in response to both the formal and informal reactions to their offending (ibid, p. 292). The requirement is for an explanation of the offenders' reaction to rejection, stigmatisation, punishment, and how this in turn affects their future offending. Furthermore, the issues faced by the offender are considered from the point of crime commission by exploring the consequences of labelling theory, stigmatisation and

social exclusion. Applying this to knife crime, this requirement also seeks to further explore the question of whether the knife crime prevention policies based upon the public health model are effective in tackling prevalence (through demonstrating their impact upon poorer younger males in England and Wales).

Requirement 7: The nature of the process as a whole: The 'New Criminologists' did not label this 'step' as a formal requirement. Instead, it is outlined that the previous six requirements should not simply be treated as separate components. Rather they are all interlinked and represent overlapping processes that influence the offending of the individual (ibid, p. 294). Exploring its potential application to the study of knife crime; it can be argued that 'requirement 1' outlines the wider origins of knife crime through illustrating the concept of political economy and how this in turn creates 'structural demands' (structural barriers). In turn, 'requirement 2' considers the structural demands and how they are reacted to, interpreted and understood by individuals at different levels of social hierarchies; affecting core beliefs which affect motivations/rational choice. The third requirement then analyses the relationship between these core values and the act of committing knife crime. Hence, the three first stages/requirements overlap with one another. This can also be seen in relation to the requirements of 4 and 5 and the effect they have upon 'requirement 6'.

Drawing from *The New Criminology*, this thesis argues that Taylor et al's (1973) theoretical framework can instead be used as inspiration to inform a further framework which provides an indicative pathway of the effects of economic structural barriers upon knife crime. Namely, recognition of the harsh economic reality facing younger males in England and Wales, the structural demands, and their reactions and optimum rationality for offending. Therefore, this thesis shall consider the possibility of exploring knife crime literature with a 'new criminological' lens, drawing inspiration from its framework, and applying aspects of it to a specific crime category. Whilst it is impossible to put forward a fully 'social theory of crime', the theoretical concepts provide a useful framework which considers both individualism and structuralism, along with a variety of psychological, social, economic and cultural factors; to convey the socio-economic reality of the knife crime offender in England and Wales.

In light of the discussions above, the perspective will be informed by analysis of *The New Criminology*'s theoretical concepts and the use of contemporary knife crime research. Furthering understanding of economic barriers, their explanatory potential in relation to knife crime offending, the accuracy of the state's depiction of their offending and their contribution to it, ideologies driving prevention policy and overall efficacy. The following section outlines this thesis's proposed formulations for a political economy of knife crime and inversely a political economy of knife crime reaction.

2.3: A Formulation of a Political Economy of Knife Crime Perspective

The analysis of the political economy concept has demonstrated that there is no single definition or key concepts that univariately constitute a political economy of knife crime perspective. Rather, there are significant variations in its understanding and application (see section 2.1 for range of examples). Consequently, it should be recognised that there is scope for variations in future research, and inclusion of alternative concepts and areas.

Nonetheless, within any political economic analysis, there are some key commonalities. For instance, the overall macro socioeconomic structural factors, their cultural meanings, and their potential interpretation for certain pathways of crime. It is crucial to consider the role of the state in their contribution towards the development of these structural factors (e.g., New Criminology's political economy of action (Taylor et al, 1973; Merton, 1938). Central to the political economy perspective is the refusal to take data and depiction of the offending at face value. In this regard, there has been an analysis of the state's depiction of the offence and the ideologies and agenda's driving prevention policy, core texts have employed their formulation for a political economy of reaction (Hall et al, 1978; Williams and Squires, 2021).

A formulation of a political economy of knife crime reaction is provided in 'Rethinking Knife Crime, Policing, Violence and Moral Panic?' by Williams and Squires (see discussion on text in Chapter 1). The authors analytical framework was derived from Hall et al's (1978) political economy of reaction on the state's moral panic about 'mugging' and black men. This thesis recognises the significant explanatory potential of this work which has been extensively recognised and seeks to build upon key areas discussed therein. Firstly, it seeks to provide a more developed examination of the efficacy of current prevention methods and provide a more expansive account of necessary policy recommendations. Secondly, through putting forward aspects of a political economy of the knife crime act, it seeks to provide a contemporary account of the key socioeconomic issues facing youth in recent times, and the role of the state. Thirdly, there is a more expansive exploration of the allure of gangs and county lines as viable illegitimate alternatives for economic survival. Although there are some areas of significant overlap such as the need to examine the state's depiction of the crime, there are also key distinctions between formulations of a political economy of the act in comparison to the reaction to it. In light of this, this thesis provides separate definitions to highlight and specify the scope of respective areas. Overall, it is contended that a competent political economy of knife crime perspective requires analysis of both the act and reaction, when considering youth involvement.

Interpretation of a Political Economy of Knife Crime Act Perspective. For the purposes of this thesis, the political economy of the knife crime Act constitutes:

A political economy of the knife crime act perspective on male youth involvement firstly requires an examination of the extent and nature of the act itself, informed by the state's depiction of this. The importance of key demographic factors such as gender, age, race and socioeconomic class are emphasised. In turn, there is a need to examine the range of explanations for offending such as underlying causes and motivations. Within this account, placing an emphasis upon the economic whilst also appreciating that it is part of a complex interplay with other domains/categories of explanations, such as individual, cultural, psychological, relationship, peer-group, community and social.

There is a further need for a contemporary macro level analysis of the socio-economic reality faced by younger males at risk of knife crime offending, highlighting meanings around notions of economic self-sufficiency, as well as interpretations of cultural goals of success. The thesis identifies key structural barriers to economic survival and examines the role and accountability of the state in the development of these factors. Within this account, there is an exploration of key knife crime pathways which act as prominent illegitimate means for economic survival.

Interpretation of a Political Economy of Knife Crime Reaction Perspective. For the purposes of this thesis, the political economy of knife crime reaction constitutes the following:

A political economy of the reaction to male youth knife crime is a perspective which puts forward an account of the ideologies underpinning punishment and prevention policy in relation to knife crime offending in England and Wales. It incorporates an analysis of state reaction (criminal justice) and societal reaction to knife crime offending by young men. The state's depiction of the offence, the extent of its accuracy, the agendas driving its depiction, influences upon policy formulation and overall impact on the affected demographic, impact on future offending. An assessment of whether the knife crime policies and prevention methods are suitable in response to the socioeconomic reality facing this demographic is also provided.

In the application of these definitions, this thesis has explored various relevant areas at a preliminary stage in earlier chapters. Firstly, when examining the knife crime act, there is a need to consider the extent and nature of the act with regards to youth involvement. In this regard, Chapter 1 argued that the state has distorted the extent and nature of youth involvement through their moral panic on youth, particularly young black men. It became apparent that various themes were central in the state's depiction, such as age, race, gender and socioeconomic background. Further, there was recognition that state construction has the benefit of facilitating punitive prevention methods whilst diverting attention from the state's accountability for increases in structural barriers.

Consequently, in order to further develop the political economy of the knife crime act in accordance with this thesis's preferred definition, the following chapters continue to consider its application. Chapter 3 shall provide an examination of the evidence base on youth knife crime involvement, exploring the range of explanations provided, such as underlying causes, risk factors, motivational factors and examples of contemporary research directions. In light of the remit of this thesis, particular focus will be placed upon the economic.

This emphasis upon the economic factors within the political economy analysis does not, however, constitute a determinist formulation, nor does it disregard other key explanations behind offending. Indeed, the analysis in Chapter 3 seeks to demonstrate an awareness of non-economic risk factors and motivational factors due to the complex interplay between a range of individual, societal, community and peer group risk factors. Consequently, the economic does not constitute the sole explanation behind offending. Yet, a macro level analysis is necessary to explain the growth and significance of barriers to economic survival for young people. In particular, there is a need for a radical criminological perspective which highlights the state's responsibility in this regard.

Chapter 4 places emphasis upon youth perceptions of economic self-sufficiency and or the cultural goals of success. The key structural barriers to economic survival shall be explored. These are termed barriers rather than demands since the literal interpretation is indicative of determinist connotations, consequently this change of terminology from the language originally used by the New Criminologists is necessary.

Also, in Chapter 4 there will be an emphasis upon the accountability of the state for exacerbating these structural factors, outlining key contributory factors. Additionally, recognising the manner in which the state's moral panic serves to divert attention from rises in inequality and poverty; similar moral panics around youth have been used to attribute blame for social unrest including the 2011 riots. Finally, exploring the relationship of the economic structural barriers to key knife crime pathways such as gangs and county lines, for some poorer young males.

As earlier discussed, a thorough attempt at a political economy of knife crime reaction has been formulated in the literature (e.g., Williams and Squires, 2021). This thesis builds upon this work through further exploring the efficacy of current prevention methods and by providing a more expansive account of necessary policy recommendations. Chapter 1 examined agendas driving depiction knife crime perpetrators and prevention policies. The state driven moral panic on black male youth, as a means to police the crisis and to facilitate the introduction of punitive prevention, extend stop and search powers, SVROS, KCPOs, impose harsher custodial sentencing and increase surveillance, was detailed.

Building upon the application of the political economy of knife crime reaction, Chapter 5 will scrutinise how knife crime prevention policies, particular the 'Public Health Approach' – have emerged and been implemented. The author will consider whether the label of public health ideology is accurate by considering the core requirements for such an approach. Building upon this, the chapter shall also provide an expansive evaluation of both non-enforcement and enforcement interventions, determining their efficacy and highlighting key challenges. Throughout this account, putting forward key policy recommendations necessary in order to truly achieve crime reduction and to facilitate an accurate application of the public health ideology.

Chapter 3: An Examination of the Evidence Base's Explanations on Male Youth Knife Crime Offending

3.0: Chapter Overview

This chapter considers the political economy of knife crime action. Chapter 1 indicated that despite a wide range of knife crime offending, the overall government focus has been on young men as perpetrators, particularly young black men. Given this, examination and evaluation of the literature on male youth involvement in knife crime is provided. The importance of key demographic factors such as gender, age, race and socioeconomic is discussed. A range of explanations for knife offending including underlying causes, risk factors, motivations and other factors, is provided.

Section 3.1 shall examine perceived underlying causes and the range of knife crime risk factors. Section 3.2 shall examine the range of motivational categories for the involvement of younger people in community settings. Finally, section 3.3 shall also examine examples of knife crime research directions. Whilst the focus is upon younger males it should be recognised that some of the factors explored apply more broadly to other demographics of the population. The selected factors are intended to be non-exhaustive since it is not possible or practical to include all identified risk factors, motivational factors and contemporary research directions.

Many contemporary reviews of knife crime offending can be located in the existing literature, (i.e., Silvestri et al, 2009; Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; Haylock et al, 2020; Browne et al, 2022; Williams and Squires, 2021; and HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). These include general literature reviews of knife crime (such as Silvestri et al, 2010; Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; and McNeil and Wheller, 2019), systematic literature reviews such as Haylock et al, (2020); Browne et al (2022), contemporary reviews from government bodies such as the HM Inspectorate of Probation's study on Youth Offending Teams (2022). Additionally, more recently a systematic literature of selected knife crime motivational factors (Figueira et al, 2024).

Nevertheless, literature reviews that focus upon the knife crime offending of young men are limited in that few provide a comprehensive analysis. Crucially, the aforementioned reviews of literature often focus upon a single issue or a selected range of factors, the cultural significance of economic factors and the societal economic pressures facing younger men has, for example, been afforded insufficient attention. Arguably, therefore, a broader analysis is warranted. Notably, Williams and Squires (2021) offer a contemporary example of a knife crime text which recognises many of the aforementioned areas and offers a particularly insightful analysis of knife crime offending in the UK, albeit it does not seek to provide a

developed account of risk and motivational factors. The current thesis seeks to build upon these works by providing a more comprehensive coverage of some of the areas that have been underplayed.

It should be noted increases in knife crime cannot simply be attributed to a general increase in violent offending overall (HM Government, 2018; Browne 2022). Consequently, it is important to place an inherent focus upon knife crime research rather than violence in general, although selected areas of the youth violence literature shall be considered where appropriate, as there are some overlaps.

3.1: An Examination of Knife Crime Causes and Risk Factors for Male Youth Offending

This section explores the underlying causes and risk factors of knife crime. The factors are selected since they are considered applicable to younger men in community settings, albeit they are also applicable to further age groups in the population. Although these are not intended to constitute an exhaustive selection. Often knife crime literature refers to underlying causes of this phenomenon as the 'drivers of violence' (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). Key examples include the drugs market, county lines, gangs, economic deprivation, poor mental health and inequality (ibid). The scope and meaning of these examples will now be examined as risk factors.

Individual, societal, relationship, community and peer group domains may all act as risk factors which may increase the likelihood of an individual carrying a knife or committing a crime involving the use of a knife or a sharp instrument (Early Intervention Foundation, 2015). It should be appreciated that the following list has been selected with a focus upon the knife crime offending of younger men, ranging from early adolescence to early adulthood which has been put together through reviewing selected sources. These include literature reviews of knife crime such as Silvestri et al, (2010), Grimshaw and Ford (2018), McNeil and Wheller (2019), systematic literature reviews such as Haylock et al, (2020), Browne et al (2022), contemporary reviews from government bodies such as the HM Inspectorate of Probation's study on Youth Offending Teams (2022), and contemporary key texts such as Williams and Squires (2021). Separately, there is discussion of the significant overlap between knife crime with youth gang literature (see further Andell and Pitts, 2023)

Peer Groups Risk Factors

Peer influences have been identified as a risk factor for knife crime offending. A positive association has been found between involvement with high-risk peer groups and knife crime (Alleyne et al, 2010; Alleyne et al, 2016; Barlas et al, 2006; Falshaw et al, 1997; Hayden et al, 2010; Smith D et al, 2007; Briggs et al, 2010), with some studies showing delinquent peer

association and/or peer influence to be associated with knife crime offending (Brennan, 2018; Alleyne et al, 2016; Alleyne et al, 2014).

Generally, this literature focuses on gangs. There is no single definition of the term 'gang', instead there are various interpretations and formulations of its parameters (Andell and James, 2023; Esbensen et al, 2001). The Eurogang Programme of Research established a widely used definition: *"A street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its identity group"* (Esbensen and Maxson, 2012, p. 3). It has also been more expansively defined as *"A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activities and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs"* (Centre for Social Justice, 2009 cited by Pitts, 2008, p. 27). To surmise, gang-related violence refers to acts or threats of violence carried by a group with a minimum of three members and one characteristic from the Serious Crime Act 2015 (Home Office, 2015).

Within contemporary literature there has been contention over the prevalence of gangs and their relationship with youth violence. Considerable debate exists within academia over the existence of a gang culture and if so, what it looks like within the UK context (Whittaker et al, 2020). Pitts (2012) argues that gangs are on the rise and represent the face of modern-day youth violence. In his 2008 study on gangs in London, Pitts advocated that contemporary youth violence can be best understood through the growth of gangs. Acknowledging the role of structural economic factors, he argues that a generation of marginalised and poorer youths were joining gangs as a rational response to tackle the challenges faced in street life. Gangs have arguably arisen due to a combination of issues such as income inequality, lack of affordable housing, racial inequality and the growth and expansion of drug markets (Pitts, 2016; Whitaker et al, 2020). Pitts' characterisation remained prominent through public discourse and policy implementation post-2010 through the introduction of the *Ending Gang and Youth Violence Strategy* (explored in Chapter 5).

However, these claims received significant critique and challenge from other researchers. Hallsworth (2013) viewed this observation as a mischaracterisation of youth crime, arguing it could not be solely attributed to gangs. Hallsworth argued that Pitts' position was arguably a social construction involving police, media and academics (Hallsworth, 2013). Additionally, Young and Hallsworth have argued that gang researchers such as Pitts are engaging in 'gang talk', which is indicative of a bias that leads to the societal narrative of gangs being prominent (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). In response, Pitts argues that parents of gang members and victims began to adopt gang terminology to describe violence in their economically deprived

neighbourhoods (Pitts, 2012). In turn, the media began to use gang terminology to refer to these groups (Van Hellemont and Densley 2018).

Some of the literature place a particular emphasis on the racialisation of gang narratives. Researchers argued that the use of gang labelling of youth violence contributed towards politicians stereotyping and criminalising black youth and ethnic minorities (Williams and Squires, 2021; Gunter 2017; Williams 2015). In support, in Chapter 1, a key observation concerned the assertion of the racialisation of gangs as a black ethnic phenomenon (Miller, 2023, see Chapter 1, § 1.0 for discussion of this issue). Researchers have therefore pointed towards the presence of a *"race-gang nexus"* (Williams, 2015, p. 18). For example, it is contended that Britain's gang policies are indicative of a *"resurgence of a colonial racism"* which contributed towards the *"construction of black communities as networks of criminality"* (Nijjar, 2018, p. 150).

Williams (2015) has highlighted how black youth have increasingly been associated with the gang label which has facilitated the over policing of black communities. Researchers have argued that evidence on the reality of gangs indicates that black youth membership has been exaggerated (Palmer, 2011; Williams, 2015). Arguments that indicate an over-representation of black youths in gang offending and serious violence will shortly be considered including those around structural racism and inequality.(Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Pitts, 2008; Palmer 2023, see later discussion on individual economic and societal economic risk factors).

At this point, it must be noted however that much research on gangs has failed to recognise the othering of black youth (Palmer, 2023). Rather, the dominant narrative has positioned black youths as the face of violence (ibid), as opposed to literature emphasising the racialisation of gang narratives (e.g., Palmer, 2009; Williams, 2015). The former position was considered in Chapter 1 regarding the historical demonisation, exclusion and labelling of black male youth as deviant and the benefits that can be derived from this characterisation (see Chapter 1, § 1.0).

Concerning the overall extent of youth gang involvement, there is considerable disagreement about what constitutes a 'gang.' Arguably, many youth groups termed as gangs are not in fact gangs but arguably volatile peer groups (Hallsworth, 2014). There are also non-gang associated youths who may be perceived to constitute a gang but do not meet the legal criteria for its definition (Alleyne et al, 2010). The extent to which knife crime can be attributed to gang related activities is also contested, since it has been argued that those who identify as gang members only contribute to a fraction of the violence that occurs (Clark et al, 2012; Williams and Clarke, 2016). Additionally, it is difficult to ascertain the exact proportion of gang

contribution to violence overall. Indeed, the definition of the word ‘gang’ used by the MPS may be outdated (ibid).

Additionally, many group associations within the occurrence of group level violence can come under the umbrella of youth violence but do not come under the gang definition. Consequently, it is inaccurate to contend that gang involvement constitutes the sole pathway for knife involvement, since knives are also used by some youths not involved in gangs (McVie, 2010). Studies indicate key differences between young people who use knives as part of their gang involvement, in contrast to youths who are not involved in gangs but who also carry and use knives (ibid). Both types of youths often share similarities, in that they are men, may have delinquent peers, and have a previous criminal history. Furthermore, younger people with gang involvement have a higher likelihood of facing economic deprivation and poverty (ibid).

Whilst there are differences between gangs and volatile peer groups. It is contended that some academics have queried the existence of gangs themselves, (Palmer, 2023, p. 325), e.g., Hallsworth and Young, 2008. Notwithstanding, Palmer (2023) argues that a failure to acknowledge the existence of gangs, undermines the experiences of many youths living in gang concentrated areas (Fitzgerald, 2009). For example, in London it has been found that there is a stronger link between gangs and knife crime starting from 2016 (Kirchmaier and Villa Llera, 2018). Research seems to suggest that UK street gangs provide a partial explanation of knife crime (Densley 2013; Harding, 2014; Pitts, 2008) since gang members have an increased likelihood to carry knives (McVie, 2010). As Harding (2020a) indicates, however, whilst there has been a focus on gang membership as a contributing factor to knife crime, it is still not clearly understood. Overall, however, there appears to be some link between gangs and knife crime, although it needs to be appreciated that there are differences between those who carry knives and those who use them in relation to gangs (McVie, 2010). Additionally, there is variance and overlap in the nature and types of youth gangs such as county lines gangs or street-oriented gangs and implications for knife crime.

Another issue underplayed in the knife crime literature concerns how subcultures, masculinities and the rise of youth peer group or youth gangs affect use of knives. In particular, the relationship between masculinities, youth violence, street life and use of weapons; often referred to as part of life ‘on road’ (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Gunter, 2008). This is a descriptive term for a way of life or a destination following social exclusion (Trickett, 2011) where violence and retaliation are core behavioural survival strategies (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). Gang researchers such as Hallsworth, Silverstone and Young have pointed towards the growth of ‘on road’ masculinity where male honour is implicated in constructing an image of toughness (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). Consequently,

engaging in crime allows these young men to comply with their particular forms of 'on-road' masculinity, which can explain the relationship between their street identity and the commission of violence (ibid).

Trickett's (2011) qualitative research on such young men illustrated how fears and anxieties relating to their masculine identities affected perceptions of safety and use of violence as a behavioural strategy. Demonstrating a masculine identity required adherence to expectations of hardness as part of gang norms through behavioural practices such *as "acts of bravado, the managing of reputations, engagement in retaliation and the carrying of weapons" (*Trickett, 2019, p. 290*).* According to Trickett, these behaviours "*were all met with violence from others which was likely to escalate. The continued expectation of violence meant that even in situations involving high risks of death to oneself and others, respondents were expected to act through using violence themselves"* (Ibid, p. 290). Consequently, Trickett's work is indicative of the significance of the fear of crime and how it informs motivations for continued weapon carrying. This is associated with knife crime motivations concerning fear, protection, respect and reputation which shall later be explored in section 3.2.

In terms of the explaining the emergence of these aggressive forms of 'on road' masculinity, those youths involved often have poor socioeconomic status as a consequence of the capitalist system (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009, p. 373). This recognition of structural factors has been drawn upon by subcultural theorists utilising the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell, 1995) where class and race interact to place younger men at the bottom of socioeconomic hierarchies. In response to social exclusion such young men often respond with internalised anger and violent responses amongst themselves and each other (Trickett, 2011). The construction of criminal subcultures provides a response to social exclusion (Messerschmidt, 1993; Newburn and Stanko, 1994). In line with the arguments of this thesis, these subcultural theorists view contemporary violence as a reaction to the difficult circumstances facing young men including social exclusion and economic disadvantage which are compounded by limited options.

The growth of the drugs trade in the UK has been recognised as significant driver of youth violence (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; Harding, 2023), including both the growth of county lines gangs and the increase in drug dealing activities of existing street-oriented gangs (Harding, 2023; Pitts, 2023a; Pitts, 2023b). 'County lines' refers to the distribution of drugs across the country through the use of mobile phones and exploitation of vulnerable adults and children (National Crime Agency, Drug Trafficking, no year; NCA, 2016). The ever-growing supply lines of drugs into the UK also involves drug trafficking methods such as *"container shipping, yachts and small boats, light aircraft, vehicle traffic from continental Europe, airline passengers…the*

post and fast parcels" (ibid; NCA, 2016; NCA, 2018). The growth of the drugs market remains a considerable issue since it remains a source of illegitimate means that can be used to meet economic needs (Chapter 4, § 4.3 shall expand upon this issue).

Knife crime research in England and Wales has emphasised the significance of the drug market upon the current knife crime phenomenon (Crest Advisory, 2020). For example, government policy highlights the need to tackle this underlying cause (House of Commons, 2022a); "*County lines enforcement action since 2019 has resulted in "more than 1,100 lines closed, over 6,300 arrests, and more than 1,900 vulnerable adults and children safeguarded". The number of operational county lines deal lines reported has reduced (from 2,000 in 2019 to 600 in 2021)"* (ibid).

Drug dealing has been found as a key behaviour of gangs in large cities such as Glasgow (McLean et al. 2018a, 2018b) and London (Coomber and Moyle, 2017). There has been a growth of the country lines drug supply (Robinson et al. 2018; Storrod and Densley 2017), involving organised gangs in key cities such as London where drugs are supplied and retailed throughout the UK (Coomber and Moyle 2017). The significance of the drug market and its relationship with gangs has grown exponentially (Whittaker and Harvard, 2023). Pitts (2008) study of gangs in Waltham Forest Borough of London identified that the drug activities at this time were focused within gang concentrated neighbourhoods, mainly run by only a few of the most dominant gangs (Pitts, 2008). These consisted of *"open markets"* which providing drugs within these neighbourhoods and *"closed markets"* where drugs would be delivered to a trusted clientele (Pitts, 2023a, p. 144; Pitts, 2008). Within these urban areas, the increased competition for control of the drug trade led to increased violence between street gangs (Pitts, 2023a).

In recent times, drug dealing has become a core component and central role of organised gang activity in London through the growth of county lines. For instance, the 'Mali boys' are a key gang in London and are using other gangs as their 'foot soldiers' to deal drugs outside of the city (Whittaker and Harvard, 2023). Violence and knife usage are key in facilitating these behaviours (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018).

When considering environments and systems within which gangs operate, there appears to be significant variation in the level of organisation. For instance, in Manchester the groups were less structured compared to those observed in London (Ralphs et al. 2009). In comparison, Pitts (2008) and Densley's (2013) separate studies on gangs in London both observed that gangs were organised, hierarchical and violent in nature. Densley's work further analysed the development of UK street gangs, identifying that there was an evolution of aims from original recreational pursuits when conducting crime, building towards accruing finance,

where the gangs become more organised, and their conduct falls more squarely within the parameters of organised crime (Densley, 2013). Furthermore, Densley's work reiterates that there is variance amongst UK street gangs which can be complex in nature (Densley, 2012; 2013; 2014). Harding (2014; 2020a) began to apply social field theory and social theory to explain the gang environment in the UK, arguing that these have their own unique codes and rules, wherein a social field continually evolves, involving competition through generating and maintaining 'street capital' and criminal conduct which determines the position in the gang' hierarchy.

Gang association has been linked with the creation of further risk factors such as stigma and discrimination with weapon related crime (Densley, 2011; Densley et al 2015; Alleyne et al, 2016; Alleyne et al, 2010). A positive association has been found between those experiencing marginalisation/discrimination/stigma and knife crime (Alleyne et al, 2010; Alleyne et al, 2016; Densley et al, 2011; Densley et al, 2015), with many gang members seeing themselves as 'urban outcasts' (Densley et al, 2015). Consequently, the role of gangs and other youth peer groups not formally meeting the criteria of a 'gang' offers significant explanatory potential in informing contemporary understandings of increased knife crime offending of younger men. In relation to knife crime, much of the gang related activity can be associated with the drug market through the roles of both street-oriented gangs in urban cities and the county lines gangs through the evolution of the role of gangs in the United Kingdom (for a history on the development of UK youth street gangs in the UK see Pitts 2023a and Pitts 2023b for more detailed accounts).

In light of the analysis above, it can be said that gang membership is a key pathway for knife crime offending. Exposure to this risk factor is associated with a range of others such as economic deprivation and low educational attainment, which shall shortly be explored.

Individual risk factors

As outlined in Chapter 1, age/adolescence has been identified as a risk factors for knife crime offending (see relevant evidence base, Home Office, 2018a; Brennan, 2018; Hayden 2010; Densley and Stevens 2015; Alleyne et al 2014; Falshaw et al 1997; Barlas et al, 2006; Alleyne and Wood, 2010; Browne et al 2022). However, in Chapter 1 it was observed that youth knife crime offending was comparable to that of other age demographics (Williams, 2023) (see Chapter 1 for detailed discussion on this area). It was further conceded that there is a heavily contested debate surrounding the extent and nature of youth involvement, further exacerbated by the state's moral panic about young people. Therefore, any consideration of knife crime by young people, must be contextualised within a broader awareness of the fact that the 'youth'

demographic has been historically demonised and stigmatised, in relation to deviancy in general (see earlier in Chapter 1, § 1.0).

However, given that some evidence does suggest a link between youth and knife crime, it must be subject to scrutiny. It is necessary therefore to examine and evaluate evidence on youth involvement, to recognise the relationship between age, additional risk and motivational factors. Some explanations behind the increased involvement of youth have already been discussed in previous sections, including the argument that young men are using violence to enact a masculine identity as a resistance to poverty (Trickett, 2011; see also gang risk factor subculture and masculinity discussions above for a more detailed exploration of this issue).

Furthermore, the argument historically has been made that younger victims have an increased likelihood to engage in retaliation (Marshall and Webb, 1994). Additionally, this age range has been found to be significant when considering both street-based gangs and county line gangs (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; Browne et al, 2022). For instance, it has been argued that children have been targeted by county lines gangs and drug mules. Increased exposure of some youths towards societal risk factors such as economic deprivation (Williams and Squires, 2021) has been magnified due to the austerity measures post- 2010 and their exacerbating effects upon recent generations (Williams and Squires, 2021; Pitts, 2023a; Harding, 2020b)

A contested risk factor for knife crime includes gender. Whilst this thesis is focussing upon community and societal knife crime offending, rather than the incidences in domestic settings, the significance of gender has been recognised in a wide variety of different settings. Interestingly, overall, it has been observed that men have an increased likelihood of committing knife crime in relation to strangers, and in public space, men have been found more likely to commit serious violence offences and also to carry weapons (Home Office, 2018a; Brennan, 2018). In contrast, women are more likely to commit knife crime in domestic environments against their partners and family members (Swatt and He, 2006; Walsh and Krienert, 2007; McVie,2010; Gerard et al, 2015). However, the violence against their partners can be explained as a response to off-set domestic violence committed by their male partners (Browne et al, 2022). Furthermore, this must be offset by the fact that women are far more likely to be the victims of domestic homicides by men, than of women killing men. For example, for the year ending March 2023, police recorded data observed that the victim constituted a female in 73.5% of domestic abuse-related crimes (ONS, 2023c).

Haylock et al (2020) argue it is difficult to identify gender as a risk factor since there is an absence of significant association in quantitative research between the variables of gender and knife crime offending (Haylock et al, 2020). Nevertheless, when considering the overrepresentation of men as both offenders and victims, it has been termed as a gendered

phenomenon (Cook and Walklate, 2020). It is further contended that *"males are routinely identified as both victims and perpetrators of knife-related crime*" (Figueira et al, 2024, p. 1). In support, Malik et al's (2020) study on hospital admissions in the Major Trauma Centre in Birmingham observed that 93% of knife injury patients were male.

Therefore, it appears gender can be viewed as an instrumental risk factor for knife crime since the majority of knife crime offenders and victims are predominantly men (Browne et al, 2022) and that aggressive forms of masculinity may, in particular, contribute to this risk (Shepherd and Brennan, 2008). For instance, a positive association has been found between certain perceptions of status and masculinity and knife crime (Alleyne et al, 2010; Alleyne et al, 2014; Alleyne et al, 2016; Barlas et al, 2006; Clement et al, 2010; Briggs et al, 2010).

Furthermore, understanding the significance of 'gender' as a risk factor, must be contextualised within an awareness of the emergence of criminal subcultures involving the expression of negative forms of masculinities in response to structural factors (see earlier discussion on the gang risk factor and subcultures). The significance of gender has been highlighted through the identification of challenges to masculinity, and the broader relationship of men with violence (Mersserschmidt, 2000; Mulins, 2006; Deuchar, 2013). For instance, male violence can be construed as a behavioural response to the difficult circumstances facing many young men, namely social exclusion and economic disadvantage, compounded by limited options, leading to on road lifestyles. Weapon carrying has been associated with forms of 'hypermasculinity' conducive to navigating street life. Knife carrying is arguably an example of 'Machismo', and a way to reinforce 'gender defined identity' through exaggerations of male stereotypical behaviour, emphasising physical strength and aggression (ibid). As noted earlier, within gang literature there is a recognition of the role of masculine identities (see earlier discussion on gangs, masculinities and subculture in relation to the gang risk factor). (Shepherd and Brennan, 2008). Given all this, it is argued that the notion of 'gender' as a concept is both useful and important in its explanatory potential to further understanding of men involved in knife crime, including risk factors such as economic deprivation and gang membership, and motivations such as fear, protection and status.

A positive association has also been found between poor mental health and knife crime (Bailey et al, 2001; Barlas et al, 2006; Wood et al, 2017). It has been said that *"Poor mental health can be associated with violent behaviour in both directions, both contributing to and resulting from violent behaviour"* (Sethi et al, 2010). Therefore, the relationship between poor mental health and the commission of violence has been recognised. Specifically, in relation to knife crime, studies have looked at the inherent relationship between mental health and knife crime (Wood et al, 2017, Bailey et al,2001; Barlas et al, 2006). As a result, aspects of poor mental

health such as depression, self-harm and suicidal tendencies have been identified as risk factors (Wood et al, 2017; Bailey et al, 2001; Barlas et al, 2006). Furthermore, a survey of those who identified themselves as gang members in the UK found that they demonstrated increased levels of mental ill-health, evidence of previous traumatisation and history of using mental health services (Coid et al, 2013). This is suggestive of overlapping relationships between the respective risk factors.

Following on from mental health, illicit substance use has been found to have an association with young people being engaged in knife carrying (McVie, 2010; Hamdulay and Mash, 2011). In an analysis of a survey by (Brennan, 2018), drug use in the last year was found to be associated with future violent offending and substance misuse has been identified as a risk factor, being associated with knife offences in relation to homicide (Frierson and Finkenbine, 2004). Therefore, it can be said that substance misuse along with general drug taking have both been associated with increased risk of knife crime offending (Frierson and Finkenbine, 2004; McVie, 2010).

Individuals with psychotic and anxiety disorders (Frierson and Finkenbine, 2004) have also been found to have an increased likelihood of committing knife crime. Overall, research has demonstrated that mental issues such as anxiety disorders, self-harm, psychotic disorders and low-self-esteem increase the likelihood for knife crime involvement (McVie,2010; Frierson and Finkenbine, 2004). In Chapter 1, it was recognised that there is an array of knife crime offending associated with these factors. Consequently, it is an area which warrants investigation.

When exploring the relationship between mental health and violence, researchers in general often refer to the effect of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Therefore, the following section on ACEs shall consider the mental health impact upon young men.

ACEs such as "*childhood maltreatment, when combined with predisposing individual conditions, have been identified as factors that increase the likelihood of violent behaviour*" (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018, p. 8). A positive association has been found between knife crime and teenagers who experienced adverse childhood experiences (Alleyne et al, 2010; Bailey et al, 2001; Falshaw et al, 1997; Smith D et al, 2007; Smith I, 2007; Wood J et al, 2017; Briggs et al, 2010), such as abuse, neglect, parental criminality, substance abuse, living in care, and witnessing parental separation (Dobash et al 2007; Hales et al 2006; Home Office, 2018a).

A meta-analysis of longitudinal research also found that physical and sexual abuse had the strongest association with aggressive behaviour (Braga et al, 2017). It should be noted that ACEs are more likely to be experienced by those who are living in economically deprived areas (Lewer et al, 2020), being significantly more prevalent in poorer households, having a

greater effect on working class communities. In short, living in economically deprived areas increases the likelihood of knife crime involvement since a significant concentration of violence occurs in these areas and exposure to risk factors are higher.

A positive association between teenagers with ACE's and weapon-related crime has been found. Wood et al's (2017) study demonstrated that gang members and affiliates reported more 'childhood traumatic events' and were also more likely to be placed in care in comparison to violent men who are not in gangs. This point is particularly significant since gangs are the main pathway for knife crime offending. Therefore, it is necessary to consider why ACEs can lead to possibly committing knife crime. For instance, the rationality, cognitive perceptions and the inherent motivations preceding the offending and their relationship with traumatic experiences and criminal behaviours (Ardino, 2012).

It has been found that trauma can be linked to the occurrence of later violence since it can reduce compassion for others, and lead to greater emphasis being played on self-preservation (De Zulueta, 2006), this, along with previous exposure to violence can have an isolating effect upon the individual (Butcher et al, 2015). A study in Boston, USA (Rich and Grey, 2005) looked at the relevance of trauma amongst young men who had previously been victims of violence and who were involved in weapon carrying for potential retaliation. Motivational factors including gaining of respect in the street and ensuring personal safety, are also both linked to effects of previous trauma. These factors relate to gang membership/association with youth street-oriented peer groups; gang membership increases an individual's risk of repeat violence. Weapon carrying is common within such contexts, which exacerbates the cycle of violence. In addition to this, trauma inflicted by bullying has also been identified as relevant, since both the victim and assailant were likely to engage in weapon carrying (Valdebenito et al, 2017). In support, Holligan (2015) in their 'aetiology of knife crime' looked at the life stories of young people in prison for violent offending. Within their life stories, it was found that there were accounts of childhood trauma, alongside their experience of growing upon in poorer neighbourhoods and threatening environments (Holligan, 2015).

Earlier studies have investigated the link between previous victimisation of weapon-related crime and future offending; individuals who reported previous self-reported victimisation may be more likely to offend (Smith and Ecob, 2007; Wood et al 2017; Barlas et al, 2006). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that experiencing previous victimisation of violent offending increases the likelihood of carrying weapons (Uehara et al, 1996). A positive association has been found between previous victimisation and knife crime offending (Barlas et al, 2006; Smith D et al, 2007; Wood J et al, 2017). Contemporary research has uncovered

the relationship between knife crime offenders also being victims of the same crime (Bailey et al, 2020).

Researchers have also argued that ACEs and mental health should be the main focus in informing prevention approaches as affected individuals constitute a high-risk group. Specifically experiencing mental health issues of self-harm, low-self-esteem, anxiety disorders, and psychotic disorders. Furthermore, those with experiences of previous victimisation are also at high risk (McVie, 2010) of violence, since this exposure also can lead to traumatic experiences within the scope of mental health issues (Moya, 2018). In turn trauma and mental health issues have both been associated with substance use (Hammersley et al, 2020). As discussed above, illicit substance use has been found to be an important risk factor with many different studies finding that it significantly increases the likelihood of knife crime involvement (Hamdulay and Mash, 2011; McVie, 2010). Considering this further, ACEs are related to substance misuse, mental health problems, gang membership and poor educational attainment (Haylock et al, 2020; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022), all factors that have also been associated with knife crime.

Additionally, analysis of a survey by (Brennan, 2018), indicated that knife carrying was also found to be associated with previous violent offending. Research has uncovered the influence of the victim/offender overlap phenomenon in relation to knife crime offending (Bailey et al, 2020). A national study in the USA found that previous victimisation has a significant influence upon weapon carrying (Yun and Hwang, 2011). Overall, it has been established that victims of violence have an increased likelihood to commit knife crime (McVie, 2010; Swatt and He, 2006). Since it has also been identified that previous victimisation can be indicative of trauma (Moya, 2018), it is a crucial risk factor since it exacerbates the effects of trauma, poor mental health, and ACEs. Consequently, young men engaged in subcultures or those following 'on road' lifestyles involving increased weapon carrying and violent retaliation, exhibiting aggressive forms of masculinity, may be linked to ACEs, poor mental health, and trauma. Considering the relevance of race, although not officially listed as an ACE, certain academics have argued that the institutional and societal racism and stereotyping of black people throughout the criminal justice system (see earlier discussion on these stereotypes in Chapter 1, § 1.0) should also be considered as an ACE due the negative impacts upon black children (Palmer, 2023).

Certainly, low educational attainment and school exclusion have been shown to be linked with weapon carrying and violence and have been identified as risk factors (Hales et al 2006; Home Office, 2018a; Ministry of Justice, 2018a). A positive association has been found between knife crime and school exclusion (Bailey et al, 2001; Clement et al, 2010; Hayden et al, 2010).

Furthermore, research has shown children with knife possession offences often have a lower educational attainment, which has in turn been demonstrated as a risk factor for committing violence (Ministry of Justice, 2018a). Three such studies have looked at the relationship between school exclusion and its impact upon involvement in knife crime (Clement et al, 2010; Hayden et al, 2010; Bailey et al, 2001). Moreover, Clement et al, have found a link between school exclusion and involvement in violence (Clement et al, 2010). However, Hayden et al (2010), found similar rates of exclusion between knife crime offenders and non- offenders in care homes, although the fact they were in care homes may affect this finding (Hayden et al, 2010). Additionally, school exclusion is a key risk factor for gang involvement (Dempsey, 2021) which is a key knife crime pathway. Qualitative interviews with gang members have discussed them perceiving success through education as "*unattainable"* (Briggs et al,2008).

Furthermore, it is argued that permanent exclusions also hinder access to employment (Williams and Squires, 2021). Researchers emphasising poor educational attainment have pointed towards past government actions, such as the cuts in public spending as explanatory factors (Williams and Squires, 2021). Local council budget cuts across England and Wales led to significant reductions in spending upon youth services and education (Roberts, 2021). *"Many school-based initiatives such as, one to-one teaching programmes, breakfast clubs, outdoor education, music services, school psychologists and speech therapists were funded through local council welfare support and services"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 214). Schools either had to reduce their spending upon these provisions or reallocate money to other initiatives (Granoulhac, 2017). Consequently, *"the collapse of youth services and early years provisions removed some of the limited safeguards and supports available to those young people experiencing the most extreme marginalisation"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 215).

School exclusion is seen to be part of institutional racism, where there is an increased proclivity and willingness to punish black children, particularly boys, via school exclusion, proving a barrier to educational and employment opportunities (Gillborn, 2008; Miller, 2023). There is a disproportionate overrepresentation of black children that have low educational attainment and facing school exclusions (Pitts, 2008). Discrimination and racist attitudes (Palmer, 2023) have a longer-term impact on life opportunities including employment (Miller, 2023). Consequently, there needs to be an awareness of the racialisation of educational and employment opportunities.

Relationship Risk Factors

A positive association has been found between poor parental attachment and knife crime (Nasr et al, 2010; Smith D et al, 2007). For adolescents at the age of 15, a study observed

that having conflicts with parents, increases both risk of victimisation and offending for knife crime (Smith and Ecob, 2007). Inversely, it has also been found that strong parental attachments act as a protective factor which reduces the likelihood for both knife crime offending and victimisation (Smith I et al, 2007). This underlines the importance of parental relationships in influencing the life-course of at-risk youths since it has been demonstrated that many violent offenders have been exposed to living in care or have witnessed family conflicts (Holligan, 2015).

Witnessing conflicts between parents also has a detrimental impact, which overlaps with an ACE of parental separation (see previous ACEs discussion). This factor may additionally contibute to financial hardship which can lead to living in economically deprived areas, as well as a lack of parental supervision (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). However, it must be underlined that such circumstances do not inevitably lead to delinquency and/or knife offending, and stereotyping must be resisted.

A related factor is that familial attitudes must be considered, since possessing a positive perception of the effectiveness of using violence and having a family with matching perceptions is also a risk factor for committing knife crime (Corvo and Williams, 2000). Finally, negative perceptions of authority in a study with secondary school children found these were highest in gang members, followed by peripheral youth not classified as gang members, and the lowest in relation to non-gang youths (Alleyne et al 2010).

Societal Risk Factors

There are two key societal risk factors for knife crime offending consisting of income inequality and economic deprivation which arguably constitute underlying causes for knife crime offending (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). Firstly, there are studies which have looked at income inequality (Sethi et al, 2010) correlated with increased risk of violence. Hsieh and Pugh's (1993) meta-analysis of 34 studies found stronger correlations between income inequality and specific forms of violence, for instance homicide and assault. Further studies have also found positive correlations between income inequality and homicide (Messner et al, 2002). A positive association has been found between economic inequality and knife crime (Nasr et al, 2010; Wood R, et al 2010; Densley et al, 2015). However, there is a lack of research which specifically looks at the relationship between changes in income inequality and its affect upon violence, meaning that it is hard to understand precisely the impact of changes in inequality (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). Moreover, this must be qualified by the fact that general offending also occurs amongst the middle and upper classes, both in private and public space, much of which remains hidden and unexplored due to lack of state attention (Karstedt, and Farrell

2007). Consequently, it needs to be recognised that there is an absence of knife crime research on its nature and extent in middle and upper classes.

In terms of how these variables of inequality and violence may be related to one another; societal trust has been identified as the explanatory factor between these two variables. In the sense that lack of societal trust and inequality have been found as significant in homicide, across 33 countries in Elgar and Aitken's (2010) research. Here it was found that the societies which have increased levels of inequality, and in turn lower levels of interpersonal trust in communities, leads to poorer social capital which contributes towards less safer communities (Elgar and Aitken, 2010).

Further reiterating the importance of income inequality, Whitworth (2011) found a correlation between unequal distribution of income and the *"aggregate violent crime at the level of crime and disorder reduction partnerships in England*" (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018, p. 7). Grimshaw and Ford (2018) argue that strain theory may help explain the relationship between these two variables since it proposes that people can be pressured to achieve socially accepted goals, yet the lack of legitimate means to achieve them produces the strain which results in the pursuit of illegitimate opportunities (Merton,1938). It has been further argued that inequality may be a more reliable predictor of homicide in comparison to the presence of material welfare (Daly and Wilson,2001). This risk factor influences the behaviour of men since Densley et al explains that economic inequalities have contributed towards young men carrying out self-destructive behaviour; as the "*societal problems have left individuals with minimal options"* (Densley et al, 2015), (these notions shall be expanded upon in Chapter 4, § 4.3).

Secondly, economic/relative deprivation has been demonstrated as having a relationship with violence. A positive association has been found between economic deprivation and knife crime (Alleyne et al, 2010; Alleyne et al, 2016; Nasr et al, 2010; Wood R, et al 2010; Briggs et al, 2010; Densley et al, 2015). For instance, Leyland and Dundas (2010) looked at the relationship between deaths arising from assault and the relationship with individual deprivation and area deprivation in Scotland. It was found that the rates of death by sharp instruments were higher for those living in the highest deprived areas in contrast to lowest deprived. Furthermore, a study in Chorley observed that rates of assault were nine times higher between the highest deprived and lowest deprived wards in the locality (Howe and Crilly, 2002). A study in Wales also found that the rate of injuries via assault increased with deprivation (Jones et al, 2011), and death by a sharp instrument is also twice as likely in poorer areas in comparison to wealthier areas (Eades, 2007). However, it has been noted that it is difficult to identify the independent effects of living in areas of higher deprivation compared to

those with higher inequality, since whilst there is overlap, both have separate effects upon rates of violence (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018).

Overall, it is contended that living in economically deprived areas significantly increases the likelihood of being a victim of violence (Bellis et al, 2011). Furthermore, it is argued that *"members of those communities are more likely to experience violent crime, and muggings in particular, which involve a high proportion of knife usage"* (Eades, 2007, p. 24). Further to this, Eades (2007) observes that in homicide data, deaths arising via the use of a knife or sharp instrument doubles when comparing to lower socioeconomic areas, in comparison to their wealthier counter parts in Britain (Eades, 2007).

Consequently, economically deprived areas have a consistently higher rate of knife crime in comparison to other areas (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). Such areas have an increased likelihood of encountering knife crime, whilst additionally contributing towards its occurrence (Kirchmaier et al, 2020), as people living in these areas are more likely to be exposed to adverse childhood experiences. Ultimately, it has been found that younger men living in the most deprived areas were more likely to end up committing the most serious violence in UK (Coid et al, 2016). However, it is worth noting that there was no significant variation of the rate of young men committing less serious violence offences in the lowest deprived areas and the highest deprived areas. Therefore, potentially illustrating that the lower serious violence occurring amongst younger males is not as heavily influenced by the presence of socioeconomic deprivation in their respective areas (ibid).

There have been studies in Scotland examining the impact of living in an economically deprived area, which looked at the patterns of knife carrying amongst young people. For instance, Bannister et al (2010) found that in economically deprived areas, younger people tended to create 'territorial identities' when they are faced with social and economic restrictions. Some young men in these areas were constructing their social identity within the context of a delinquent group. This also led to patterns of group rivalries within these economically deprived areas (ibid). When understanding the significance of living in economically deprived areas, there needs be an awareness of how environments with limited opportunities, can lead to the presence of socially excluded youths becoming drawn to criminal subcultures where forms of masculinity such as 'hardness', violence and retaliation are encouraged and accepted, i.e., 'on road' (see earlier discussion on youth subcultures and gang risk factor). Consequently, there needs to be an awareness of gender as a knife crime factor within particular areas.

It is also important to recognise 'age' as an over-lapping risk factor, which can expose youths to economic deprivation (Williams and Squires, 2021; Pitts, 2023a, Harding; 2020b) (see earlier discussions on age risk factor above). The impact of austerity measures post- 2010,

the reduction in public spending including education and youth services, and their exacerbating effects upon recent generations have lent credence to contemporary explanations of youth involvement in knife crime (Williams and Squires, 2021, this shall be further explored in Chapter 4).

The relevance of race must also be examined. At an earlier point, this thesis acknowledged the moral panic around knife crime, with its depiction as a crime largely connected with young black men. The implications of institutional, structural and societal racism and how they play out within the media, schooling, the employment market and the criminal justice system, have been noted and shall be expanded upon in the following chapters. In Chapter 1, § 1.0, a preliminary observation concerned the increased exposure of black youth to socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and unemployment (Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Palmer, 2023). There are some interesting demographic patterns in England, for example, 10% of the white demographic live in socio-economically deprived areas compared to 19.6% of the black demographic (Gov.uk 2018b). In London alone, 40% of black and ethnic minorities were observed as living in lower income households in comparison to 20% of the white demographic (MacInnes and Kenway, 2009, p. 61).

It is argued that the contemporary exposure to these challenges is akin to the racism experienced by previous generations of black youth (ibid). Whilst the involvement of young black men in knife crime has been considerably distorted and exaggerated, for those that are involved, their increased expose to economic disadvantage is arguably a factor which will be considered at a later point (Williams and Squires, 2021).

Community Risk Factors

As previously discussed, there is an overlap between community factors and societal factors. For instance, exposure to economic deprivation and living in an economically deprived area constitutes societal risk factors. The following community risk factors lend explanatory potential since living in economically deprived areas leads to the exposure to certain community factors such as poor social cohesion (Alleyne et al, 2010), lack of social order (Brennan, 2018) and distrust of police (Brennan, 2018).

There is a range of literature which explores the relationship between low socio-economic neighbourhoods and the occurrence of violence (e.g., Densley et al 2015, arguing that living in areas with a low socioeconomic status increase the risk of being involved in a gang). Crime rates are also higher in economically deprived areas, which in turn increases the likelihood of adolescents being involved in violent crime (Wood, 2010). Economic deprivation also contributes to low social cohesion developing in these areas which has been associated with the offending of adolescents and gang members (Alleyne, et al, 2010). A positive association

has been found between areas with low social cohesion and knife crime (Barlas et al, 2006). This in turn can contribute towards social disorder which is also a predictor for knife carrying (Brennan,2018). Furthermore, within these communities a lack of police trust is often prevalent; found to be a positive association with knife crime (Alleyne et al, 2010; Alleyne et al, 2016).

Further Analysis of the Identified Knife Crime Risk Factor Categories

To surmise, the analysis of the above identified knife crime risk factors includes societal, community, relationship, peer group and individual factors. Research has depicted some of them to be underlying causes or 'drivers of violence' such as economic deprivation, inequality, gangs, poor mental health, adverse childhood experiences and the drugs market. For instance, Grimshaw and Ford's (2018) research outlines the 'drivers of violence' drawing on themes of gangs and illegal drug markets, as well as inequality, deprivation, social trust, and mental health. There exists no single underlying cause, rather it is a combination of factors and in turn their respective interactions which further increase the risk of involvement (Brennan, 2018). Knife crime violence arises through the interactions between community/societal interactions involving relationships between people and groups, as well as individual factors (Sethi et al, 2010).

The demographic at heightened risk appears to be individuals in their late teenage years and those approaching their early twenties (Rippon, 2017). Within the above discussion, there is a recognition of relevance of overlapping influences, such as the increased exposure of youth towards economic deprivation (Browne et al, 2022; Marshall and Webb, 1994; Squires, 2009; Williams and Squires, 2021), due to austerity measures post- 2010 and their exacerbating effects upon recent generations, black youth in particular (Williams and Squires, 2021). As stated earlier, there appears to be a gendered dimension (Browne et al, 2022), as young men have been found to have a higher likelihood of gang involvement, violent offending and general knife carrying in community environments (McVie, 2010 with aggressive forms of masculinity being implicated in knife carrying (Palasinski et al, 2019) (see earlier discussions on gender, subcultures and masculinities in section 3.1)

Research suggests that there are key differences between young people who use knives as part of their gang involvement, in contrast to youths who are not involved in gangs but also carry and use knives (McVie, 2010). Younger people with gang involvement have a higher likelihood of facing economic deprivation and poverty. Therefore, researchers have also identified various sub-groups of knife crime offenders, within and outside of gangs (Browne et al, 2022). Future research is necessary in exploring the existence of sub-groups involved in knife carrying, their offending patterns, and knife crime risk factors applicable to specific sub-groups.

Whilst gang membership and association has been found to be a significant driver of violence (Home Office, 2015b), it has also been conceded that *"gangs are not wholly responsible for this recent surge in youth violence"* (Haylock et al, 2020). Indeed, overuse of the gang label may serve to exaggerate the extent of gang involvement, society is now conflating the word gang with almost all group related deviance (Hallsworth, 2014). Arguably use of the term 'gang' must be more sophisticated (Haylock et al, 2020). There may be key differences between gangs and violative peer groups (Hallsworth and Young 2005). Another key issue is that overuse of the gang label has been racialised resulting in the depiction of black youth as the face of modern gang violence (see Andell, 2023; Miller, 2023; Palmer 2023).

Criticisms have also been levelled against both the quality and the nature of the risk factor-based studies (Browne et al, 2022). Firstly, in terms of their nature, many of the studies have been carried out in the USA, it is necessary for more contemporary studies to be conducted in the UK, which can account for national differences such as the availability of different weapons (ibid). In the United States guns are more often used and easily accessible, in comparison with the United Kingdom. This may increase the likelihood of a UK offender using a knife as a weapon of choice compared to a US offender (ibid). Additionally, there are certain risk factors which lack a strong evidence base, such as where knives are used to carry out sexual offences in groups (Park and Kim, 2016), or to commit anti- LGBT murders (Gruenwald and Allison, 2018), where only single digit studies exist.

A further issue is that the majority of young people exposed to knife crime risk factors do not commit knife crime or carry weapons (Williams and Squires, 2021). A key explanation for this finding is that exposure to protective factors may reduce their risk for offending and mitigate the effects of the risk factors outlined above (ibid). For instance, protective factors include *"positive relationships with parents, high academic achievement, positive friendships with non-delinquent peers, extracurricular school activities, belonging to smaller (in terms of numbers of children) families, development of good problem-solving skills and empathetic skills"* (Silvestri et al., 2009, p. 17; Williams and Squires, 2021). Arguably, the exposure to protective factors generally tends to lead to the formation of 'resilience' where younger people develop a capacity or strategies to avoid being affected by negative peer influences (ibid). Consequently, there is a recognition of the role of protective factors and their significance in mitigating the effects of risk factors.

The range of risk factors and motivations demonstrate that any criminal justice response needs to be multi-faceted and involve early intervention methods and multi-agency collaborations McNeill and Wheller (2019). A variety of knife crime research approaches have informed the existing national prevention policy. The current public health approach (explored

in Chapter 5) informed by research a decade prior to its implementation (e.g., Silvestri et al, 2009); is an example of 'what works' in an evidence led agenda. More research with an inherent focus upon developing knife crime violence reduction strategies informed by an evidence base on and knife crime offenders (Wieshmann et al, 2020), is required. Particularly given that existing research has identified differences between knife crime offenders and general violence offenders (McVie, 2010). Such research can enhance understanding of knife crime risk factors, informing the development of effective prevention policy (Browne et al, 2022).

3.2: An Examination of the Knife Crime Motivational Factors for Male Youth Offending

This section will examine knife crime motivational factors which are said to inform the reasoning of young men committing knife crime. When researching the motivations for carrying weapons, McNeill and Wheller (2019) argue that there are certain overarching categories of explanations as to why people carry knives (Brennan, 2017). The first category is out of self-protection, necessity and fear (Lemos, 2004; Melde et al, 2009). Riggs and Palasinski (2011) argue that young men perceive knife crime as a valid response to threats and the perceived lack of police authority in cities. A study in Edinburgh observed that knife carrying was a rational response for young people who are fearful (Mcvie, 2010). Therefore, carrying a knife is perceived as a responsible action by some young people to manage this potentially violent environment, as a precaution against injury or death (Palasinski, 2013).Their fears and anxieties need to be contextualised within existing subcultures and aggressive forms of masculinity. The fears of many young men and carrying of weapons may act as drivers for violence (Trickett, 2011); weapon carrying is tied to the fear of violence and need for protection, but carrying a weapon increases the risk that it will be used.

Fears of violence are often linked with perceptions of insecurity (Traynor, 2016) and reduced trust in police (Brennan, 2017). Skarlatidou et al (2021) argue that lack of trust can be a knife crime motivational factor since in fearful situations, young people may feel more protected carrying a knife despite the risk of punishment (Broadhurst et al, 2008). It is argued that younger people who carry weapons are more focused upon maintaining their safety rather than being concerned with potentially facing punishment via the criminal justice system (Figueira, et al, 2024).

Their lack of trust in the police results in them not seeing the police or the state as a source of protection. This needs to be further contextualised within the gang discussions above on the gang membership and the lack of trust in police risk factors. Both gang associated youth, and youth involved in street peer delinquent groups, do not have good relationships and trust in police since both reside predominantly in economically deprived high crime areas (Brennan,

2017). Such areas are characterised by harassment and over policing of young people, particularly young (black) men including stop and search (these notions shall be expanded upon in Chapter 5).

There is research which links victimisation and the development of fear (e.g. Marfleet 2008; Gray et al, 2021). The perceived risk of victimisation does not always lead to fear meaning that the concepts of fear and protection are not synonymous with one another (Figueira, et al, 2024). Instead, young people may individually calculate their ability to prevent victimisation (ibid). Li et al's (2021) research observed self-efficacy contributes to the decision making of younger people in electing to carry knives. In particular their levels of confidence in their abilities and capacity to use the knife for their protection. Albeit, we cannot make generalisations regarding their findings since further research is warranted (Figueira, et al, 2024), nevertheless, it is argued:

"Some young people may carry weapons for protection against victimisation, which may not be driven by fear. Their decision to carry a weapon is based on their 'analysis' of perceived risk and may not necessarily be accompanied by the emotional reaction of fear" (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 10)

The second motivational category consists of self-presentation which entails gaining street credibility and respect (Silvestri et al, 2009). For instance, Lauger (2016) argues that weapons have a practical and symbolic benefit in gaining respect in 'street life' and 'gang environments.' Similarly, Palasinski (2013) and Palasinski and Riggs (2012) maintain that carrying knives is a way to achieve respect in the 'street'. Essentially, the 'Code of the Street' requires young men to retaliate to new threats and as a response to any previous victimisation since there is a necessity to obtain respect in the street (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). This is a key part of 'on road' subcultures and the necessity for violence in these environments in order to maintain the image of 'hardness' (Trickett, 2011). In addition, knife carrying has been identified as garnering respect with certain young people in England (Palasinski, 2013). Further motivational factors applicable to the category of self-presentation include the use of violence and the carrying of weapons as methods of *"gaining status, power and establishing masculinity"* (Clement, 2010; Barlas and Egan, 2006; Alleyne et al 2010).

Keeping these factors in mind, gangs may be important for some young people in *"providing identity, status, and companionship"* as membership of a gang helps establish reputation (Clement, 2010; Briggs, 2009; Alleyne et al, 2014; Alleyne et al, 2010). Research has identified that young gang members appear to view social status as more important than non-gang involved adolescents (Clement, 2010, Barlas and Egan, 2006). Data on young people aged up to 25 from 2003-2006 in England and Wales (Brennan, 2018) revealed that participants

carried knives as part of their masculine identity since it was considered as a key practice in demonstrating 'toughness' as a man. In relation to street identity and reputation, the role of social media has been recognised as contributing towards the modern street identity and reputation of young men (Urbanik and Haggerty, 2018). Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney (2017) have looked at the role of social media in provoking violence, and there has been recognition of the role of social media in gang violence (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2018) through providing an online medium for garnering street respect. Young men in gangs are faced with constant expectations of hardness and adherence to gang norms which necessitates readiness to use violence (Trickett, 2011). Consequently, these young men continually engage in behavioural practices of threatening and using violence in their formulations of masculine identity. Additionally, fashion has also been considered as a motivational factor, within a culture of knife crime and peer influences in carrying knives (Marfleet, 2008; Brennan and Moore, 2009), although are limitations herein (see motivations limitations in later part of current section).

The third motivational category is that of 'utility' where knife carrying assists with other activities such as carrying out crime (Brennan, 2017). Motivations for knife carrying can evolve, for instance, initial motivations for knife-carrying can start as protection but progress to offending; (Lemos and Crane, 2004), which Marfleet (2008, p. 84) refers to as 'replicative externality', providing an illustration of shifts in motivation. The fourth motivational category has arguably received insufficient attention in contemporary research. Overlapping with the previous categories, yet remaining distinct in the sense it is based upon economic imperatives; engaging in a knife crime lifestyle can be seen an illegitimate means to obtain economic self-sufficiency and achieve financial goals by providing an opportunity to obtain *"culturally valued material"* (Baird, 2018). A recognised example is that of county lines, which may offer younger people opportunities for employability (Harding 2020b, 270). Indeed, Harding argues the opportunities are compelling for younger people, requiring no work experience, which is unmatched elsewhere in the legal economy (ibid).

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the relationship between knife crime motivational factors with risk factors. The knife crime risk factors discussed above may serve to influence the development of the motivational factors, to differing extents. Firstly, many younger men start their offending after experiencing victimisation themselves (Golding et al, 2008), especially those adolescents who have been injured or have been threatened with a weapon (Mukherjee et al, 2020). It is argued that previous victimisation influences the perception of risk and overall decision to engage in knife crime (Figueira, et al, 2024). Furthermore, Traynor (2016) advocates the notion of 'security gap' in which knife carrying facilitates a sense of both physical and psychological security unaddressed by families, teachers and the police. Traynor's study on adolescents observed the perception that knife carrying was perceived as

effective in both preventing future victimisation and addressing worries over security (ibid). Consequently, young people may carry knives for their own protection (Eades et al, 2007) and safety (Traynor, 2016) demonstrating the relationship between the risk factor of previous victimisation and the motivational category of protection.

Building upon this, it is argued that this response contributes towards the growth of the fear of knife crime since it is observed that there are increased numbers of individuals carrying knives. This significantly increased fears of becoming a victim of knife crime (Brown and Benedict, 2004). Consequently, it is argued that increased weapon carrying further fuels fears of future victimisation (Figueira, et al, 2024). In light of the analysis above, weapon carrying has been associated with an overlap between being an offender and a victim (Dijkstra et al, 2012; see further discussions on this phenomenon in section 3.3).

Gender also plays a pivotal role in influencing further motivations, since the exposure to previous victimisation, in turn, facilitates the development of aggressive forms of masculinity (Figueira et al, 2024). Previous victimisation for young men ascribing to these values of 'hardness' and 'toughness' facilitates their perceptions of a need to retaliate to avoid demonstrating any form of vulnerability (Palasinski and Riggs, 2012).

"This review suggests a theory for understanding knife-related crime. Young males' decisions to engage in knife-related crime are based on their analysis of risk and perceptions of risk. These perceptions of risk through a contagion effect are shaped and further influenced by instances of previous victimization as a result of knife-related crime. This, in turn, contributes to the development of an aggressive masculinity that justifies the behaviour." (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 12).

Furthermore, returning to the fear of crime and contextualising it through the lens of gender. Miller's (2002) study on weapon carrying on young people in the UK aged from 16 to 24 years observed that females tended to report higher perceptions of fear of crime in comparison to the males. However, this did not increase their likelihood of carrying weapons due their fear (Miller, 2002). Albeit, it is contended that these lower levels of reported fear may be due to young men being unwilling to report weakness, thereby jeopardising their masculinity (Figueira, et al, 2024; King, 2022; Holligan et al, 2016)

Additionally, factors such as gaining respect and status may arise, due to enacting masculine identities involving machismo (Shepherd and Brennan, 2008). Children are significantly affected by their environments and gaining respect amongst their peer associations. The risk factor of gang association/membership is applicable here since it addresses the various needs arising due to the inherent motivations. For instance, Harding (2020a) interviewed younger knife carrying gang associated young men in London where it was observed that their

membership resulted in perceptions of key positives. Specifically, they were able to derive a social identity through their gang membership which provided power, respect and status, whilst also ensuring their own safety and protection, effectively, reducing their fears and perceived likelihood of violent victimisation. Furthermore, their association had the symbolic effect of helping to establish their masculine identities (Baird, 2018). It has also been recognised that gangs address economic motivations and aspirations since they provide an opportunity to obtain *"culturally valued material"* (Baird, 2018). Therefore, gangs and gender are significantly related to knife crime motivations.

Clearly the social identity of the individual is bound up with the motivational factors for knife crime offending. Social identity theory can be understood as *"that part of an individual's self-concept which derives knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the emotional value and significance attached to that membership"* (Tajfel and Turner, 1986, p 63). It is argued that this, in turn, has consequences for the individual's perceptions and their behaviour within the group itself and in their interactions with other groups (Hennigan and Spanovic, 2012). Through the application of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), it has been found that identity development is informed by the values and practices that underpin 'street culture', depending upon the level of exposure of risk factors, children in turn, can develop identities which incorporate and exemplify elements of these sub-cultures.

Additionally, as discussed above, it is overall argued that *"young males who engage in knife-related crime do so because of a shared social identity*" (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 10). It is further argued that this social identity is informed by a perception of masculinity which requires an adherence to toughness and violence (Trickett, 2011; Whelan, 2013) and street culture which reiterates the importance of violence and carrying knives (King, 2022), *"knife-carrying enables these young males to construct a masculinity characterised by being tough and aggressive which helps them to manage and navigate complex spaces characterised by risk and uncertainties"* (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 11).

Palasinski et al, (2021) further argues that various knife crime motivational factors such as respect, status, and distrust in police, overlap with one another and are associated with this form of masculinity, (for further discussion on the relevance of social identity in the context of gangs, see following section 3.3). Consequently, when analysing knife crime motivational factors, it is necessary to recognise the importance of gender and forms of masculinity and their explanatory potential with regards to the range of motivation categories (e.g., Figueira, et al, 2024). In this regard, in light of the various overlaps between these domains of masculinity, previous victimisation and risk, Figueira, et al, (2024) contend that:

"We see the emergence of a theoretical explanation for knife-related crime. A knife is regarded as an instrumental tool to achieve a nonviolent goal namely for defensive reasons due to previous violent victimization and not purely as an expression of aggression. It is also an available tool for young men in the building of a masculine identity which will also serve a defensive purpose (i.e., to deter others from harming them physically). Therefore, the factor that appears to knit together past victimization, masculine identity, and knife-related crime is their cognitive analysis of perceived risk." (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 12).

Considering the relationship between economic underlying causes and the influences upon a range of knife crime motivations, the fourth category concerns economic motivation. This is self-evident in the use of knife crime as a means for economic attainment, through seeking financial opportunities in gangs and county lines (Harding, 2020b). Additionally, this thesis argues that the motivations of self-preservation and protection should be contextualised within an awareness of the structural barriers that younger people increasingly face in economically deprived neighbourhoods which lack social cohesion, exhibit social disorder (Brennan, 2018), and in turn higher rates of crime, which have the capacity to offer a range of illegitimate financial opportunities via gangs and county lines (Densley et al, 2015). Likewise, the motivations of self-presentation and respect can be further contextualised within an awareness of the growth of gangs and county lines, which contributes towards the reinforcement of these motivations through accruing social capital and status in these environments (Harding 2020a). Additionally, this thesis argues that more recognition needs to be afforded to the utility of knives motivation in enabling violent offending within county lines environments.

Separately, the motivations of fear, protection, respect, self-presentation and utility all have the capacity to be contextualised within an awareness of violent subcultures which arise due to a demographic's exposure to economic deprivation. It can be argued that the youth who tend to develop such motivations are often involved in violent 'on-road' subcultures (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009) through exposure to economic structural factors. These violent environments create feelings of fear of crime which may necessitate knife carrying for the purposes of protection. Furthermore, these subcultures foster an environment for growth of violent forms of masculinities promoting violent behaviours. Thus, contributing towards the reinforcement of motivations in gaining respect, and self-presentation.

Yet there are limitations of the motivational evidence base. An historical issue dating back some 50 years concerns a lack of existing literature which focuses upon knife crime offending motivations, (see further discussions, Eades et al, 2007). As such, Harding argues that the paradigms that underpin the 'motivational narratives' for knife carrying have evolved

insufficiently, demonstrating selective focus being mainly on factors such as symbolism, fear, protection, and fashion as discussed above (Harding, 2020a).

However, there are examples of contemporary research which challenge this critique through seeking to further develop the motivational factor evidence base (i.e. Figueira, et al, 2024, Li et al, 2021). Figeuira et al's (2024) systematic review and analysis of knife crime motivational factors offers further explanatory potential (see earlier relevant discussions in section). These researchers point to how the evidence base lacks consistency in use of terminology, in particular failing to differentiate between knife carrying and the use of knives in offences. The researchers reiterate the importance of future research examining if these examples are affected by different motivations (ibid). Additionally, there is a broader issue of knife motivations being explored within a broader analysis of weapon carrying since it is *"rarely seen as a distinct behaviour with unique motivations"* (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 12).

A significant proportion of the studies (39%) on motivational factors were carried out in the USA. This raises issues concerning the extent to which findings can be associated with the younger demographic in the United Kingdom (ibid). For instance, researchers on motivational factors involved in the development of masculinity subcultures, and motivational factors therein, must be contextualised across various cultures, making it difficult to generalise (Holligan et al, 2016; King, 2022).

They also observed that various studies focus upon interviewees in schools may distort the issue (APPG Group on Knife Crime, 2019); also, these studies do not include young people involved in knife crime who have been excluded (Figueira, et al, 2024). As indicated, in Chapter 1, when examining the nature and extent of knife crime it was recognised that knife crime significantly affects males post school completion.

There have been further issues with the methodologies being use in the design of the studies. It is argued that very few studies employ a mixed design of employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. It is recognised that quantitative research offers significant potential in understanding the variety of motivational factors (Figueira, et al, 2024). However, it is argued that a mixed methodology offers further a more holistic understanding of motivational factors of young people (ibid).

Additionally, it is argued that current and past government policy and policy interventions (see Chapter 5 for expansive discussion on policy) have become increasingly reliant upon outdated 'youth motivations' for knife crime. For example, they are still focused upon the narratives of self-protection and self-defence, along with a disregard for other developments in the field. For instance, whilst Harding (2020a) points out that fashion is one of the prevalent narratives, this motivational factor must be contextualised within an awareness of the state's knife crime

moral panic. Whilst some emphasis has been placed on fashion (eg., Marfleet, 2008; Brennan and Moore, 2009), key limitations with this category. There are also limitations in explanations of how it relates to other motivational factors *"it is not very well understood the role of fear contagion" and victimisation in shaping of masculinity ideals within groups of young men involved in knife-related crime*" (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 11). Further research is also necessary to understand the relationship between risk factors such as previous victimisation and how this influences development of masculine values in groups engaging in knife crime, in particular illuminating the *"complex interplay between these factors to inform viable treatment options for young men engaged in knife-related violence"* (Figueira et al, 2024, p. 1).

Additionally, there is a need for further qualitative research to develop our understanding of the motivational categories. For instance, whilst this thesis recognises the explanatory potential of self-efficacy as a motivating factor (Figueira, et al, 2024; Li et al, 2021). It is acknowledged that: *"while this is an interesting perspective, caution is needed in the generalisation of this finding given that the role of self-efficacy in young males' decisions to engage in knife-related crime is not very well understood*" (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 10). Consequently, there is need for future research to build upon these areas.

Additionally, the analysis in the previous domains demonstrates the importance of trauma, substance misuse and poor mental health. Recent knife crime incidents have also demonstrated the importance of these issues and lack of clarity in observing motivations which are more latent in nature (see relevant discussions in Chapter 1, § 1.0). Consequently, the argument is made that there is a need for contemporary research to build the evidence base regarding knife crime motivations (this notion shall be further explored in Chapter 5).

Furthermore, this thesis argues there is a need for a further examination of the interplay between economic structural factors identified and their capacity to inform the range of motivational categories, which will be discussed. The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (2009) suggests that complex circumstances and social meaning attributed by them by young people, further inhibits an understanding of the interventions which are effective. Consequently, there is a need for the development of the evidence base pertaining to knife crime since it is argued that there is a *"lack of detailed information on the factors that predispose individuals to engage in knife crime and knife carrying*" (Figueira, et al, 2024, p. 1).

The following section shall consider theoretical developments and examples of contemporary research directions in explanations behind male youth knife crime involvement.

3.3: Knife Crime Theoretical Developments and Examples of Contemporary Research Directions

The literature explored above relates to underlying causes, risk factors and motivational factors for knife crime. Following on from this, the current section seeks to examine applicable theoretical developments and examples of contemporary research. This should be considered non-exhaustive since the various research studies have been selected on the basis that they expand upon and provide a further account of various themes within selected examples of the knife crime risk and motivational factors. Consequently, this should be considered as a narrative account, rather than a comprehensive one. An additional objective of this section is to also identify some key areas and selected omissions within the literature which require reiteration and development through the further application of the political economy perspective.

Significant developments in knife crime have included signal crime theory (Innes, 2004), social field theory and social habitus (Harding, 2020a), the 'unified theory of gang involvement' (Wood and Alleyne, 2010), social identity theory applied to gangs (Hennigan and Spanovic, 2012), actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Holligan, 2015) and street capital theory (Harding, 2014; Sandberg and Pederson,2011). The victim/offender overlap phenomenon is also being used to understand this issue (Bailey et al, 2020). These developments shall be considered in turn below.

Signal crime theory, Innes (2004) proposes that so-called 'signal crimes' may indicate that all is not well in society. Knife crime events have been referred to as 'signal crimes' (Innes, 2004) and as influencing signal crime trends; *"What they appear to signal are decivilising processes closely tracking our unequal, divided and discriminatory culture: the brutalisation of youth-social relationships and the establishment of gang cultures where life is cheap"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 91). Actor network theory, put forward by Latour (2005), argues that knife crime cannot be completely attributed to the actions of the offender, instead there needs to be a recognition of the various actors involved, which include individuals and their values. Similarly, Holligan (2015) employed actor network theory in their research in Scotland, where it was found that the cause of violence rests in the roles of actors, mediators and networks where the role of the family and neighbourhood are significant (Holligan, 2015).

Such developments provide useful insights into the study of this crime category. For example, the formulation of the gang environment that many male poorer adolescents are exposed to which is referred to as the 'Game' by Harding (2020a), who uses social capital theory and social field theory to demonstrate that knife crime can be seen as a "logical response" to the social field, allowing for agency, control, pressure and release, whilst generating opportunities

in *the Game*. Further theoretical developments include the importance of gang processes in the opportunities offered, the effect on criminal behaviour (Wood and Alleyne, 2010), and the fact that many of those involved in this crime are also victims (Bailey et al, 2020).

There is also a recognition of the relevance of gender (Shepherd and Brennan, 2008; Townsend and Barret, 2003) and economic deprivation (Haylock et al, 2020). Bailey et al (2020) have identified the limited demographic data on knife crime offenders and victims. In their research in London Thames Valley, they sought to identify both victims, offenders and motivations for offending, to identify any victim/offender overlap. Bailey et al (2020) have also put forward a *"social network formation"* for those who are exposed to knife crime in Thames Valley in London. It was found that 16–34-year-old white males are at a greater risk of becoming victims, offenders and victim/offenders of knife crime. Interestingly, Bailey et al (2020) have found that gangs constituted less than 20% of knife crime in Thames Valley. They have also advocated that knife crime policy should not be solely focused upon gangs. In addition, Skarlatidou et al (2021) focus upon lack of trust in policing and propose strategies to tackle knife crime, whilst also improving the trust in police from young people. Contemporary research demonstrates that public trust in policing has been falling during the last few decades (Cowell et al, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, knife crime has also been explored through the lens of social identity theory, but also in the context of gangs (e.g., Hennigan and Spanovic, 2012; Wood, 2014), where it is effectively argued that self-identity is heavily influenced by the process of categorisation (e.g., gang member, social identity), which in turn affects how people behave. This is not to say that there are differences between individuals and that of the group. Rather that the group identity has significant capacity in influencing individual decisions. This may depend upon the strength of a gang member's association with the group, including incidents where there is an expectation to comply with 'gang identities' (Lauger, 2016). Harding (2020a) states parallels can be drawn in relation to the concept of social identity, and *"compliance to the social field and habitus"*.

Wood (2014) further uses the social identity approach to further understand street gangs and criminality, using the premise that gang researchers have demonstrated that those that are members of gangs, have an increased proclivity for committing crime (Kleinn, et al, 2006); gang members are both disproportionately more criminal (Chu et al, 2012) and disproportionately victims (Katz et al, 2011). Wood (2014) seeks to explore the impact of group processes on gang members in order to identify with a gang, ascribe to the gang's values, and also seek to achieve the group goals such as status. Following the group norms of a gang, influences the social cognitions of the individual such as *"moral disengagement, offence*

*supportive cognitions, and ruminations" (*ibid). In order to understand the gang processes, it is first necessary to understand what the gang offers culturally and psychologically.

Wood (2014) proposes a unified theory on gang involvement (Wood and Alleyne,2010) to explain how particular group processes *("e.g. social identity theory, self-categorization theory and uncertainty- identity theory"*), act to motivate youths to join gangs and how once youths become gang members there are particular group processes *("e.g. reputation enhancement theory, cohesion and pluralistic ignorance"*) which have the effect of them accepting and following the gang norms. Group processes can also influence a gang member's social cognitions *("e.g. moral disengagement, social dominance theory, and cognitive schemas"*) and such processes can also impact on their responses to outgroups *("e.g. displaced aggression, perceptions of entitativity")* (Wood, 2014, p. 711).

Additionally, contemporary knife crime research has also recognised the importance of social media in relation to identified knife crime motivational factors and the operation of UK gangs (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2018; Storrod and Densley, 2017). Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney (2017) have looked at the role of social media in provoking violence, and there has been recognition of the role of social media in gang violence (Irwin-Rogers et al,2018). Arguably, the promotion of gang behaviour on social media normalises the behaviour and emphasises the need and justification for knife-carrying (a key motivational behaviour for knife crime offending) for protection. In relation to further knife crime motivations, the role of social media has been recognised as contributing towards modern street identity and reputation (Urbanik and Haggerty, 2018). This consists of uploading videos, complete with depictions of violence, gang imagery, threats of violence against rival gangs, money, and drugs and representations of specific neighbourhoods which are regularly uploaded on social media (Examples include Alexander, 2023b; Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017; Pawelz and Elvers, 2018; Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018 and Whittaker et al, 2020b).

Urban gangs living in deprived neighbourhoods are increasingly relying upon social media for communication purposes (Fernández-Planells et al, 2021). Furthermore, it has created an online space for street culture for gangs to build their digital street identity (Fernández-Planells et al, 2020). The growth in gangs use of social media has been termed as 'Internet banging' (Patton et al., 2013) or 'cyber banging' (Morselli and Décary-Hétu, 2013). These terms refer to depicting conduct which encourages gang membership, demonstrating power, attaining street credibility for criminal activity (Pawelz and Elvers, 2018; Fernández-Planells et al, 2021). It has also been demonstrated that gangs are utilising social media to carry out a range of crimes such as uploading violent images and videos, threatening violence and drug dealing (Moule et al., 2014; Patton et al, 2014; Pyrooz et al, 2015). Additionally, it is recognised that

social media is *"creating a new venue for people who share or are sensitive to the values underlying street gang lifestyle to come together"* (Morselli and Décary-Hétu, 2013, p. 166).

In order to put forward a range of effective interventions to prevent gang membership, we need to understand the group processes that occur within gangs (ibid). It has also been recognised that gangs and urban based street groups play an important role in broader general urban violence. Within this field in the United Kingdom, there exists a vast field of gang research and spectrum of gang researchers. For example, Hallsworth's (2014) article can be interpreted to assert that on one side, there are criminologists such as Harding (2012), Toy (2008), Firman (2010) and Pitts (2007, 2008) who place gangs as the face of contemporary youth violence, through emphasising their growth and prevalence amongst youths (Pitts, 2008). On the other hand, other criminologists argue that youth violence also consists of street-based volatile peer groups, which cannot be solely associated with gangs (Young, Silverstone and Hallsworth, 2014; Hallsworth, 2014). Consequently, there is significant debate in the literature concerning whether gangs constitute the modern face of youth violence (see earlier discussion on gang membership risk factor in section 3.1 for further analysis of this debate).

This thesis earlier identified the importance of ACEs, trauma and poor mental health. In this regard, there is an increasing body of psychological literature examining the importance of children facing exposure to violence and its consequences for the development of the child (Figueira et al, 2024). These children face challenges in being able to differentiate between what is accurately construed as a threat, since their previous experiences have the capacity to heighten and affect their perception of the risk of future victimisation (Asmussen et al, 2020). Additionally, their previous exposure to violence may contribute towards increased emotional responses to perceptions of existence of threat (McLaughlin and Sheridan, 2016), including anger (Shackman et al, 2007) (The importance of interventions based upon these areas shall be explored in Chapter 5)

Contemporary research has also uncovered the state's moral panic on knife crime phenomenon (see discussion on literature on this area in Chapter 1). In this respect, in relation to literature on the racialisation of the offence, specific knife crime literature (Williams 2023; Williams and Squires, 2021) utilised Hall's analysis to demonstrate the significance of racist stereotyping of the black community as a means to police the crisis of knife crime (see earlier discussion in Chapter 1, § 1.0). The analysis above on knife crime risk factors (see section 3.1) explored the relevance of race to moral panic and deviancy amplification. Institutional, structural and societal racism, as well as exposure to high socio-economic risk factors and

inequality, all contribute to the over-representation and mischaracterisation of young black men as gang members and knife users. (Palmer, 2023; Miller, 2023).

However, it is contended that there is absence of literature which specifically recognises the multiple layers of oppression and subjugation faced by young black men (Palmer, 2023). It has been suggested that much emphasis is placed on class rather than issues around racism (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2004; Burgess-Proctor, 2006). In comparison, it is argued that racial subjugation, oppression and issues around identity are all factors involved in the offending of some young black men (Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Williams, 2015 ; Palmer, 2023). These issues shall be further explored in the following chapters. It is notable that the knife crime literature also involves a lack of attention to the role of the state in facilitating the harsh socio-economic reality facing the demographic most at risk of committing knife crime, namely poorer younger males. Whilst, in Chapter 1, a growing research body of literature was identified which underlines the importance of economic factors and their explanatory potential in relation to knife crime (examples include Williams and Squires, 2021; Harding, 2020b; Pitts, 2023a; Pitts, 2023b; Pitts, 2008), there is scope for a much greater emphasis at government and policy level, which will be examined in the remainder of the thesis.

There is emerging research which reiterates the importance of economic structural factors and the role of the state in distracting from these issues (Williams, 2023; Pitts, 2023b; Hesketh and Robinson, 2023). In addition, literature has pointed to the importance of drug dealing in gangs and the growth of county lines, noting that the *"analysis of this interview data suggests that the intense recruitment of younger young people into competitive drug distribution networks, along with the robbery of mobile phones, provide lucrative incentives for criminal enterprises that increased the likelihood of knife carrying and knife violence in the everyday lives of young people"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 301). Overall, a range of research has considered the economic allure of these gangs and county lines pathways (some examples include; Harding, 2020b; Pitts, 2023b; Hesketh and Robinson, 2023; Maher and Williamson, Qasim, 2023a; Harding, 2023; Whittaker and Harvard, 2023).The explanatory potential insights of these key works shall be explored and expanded upon in the following chapter, when considering the significance of these issues.

Chapter 4: Economic Structural Barriers; the Role of the State in their Development and Obscurement, and the Economic Allure of Gangs and County Lines in Response

4.0: Chapter Overview

This chapter seeks to further our understanding of the political economy of the act of knife crime. Building upon previous chapters it will explore how economic factors can act as structural barriers to economic self-sufficiency and survival, whilst considering the role of the state therein. The chapter will explain how gangs and county lines may offer viable economic options for some youth facing a harsh economic reality in the UK. The chapter will also consider how the state has arguably diverted attention from its own role through driving a knife crime moral panic around youth. The meaning of economic self-sufficiency will be considered, identifying how economic cultural goals of success may be interpreted by younger men within economically deprived areas. This may involve a process of achieving economic self-sufficiency through a move from poverty on one end of a spectrum towards wealth attainment and social mobility at the other end (section 4.1). An exploration of how economic factors can act as structural barriers to economic sufficiency and survival and consideration of the state's role will follow (section 4.2).

This chapter proceeds to suggest that one possible interpretation and reaction to these structural barriers for some young men is the taking of illegitimate opportunities afforded in the knife crime environment. Consequently, this section explores the relationship between economic structural barriers and examples of selected knife crime pathways (section 4.3). It considers how county lines and gangs can be seen as providing alluring financial opportunities. It must be underlined that the vast majority of economically deprived youth do not react to structural barriers in such a manner. Knife crime involves a much smaller number of young people than that suggested by the government and the associated moral panic. The explanations behind those young men involved in knife crime, lie in a combination of increased exposure to offending and victimisation risk factors and inversely a decreased exposure to protective factors. Overall, this discussion seeks to demonstrate that the difficult economic circumstances in this country may have contributed to some young men considering gangs, county lines and violence as a means attaining economic survival. Although it is by no means inevitable that young men will join a gang, this chapter illustrates how this pathway may be seen as a viable choice for some young men. Even those young men that do join gangs often do so from limited options, and/or in some cases through degrees of coercion.

4.1: Youth Perceptions of Economic Self-Sufficiency and Cultural Goals of Success

There are many socio-economic issues facing the United Kingdom which affect young men, such as poverty, inequality, cost of living increases and social immobility which have increased in recent times (Marsden, 2023). At the start of 2022, the United Kingdom's economy witnessed some recovery from the effects of the global pandemic. However, other political events including global conflict, and global warming (Scott, 2024) have adversely affected the global economy (National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2022; House of Commons, 2023b; House of Commons, 2024b). The United Kingdom is undergoing a cost-of-living crisis where basic necessities such as food, shelter, gas and electricity are becoming increasingly unaffordable due to inflation and decreasing real wages (House of Commons, 2023b; House of Commons 2024a; House of Commons, 2024b; Joseph Rowntree, 2024). Consequently, challenges in obtaining economic self-sufficiency and social mobility in the United Kingdom have increased (Rainsford and Wambach, 2021). Economic self-sufficiency and achieving the cultural goals of success are becoming increasingly difficult for some younger men from poorer backgrounds (ibid). These recent developments follow in the wake of a neo-liberal political economy in recent decades, resulting in the reduction of jobs and increased austerity measures affecting young working-class men.

In light of these issues, it is necessary to discuss the interpretations of economic self-sufficiency and the cultural goals of success. Specifically, it is apt to consider how they are interpreted and understood by younger men. The concept of economic self-sufficiency has been predominantly explored in contemporary international research (Tosun et al, 2019). Within this field there have been various interpretations resulting in difficulties in defining the term (Leibson, 2005). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines the concept as the *"extent of participation in the economy and society and how well individuals are able to get through daily life on their own"* (OECD, 2007, p. 21). Alternatively, it has been described as *"a situation in which a person is economically independent in the sense of not relying on financial support from their family or the welfare system"* (Warmuth et al, 2015, p. 5).

It is important to understand perceptions of young people of economic self-sufficiency, since this informs their attitudes towards attaining it (Tosun et al, 2019). A collaborative research project funded through the European Commission from February 2014 to January 2018 - *"Cultural Pathways to Economic Self-Sufficiency and Entrepreneurship in Europe"* (CUPESSE) examined the economic conditions of young people in various countries (including the United Kingdom) across Europe, looking at perceptions of education and employment (Tosun et al, 2018). It was found that young adults were facing increasing challenges not experienced by the previous generation (O'Reilly et al, 2015). Examples include difficulties in obtaining

economic self-sufficiency including problems in moving from full-time education to employment (ibid).

In terms of the findings of the CUPESSE project, Tosun et al, 2019 put forward key observations from the data. The findings compared young people's perceptions of economic self-sufficiency, and their economic position and attitudes compared to that of their parents, to identify the presence of intergenerational variations. In terms of indicators of economic self-sufficiency, income independence of the young adults refers to the extent a person is able produce their income through employment or self-employment (Tosun et al, 2019). However, merely being economically independent does not constitute an acceptable economic state of living. For example, the second focus was on the housing situations of the young adults, namely whether the respondents were living with parents/family, or on their own.

The third focus was on the respondent's self-assessed economic conditions which looked at whether they were able to afford a suitable standard of living such as being able to pay for bills, including housing; additional components such as affording to pay for hobbies and ability to save money were also considered (ibid). Finally, the study examined the notion of financial satisfaction which looked at the respondent's perception of their quality of life and their view about their financial situation. Younger adults across Europe tend to be less satisfied with their economic conditions in comparison to their parents in terms of affording basic needs and 'extras'. This pattern varies in terms of its prominence across the studied countries in Europe but notably, there were no instances where the younger adults were more satisfied with their financial position in comparison to their parents (Tosun et al, 2019).

Further studies include the UK youth economic perception survey conducted by the Prince's Trust and NatWest's Youth index (The Prince's Trust, 2023; The Prince's Trust., 2024). Considering their two most recent surveys, the findings revealed that young people are facing difficult challenges from the current cost of living crisis which have led to a reduction in their confidence and levels of happiness (ibid). In terms of the economic goals, it was found that financial stability was considered significant in order to attain a successful future. This was considered as relevant to maintaining good mental health, having a family, owning a home, securing a job (ibid). The role of financial stability was deemed to be important in facilitating positive mental health and a sense of purpose (ibid).

An additional UK survey of 16- to 25-year-olds and their parents (UK Youth, 2023) has also observed that there are fundamental fears concerning the economic ramifications of the cost-of-living crisis upon obtaining employment and maintaining good mental health. Indeed, due to the difficult and harsh economic reality, the economic aspirations of young people appeared to be currently more focused on economic sufficiency in itself, rather than the pursuit of

materialism. As this survey reiterated there were regularly expressed concerns about heating homes and eating regularly (UK Youth, 2023).

In light of the analysis above, it can be argued that economic self-sufficiency in the United Kingdom for younger people can be understood through certain characteristics such as financial independence from family and the state (although this does not necessarily imply an acceptable standard of living). Nevertheless, it can be appreciated that these aforementioned characteristics are recognised as part of economic self-sufficiency (e.g., Tosun et al, 2019; OECD, 2007; Warmuth et al, 2015). In the context of cultural goals of success, achieving economic self-sufficiency arguably constitutes a preliminary economic cultural goal of success. However, economic goals extend beyond this in terms of seeking an improved quality of life where there is financial satisfaction and an ability to afford hobbies, long-term financial stability and security (The Prince's Trust, 2023; Tosun et al, 2019). When defining the economic cultural goals of success, these can be further understood through considering economic capital and social capital. Whereas economic capital constitutes money, assets, and income, social capital refers to the network or relationships that the individual possesses (such as friends and business relationships (Roßteutscher, 2010). These examples are illustrative of the fact that the presence of certain social capital is related to the economic capital accrued by the individual, and together these contribute to the pursuit of financial aims.

Examples of economic cultural goals consisting of both economical capital and social capital can include economic self-sufficiency, careers, home ownership and social mobility. On the other hand, there are prevalent non-economic goals, otherwise labelled social cultural goals of success that refer to the pursuit of status, family and relationships (Roßteutscher, 2010). Nevertheless, when considering the cultural goals of success, it has been argued that living in materialistic cultures contributes toward the growth of economic goals and aspirations (Merton, 1938, Messner and Rosenfeld, 2006). In this regard, it has been contended that the UK provides an example of a Westernised materialistic culture (Unanue et al, 2014). However, the analysis above demonstrates that currently the economic perceptions of young people in the UK appear to be more focused upon long-term financial stability through employment (The Prince's Trust, 2023; Tosun et al, 2019) rather than the pursuit of materialism. Therefore, the idea of economic success for younger people in the state can also be construed as achieving long term financial security and stability through meeting the means of self-sufficiency.

The above brings us to a consideration of traditional and contemporary advocates of *anomie*, such as institutional *anomie* theory which have pointed to the emergence of criminal subcultures in societies where there are unregulated goals and lack of legitimate means to achieving the economic cultural goals of success (e.g., Merton, 1938; Rosenfeld and Messner,

2006; see further Inderbitzin et al, 2014 and 2019).These theorists are arguably ever more relevant, given the above discussions are indicative that in the United Kingdom, the economic cultural goals of success have been restricted to the mere attainment of economic self-sufficiency and achieving financial security, i.e., economic self- sufficiency, rather than pursuit of unnecessary material ambitions.

It is now necessary to consider the structural barriers to achieving economic survival and self-sufficiency, which may be interpreted by some young men and boys, in ways that can lead to knife crime pathways. Additionally, there is a need to recognise the role of the state in creating and exacerbating the structural barriers identified and in doing so, the shifting of accountability onto economically deprived communities for their own socioeconomic disadvantages.

4.2: The Structural Barriers to Economic Survival and the Role of the State in their Development

In recent years the structural barriers to economic self-sufficiency in the UK have arguably been raised (see section 4.1 for range of contemporary socioeconomic challenges and issues). Additionally, such issues have been compounded by the backdrop of economic and social problems due to its policies of austerity originating from the effects of the 2008 economic crisis (Marsden, 2023). This global financial crisis culminated in severe economic repercussions. The incoming Conservative coalition government was faced with increased debt of £500 billion and in response began to implement austerity measures (Williams and Squires, 2021). The government attempted to claim that *"we're all in this together*" (Brady and Dugan, 2012), in which there was an attempt to manufacture public consent and support on the necessity of cuts to ensure the future prosperity of Britain. Yet, the cuts clearly demonstrated the antithesis of unity as they impacted most severely on the poorest in society.

The incoming Conservative coalition government sought to tackle public debt through introducing reductions in public spending and reforms to the welfare state (Stanley, 2014); whilst not increasing taxes (Forkert, 2017, p. 2). From 2010 to 2012 when the era of austerity began, welfare reforms were introduced through the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which introduced cuts to welfare payments and public spending (Stanley, 2014) which significantly affected poorer young people. For instance, youth services and schools faced significant cuts. Between 2010 to 2016, youth services faced cuts of £387 million culminating in the closure of 603 youth centres (Unison, 2016) and youth service budgets of local authorities between 2011 to 2017 faced cuts of £750 million (YMCA, 2018).

Further controversial austerity policies included introduction of the 'Bedroom tax' (Forkert, 2017, p. 2) and 'Workfare' (Gibb, 2015). Firstly, the Bedroom tax consisted of tenants obtaining a reduced housing benefit payment of up to 25% due to unoccupied bedrooms (Gibbs, 2015,

pp. 148-158), contributing towards financial difficulties for those who are already disadvantaged (Gibb, 2015; Moffatt et al, 2016). Secondly, Workfare consisted of the introduction of mandatory work activities leading to the normalisation of unstable employment opportunities such as zero-hour contracts through benefit sanctions (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). The overall shift towards privatisation (ibid) has arguably contributed towards a shift towards less secure jobs in the public sector and the increase in zero-hour contracts (Heyes, 2013). Overall, it has been argued that the culmination of these measures has contributed to a substantial growth in inequality driving more people into poverty (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Crucially, the combined effects of these measures have arguably had a disproportionate effect upon the poorest in society (Forkert, 2017, p. 2; Hastings et al, 2015).

In the discussion of the following structural barriers, for the purposes of this research the following position is adopted: *"structural impediments or obstacles which exist for whole classes of people who wish to attain wealth using legitimate means. For those in lower classes who share the cultural goals for success but have limited means to attain them, lack of education and job opportunities create a strain towards anomie, which may translate into deviance"* (Inderbitzin et al 2014 Reproduced in Sage 2017, Chapter 4 on Anomie). The key structural barriers in England and Wales consist of the following selected examples which shall be discussed in turn namely economic deprivation/poverty, inequality, social immobility, all of which are affected by lack of suitable educational and/or employment opportunities. These factors are selected on the basis that they may present barriers to economic self-sufficiency, possible reactions to these barriers by some younger males may have the capacity to lead to knife crime offending. It should be recognised that the selected examples constitute a non-exhaustive list since it is not feasible nor practical to put forward an exhaustive selection of factors.

Poverty and economic deprivation in the United Kingdom: Poverty can be explained in two different ways. Firstly, the notion of absolute poverty refers to the absolute minimum a person requires in terms of meeting their basic needs. The United Nations defines it as *"a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information"* (United Nations, 2019). Therefore, absolute poverty is influenced by both income and access to social services. On the other hand, relative poverty is a consideration where the poorest in society are compared to the other groups of people in the society (ibid). Nevertheless, it is appreciated that there is no universally accepted definition of poverty (ibid).

In the United Kingdom, it was earlier identified that there have been a range of contemporary events (see section 4.1 paragraph one), contributing towards a significant increase in food

and energy prices, which has had the effect of increasing material deprivation and the number of those in absolute poverty. In relation to material deprivation, *"A household is materially deprived if they cannot access key goods or services. The rising prices of essentials means more families will not be able to afford things like energy and food"* (House of Commons, 2022b). Low-income households are at a greater risk of material deprivation since they spend a greater proportion of their income upon these areas (House of Commons, 2022b; House of Commons, 2024a).

In relation to the contemporary scale of poverty in the United Kingdom, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2024) observed that at least 1 in 5 adults and 3 in 10 children are living in poverty. Whilst overall poverty rates have remained stable from 2004/05 to present time, there have been significant variations for different groups since the 1990s (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023). For example, it has been argued that there has been an apparent reduction in overall poverty between the years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 (ibid), including percentages of children, working-age adults and pensioners. This is misleading however, since, throughout the coronavirus pandemic, income support measures were introduced (ibid). Therefore, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests that this reduction is due to the introduction of the furlough scheme, and temporary increase in Universal Credit which have lowered the line of relative poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2021), albeit temporarily. Although, even here, it has been recognised that the reversal in universal credit increase has probably nullified this decrease for the year 2021/22 (ibid).

Notably, poverty is not distributed equally across the UK since there is variation between areas (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2024). Indeed, in this study, England had a poverty rate of 22% and Wales a 23% rate. Further within England, the capital London has the highest rate of poverty in the country at 27% (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022). Considering long term poverty trends, poverty has arguably decreased since the 1990s for children, pensioners, and working-age parents. Despite this, it has increased for working-age adults without dependent children (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024) as supported by the government's own report (House of Commons, 2024a).

Recent data demonstrates that child poverty is still an important issue as currently nearly one in three children in the United Kingdom are living in relative poverty (31%) (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022, p. 10). Furthermore, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation predict there are negative prospects for future poverty rates due to the difficult economic situation in the United Kingdom based on key drivers being employment, earnings, benefits, housing costs and inflation (ibid). Therefore, it is predicted that relative child poverty returns to its upward trajectory throughout the cost-of-living crisis and will reach a peak in 2027/28 reaching its

highest rate since the 1990s (House of Commons, 2023c). Expanding upon child poverty, it is further contended that larger families with three or more children are facing higher rates of poverty due to child welfare benefit policies, such as the controversial two child limit with caps child benefits for only the first two children (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024).

Figure 4.1: Poverty trends for selected groups in the population (Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024)

[Image redacted, third party material]

In addition, the House of Commons publishes an annual report on the measurement of poverty in the United Kingdom (see House of Commons 2024a, House of Commons 2023c and House of Commons, 2022b). In terms of the paper's definition of poverty, this is observed through measuring the disposable household income. The two measures are 'those who live in relative low income' and 'those who live in absolute low income'. *"People in relative low income – living in households with income below 60% of the median in that year" "people in absolute low income – living in households with income below 60% of (inflation-adjusted) median income in same base year, usually 2010/11"* (House of Commons, 2022b). In economic terms, this provides an indication of the extent to which a household has disposable income. Relative low income and absolute low income are both currently forecasted to increase in the following years due to decrease in real wages and significant increases in inflation (House of Commons, 2023c). Currently, 1 in 6 people in the UK fall under relatively low in income, although this rises to 1 in 5 people after housing costs are considered (House of Commons, 2024a). Figures 4.2 and 4.3 demonstrates that whilst relative low income and absolute low income both fell during the pandemic, it is forecasted to increase.

Figure 4.2: Percentage of people in relative low income in the UK in 2022/2023 (Source: House of Commons, 2024a)

[Image redacted, third party material]

Figure 4.3: Percentage of people in absolute low income in the UK in 2022/2023 (Source: House of Commons, 2024a)

[Image redacted, third party material]

Additionally, in terms of who poverty affects, there is a need to recognise that certain ethnic minorities face disproportionate levels of poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024; House of Commons, 2024a), with it being highest in Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese and Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British (ibid), in contrast, to the white demographic facing the lowest

(ibid). Overall, those from ethnic minorities face twice the likelihood of being in poverty than their white counterparts (House of Commons, 2024a).

Importantly, it has been conceded that there may be other measures of poverty which are more suitable besides income measures. For instance, the Social Metrics Commission (SMC) has put forward an alternative measure which looks at the extent to which one's income meets their needs. It has been argued that this measure would be more accurate since it would incorporate the relevance of savings, disability benefits and other factors (House of Commons, 2023c).

UK poverty studies have shed some light on the reasons for people entering poverty and remaining in poverty in the United Kingdom (House of Commons, 2022b).[3] The Department for Work and Pensions (2014) study looked at factors which made it difficult for families to escape poverty, as well as factors which increased the likelihood of children remaining in poverty. In this review, it was found that the most significant factors which prevent families leaving poverty relate to low parental income (ibid). In addition to this, low educational attainment for children has been recognised as a key factor for children remaining in poverty as they become adults (DWP, 2014).

Considering how the government is tackling poverty, in 2017 the government published a policy paper (DWP, 2017) which sought to effectively track, on a yearly basis, the indicators of the 'disadvantages' that children and families face (House of Commons, 2024a). There were six parental indictor categories grouped as general disadvantages for families: parental worklessness, parental conflict, poor parental mental health, drug and alcohol dependency, debt problems and homelessness (ibid). Three indicator categories then focus upon the disadvantages that affect the future results for children and younger people in terms of early years, educational attainment and youth employment. These findings align with insights from the Resolution Foundation, both of whom also produced reports on this issue (Resolution and Foundation, 2021). Notably, in the most recent government report there appears to be some recognition of key factors which contributed towards entering poverty such as decrease in earnings, increasing housing costs and fall in benefits (House of Commons, 2024a).

However, despite the supposed recognition of these disadvantages and factors, this section has also highlighted various state actions which have exacerbated the prevalence of these

[3] Examples include; (DWP, *An evidence review of the drivers of child poverty for families in poverty now and for poor children growing up to be poor adults*, January 2014. ,Work and Pensions Committee, Children in poverty: Measurement and targets, Third Report of Session 2021–22, 22 September 2021 ,Conor D'Arcy and David Finch, The Great Escape? Low pay and progression in the UK's labour market, Resolution Foundation report for the Social Mobility Commission, October 2017 ,DWP, Child poverty transitions: exploring the routes into and out of poverty 2009 to 2012, June 2015 ,ONS, Poverty and employment transitions in the UK and EU: 2007- 2012, March 2015).

socioeconomic challenges for the most economically deprived that are on welfare, (see earlier discussion on workfare, bedroom tax which contributed towards exacerbating the financial challenges) (Gibb, 2015; Moffatt et al, 2016), pushing more people into poverty (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024). Overall, the economically deprived that are on benefits are facing increasing challenges in escaping poverty due the state's actions in relation to benefits in combination with increased cost of living (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024, p 90).

In addition, there appears to be lack of policy awareness with regards to the role of intergenerational transmission of poverty. The socioeconomic position of the family unit is paramount in its influences and impact upon the present and future economic self-sufficiency of children due to transmission of both economic and social capital. This is supported by the fact that social psychology literature shows intergenerational transmission of poverty affects beliefs, values and behaviours (Tosun et al 2018). Indeed, it has also been appreciated that poverty in the form of social and economic capital can be intergenerationally transmitted, meaning that poverty can move from one generation to another (ibid). This is due, in part, to the social capital of the family impacting on that of the children. In this respect, empirical studies have demonstrated that cultural capital can pass from parents to children (Kraaykamp and Van Eijck, 2010). Furthermore, Tosun et al (2018) argue that the socioeconomic status of parents provides a starting basis for the career of the younger generation, since the career and educational ambitions of parents are increasingly likely to have an impact on the careers of children (Busemeyer and Jensen, 2012). This is by no means a determinist argument, as some working-class children do well in school and may go on to university. However, many of these children are the first in their family to do so and there remain significant educational and employment barriers, for those living in poorer areas, that may influence cultural intergenerational transmission. Consequently, there needs to be an awareness of actions of the state in perpetuating poverty, imposing challenges to breaking the cycle of poverty via intergenerational transmission.

Unemployment: It has been argued that youth unemployment across Europe has significantly increased post the 2008 recession, as demonstrated through contemporary research (e.g., O'Reilly et al. 2015; Tosun et al. 2014, 2016, 2017; Tosun 2017). Youth unemployment remains a fundamental issue due to potential long-term unemployment (Dvouletý et al, 2018). Recent reports have indicated concerns with long term employment rates in the United Kingdom (i.e.., Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023 and 2024).

The relationship between poverty and unemployment is a concept which is clearly recognised in literature and policy. For example, in the UK there is an increased likelihood of people who

lived in families where no-one is working to continue remaining in poverty, in contrast to families who have at least one person who is working (House of Commons, 2023c; House of Commons, 2024a). Additionally, it is argued that explanations behind overrepresentation of ethnic minorities facing poverty are associated with higher unemployment rates (House of Commons, 2024a). Consequently, employment is an important factor to avoid poverty in the United Kingdom. However, it does not provide a guarantee of this since Figure 4.4 demonstrates that there is a recent increase in children in working families who are in relative poverty (House of Commons, 2023c; House of Commons 2024a).

This can be explained with the trend of national wages being out of line with the rate of increasing inflation (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023). Emphasising the point that merely being employed does not prevent a family from falling into relative poverty in the United Kingdom. Further supported by Figure 4.5 which demonstrates that the number of working adults in relative poverty has increased in recent years. This demonstrates therefore that employment in itself is insufficient to attain economic self-sufficiency, rather suitable employment is needed which provides sufficient resources to avoid falling into poverty in the United Kingdom. This shall be further explored in the following paragraphs.

Figure 4.4: Children in relative poverty and working status of family (Source: House of Commons, 2024a)

[Image redacted, third party material]

Figure 4.5: Working adults in relative poverty and working status of family (Source: House of Commons, 2024a)

[Image redacted, third party material]

When exploring the issue of unemployment, it has been further contended that there are *"signs of the labour market weakening, through falling vacancies and rising unemployment"* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024, p. 75). The issue of unemployment is illustrative and connected to a further structural barrier concerning the **lack of suitable higher educational and employment opportunities for younger people (lack of legitimate means).** For instance, "*data from the Labour Force Survey suggests that this is not primarily being driven by people losing their job (as the size of the workforce has remained broadly stable) but rather people who start looking for work being unable to find it, as the number of vacancies has fallen dramatically."* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024, p. 81).

Figure 4.6: Increasing Unemployment Rate and Decreasing Vacancies 2022/23 (Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024)

[Image redacted, third party material]

Rises in inflation are also relevant to the lack of job vacancies. It is contended that businesses are reducing recruitment due to soaring inflation. Additionally, there is a reduction in real earnings (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024, p. 84). Consequently, rising inflation has the dual effect of decreasing vacancies (see Figure 4.6) and real wages (see Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7: Decline in real wages between 2001 to 2023 (Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024)

[Image redacted, third party material]

Further to this issue, the composition of the UK labour market has been interpreted as showing an imbalance between many higher quality employment opportunities on one side of a spectrum and many lower quality employment opportunities on the other, indicating a lack of medium tier employment opportunities (Sissons, 2011). This employment imbalance has, in turn, led to increased competition for entry level professions which tend to be suitable for the younger demographic (Rainsford and Wambach 2021). Researchers have identified that a key issue in relation to this increased competition for entry level positions rests in the fact these opportunities are crucial to those from economically deprived backgrounds. This section of society is seeking to move on from poorer quality professions in order to achieve job security and economic growth in their pursuit of economic self-sufficiency and to escape from the cycle of poverty (Shildrick et al, 2012).

Furthermore, as noted above, key government policies have arguably contributed towards a challenging pathway for younger adults in transitioning from schooling towards employment and economic independence (Heinz, 2009). The issue of zero-hour contracts has resulted in younger adults becoming increasingly economically dependent upon their parents (Baranowska-Rataj et al 2016). This is due to the instability of employment opportunities for lower-skilled people, particularly younger males with limited qualifications.

Considering challenges relating to higher educational opportunities, in the United Kingdom the education system has an inherent focus upon facilitating a pathway to university education (Rainsford and Wambach, 2021). Arguably, this focus has come at the expense of youths who may be vocationally inclined. Apprenticeship opportunities have reduced (House of Commons, 2024e) coupled with the criticism that the existing schemes fail to provide suitable qualifications or training (Fuller and Unwin, 2016). Consequently, this thesis makes the argument that there is strain upon the availability of legitimate opportunities for younger people in the population, particularly those living in economically deprived areas. It is also of concern that there are gaps in attainment with regards to graduate outcomes between the most and

the least economically deprived (Office for Students, 2022; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024).

Due to a combination of these factors, the UK is witnessing a younger generation which is increasingly dependent upon their family for economic support (Swartz and O'Brien, 2009; Rainsford and Wambach 2021); evidenced by the increasing number of younger adults living with their parents (ONS, 2016). This trend is even evident in younger adults who have finished university and obtained employment; university graduates are increasingly returning to their family homes due to their financial income not being sufficient for economic independence (Stone et al, 2014). This clearly demonstrates that legitimate pathways such as higher education and initial entry level employment are not always effective in enabling youth to achieve economic independence.

Challenges in the School Services: The consequences of austerity with regards to school services should also be recognised. Austerity measures have resulted in several detrimental consequences affecting children and young people (Williams and Squires, 2021; Granoulhac, 2017, see relevant discussion in Chapter 2, § 2.1). If we consider the impact upon college students, the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was abolished which previously provided £30 weekly to college students from families with lower incomes. It is contended that these cuts had a profound effect upon black ethnic students already experiencing the highest rates of educational exclusions (Timpson, 2019). Consequently, these issues in education had the effect of reducing access to key legitimate economic pathways of education and, in turn, future employment.

It is contended that "*Poverty also can affect the prospects of children, who may fail to reach the same level of educational attainment as those from wealthier families. This in turn can make escape from poverty even harder when they become adults*" (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024, p. 18). Consequently, the relationship between low educational attainment and poverty is paramount since the most economically deprived children have significantly lower educational attainment than more economically advantaged students (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2017). It is contended that education has a pivotal role in providing long term opportunities for children. Yet, it is argued that many students are leaving school missing basic skills. Furthermore, qualifications are necessary in order to access employment (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024). In a recent government report low educational attainment *"was identified as the main driver that causes poor children to become poor adults"* (House of Commons, 2024a). Yet, this fails to address the fact that the government actions outlined above have exacerbated this issue.

This thesis recognises the significance of low educational attainment. Educational opportunities have been identified as an area of focus within crime prevention and knife crime prevention policies. A key issue for this thesis in relation to the accessibility of educational opportunities is the institutional racism within the education system which acts as a significant barrier to the educational attainment of young black men. Research has long identified the existence of racism in schooling (see Crozier, 2005; Department of Education and Science, 1985). Research on the educational gap between black and white students has indicated the prevalence of institutional racism across institutional settings (ibid; Palmer,2023). Yet historically, black youths have been depicted as responsible for their lower academic attainment (Department of Education and Science, 1985).

Palmer (2023) in their study found that black boys are significantly let down by the education system in the UK. Key findings involved perceptions that teachers adhered to racist stereotypes of black youth and endorsed excessive exclusions (Palmer, 2023). Indeed, research indicates that: *"Black and mixed ethnicity pupils had the highest rates of both temporary and permanent exclusions, with black Caribbean pupils permanently excluded at nearly 3 times the rate of white British pupils"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 215).

Historically the excessive exclusion of black boys in schooling has long been identified as an example of racist practice. This is key issue since in earlier chapters it was observed that school exclusion is a risk factor for gang membership (Dempsey, 2021) and also for knife crime offending (Haylock et al, 2020). Furthermore, school exclusion can have significant repercussion upon mental health of children such as lower self-esteem and depression (Ford et al, 2017). Research with young black men has revealed that their experiences of schooling had not provided key life skills which had, in turn, limited their future employment prospects (Robin, 1992). Consequently, it is argued that racism within the education system must be recognised when considering barriers to educational attainment in schooling.

Inequality and social immobility: there are prominent issues concerning income, education inequalities and social immobility. For example, it has been argued that the recent coronavirus pandemic has increased educational inequalities for those who are most disadvantaged (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022), the move to remote learning and the disparity in technology available to children in poorer backgrounds had a significant impact. In discussing the effects of socio-economic inequality upon the individual, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) assert that inequality creates a plethora of problems in society. Specifically, it refers to 11 health and social problems including physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community, violence, teenage pregnancies and child well-being. These problems become significantly worse when there are increased

levels of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2011). The earlier discussed policies of austerity have had the effect of contributing towards the growth in inequality (Cooper and Whyte, 2017).

It is also apparent that wealth inequality is increasing across social classes in the United Kingdom (Marsden, 2023). In support, it has been observed that the UK has one of the highest income inequalities in the world (Rainsford and Wambach 2021). Further an uncertain future is predicted with regards to inequality since it is argued that current tax and benefit policies appear to benefit higher income demographics of the population (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024).

Inequality is problematic for many reasons since it acts as a barrier for social mobility to be achieved and also displaces many at the bottom of the social class hierarchy. This has been recently compounded through an increased pressure on social services due to increased demand and reduced spending on these services in the era of austerity (Marsden, 2023). Researchers have also argued wealth inequality can also be attributed to the liberal welfare state regime due to its effect of creating wealth dependency through focus upon a 'stable' two parent family unit (Rainsford and Wambach 2021). Consequently, it has been argued that the combination of challenges around achieving economic self-sufficiency has contributed towards a decline in upwards social mobility and an increase in downward social mobility for younger people, in contrast to the earlier generations in the United Kingdom (Bukodi et al, 2015). There is a significant overrepresentation of ethnic minorities facing economic deprivation, poverty, child poverty inequality and unemployment (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024; House of Commons, 2024a). Additionally, this affects a range of different ethnic minorities, e.g., Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Black African amongst others (ibid). Furthermore, it is argued that the state's reductions in welfare and benefit spending have disproportionately affected ethnic minorities.

To date, there has been only limited recognition of the higher levels of socioeconomic issues including poverty, unemployment, low school attainment and living in higher crime neighbourhoods (Palmer 2023). There is no doubt that the scale of these problems is exacerbated by racism, having a particularly pernicious effect on young black men (Palmer and Pitts, 2006), which is explored further in section 4.3).

How has the State diverted attention from their responsibility for increases in Structural Barriers to Economic Survival?

In the context of knife crime, it is contended that the state has underplayed the significance of the structural factors identified above. A key issue concerns the demonisation of ethnic groups in order to distract from the significant contribution played by state contribution to growth in economic structural barriers to self-sufficiency. For instance, in previous iterations of political

economy of reactions explored in Chapters 1 and 2 it was recognised that migrant groups more generally and black immigrants in particular, have historically been demonised and depicted as being responsible for economic decline and growth in hardship (Gilroy, 1987). This historical state practice continues into contemporary times (Williams, 2023) fuelled by the increase in authoritarian populism which continues to demonise ethnic minorities and migrants blaming them for a range of social problems in the United Kingdom.

Building upon the analysis from Chapter 1, it was demonstrated that throughout the latter stages of the 20th century and the 21st century, certain street crimes and behaviours became increasingly racialised, such as mugging, gang involvement (see discussion in Chapter 3 on race-gang Nexus) and recently knife crime. It is contended that *"mainstream media and state agents play a key role in instituting representations of black criminality and, specifically, the contemporary 'black gang, gun and knife crime' consensus"* (Malik and Nwonka, 2017, p. 424). Nonetheless, it should be recognised that this construction is not unique to the United Kingdom, rather similar depictions have occurred in the USA where urban violence and gang involvement have long been associated with black communities, particularly young black men (Miller, 2008). Indeed, the racialisation of street crime, extends to other ethnic demographics in the population. Young British Pakistani Muslim Men have also been depicted as having an increased involvement with gang violence and drug involvement (Qasim, 2018; Qasim, 2023a). This can be linked to intersectionality where aspects of race and religion are implicated in a rise in Islamophobia more broadly (Rehman and Hanley, 2023).

The racialisation of crime as a distraction tactic is not unique to contemporary times, rather it is demonstrative of a continued pattern by the state. For example, *"In Policing the Crisis (1978) Stuart Hall and his colleagues described how urban violence, coded as 'black' via the mugging label, obscured the wider socio-economic conditions, poverty, disadvantage and racialised exclusion which were themselves the underlying causes of the violence" (*Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 220).

Furthermore, it is argued that the over policing and racialisation of knife crime coincides with the financial crisis in 2008 and subsequent austerity measures which had the effect of *"threatening to expose the deep contradictions of neoliberal corporate capitalism"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 211). In turn, subsequent welfare cuts were justified on the basis that the economically deprived needed to build their own work ethic rather than relying upon the welfare state (Squires, 2016). It was further argued that the economic polices being implemented were indicative of self-fulfilling prophecy which would lead to more authoritarian crime prevention policy measures (Farrell and Hay, 2010).

This state diversion is further illustrated by their depiction of the riots in 2011.The London Metropolitan police's killing of Mark Duggan on the 4th August 2011 provoked outrage. A protest march outside Tottenham police station by Mark Duggan's friends and relatives included a request to speak to senior police officers (Pitts, 2023b). In response, to this the police were deployed with riot shields. Following from this response, riots erupted throughout the country, *"three days of riots accompanied by arson and looting occurred in several cities with upwards of 15,000 young people involved, some £300 million in property damages and five deaths"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 217).

In response, the state denied that these riots were associated with frustration over poverty and over-policing of ethnic minorities, but rather they were illustrative of a violent culture (Williams and Squires, 2021). In particular David Cameron quickly placed the responsibility for the violence with gangs and gang culture (ibid). Cameron depicted criminality amongst the working class as a consequence of the dependence facilitated by the welfare state which encouraged criminality (Pitts, 2023b). When describing the causes of the riots Cameron used many controversial and contentious characterisations in his speech, e.g., *"Children without fathers", "schools without discipline", "reward without effort" and "crime without punishment*" (Stratton, 2011).

In support, politicians such as Iain Duncan Smith pointed towards gangs and the breakdown of the family unit as underlying causes of the riots. Consequently, the overall position of the government was that it was *"orchestrated by violent youth gangs whose members were drawn from the progeny of fatherless families or unmarried parents"* (Pitts, 2023b, p. 497). The Justice Secretary of time, Kenneth Clarke falsely asserted that 75% of those involved had criminal records and represented a feral underclass (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023, p. 245). The media also played a pivotal role in condemning young people (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023) and placing responsibility upon their shoulders for the riots (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023) with terms of 'thugs, hoodies and gangs' continuously being reported (ibid). It is contended that *"the media was swift in its finger-pointing and condemnation of disenfranchised young people in gangs sweeping the countries' cities and it was a notion that propagated government discourse at the time" (*Hesketh and Robinson, 2023, p. 244).

Public perception fuelled by government and media rhetoric on the causes of the riots lent towards notions of poor parenting practices and the prevalence of criminality (Lewis et al, 2011a; Lewis et al, 2011b). Consequently, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, § 1.0, the media plays a pivotal role in enabling the state to reinforce its own narratives (Critcher 2006). Parallels can be drawn with the riots in 1981 by young black men protesting against discriminatory policing against their communities. In response, these riots were similarly

characterised by the state as indicative of a violent culture, depicted by the state, as representing black criminality (see relevant works for expansive discussion on these riots, i.e., Gilroy, 2013; Solomos, 2011; Williams and Squires, 2021).

In response to this state characterisation of the riots in 2011, research studies have been conducted in the pursuit of analysing explanations behind its occurrence (Lewis et al, 2011b; Croydon ILRP, 2012). Much of this research based on interviews with those participating put forward explanations such public resentment over discriminatory use of stop and search and perceived harassment by the police. However, further reasons included concerns regarding poverty and government policies exacerbating this (ibid). Furthermore, in Croydon South London, one of the key areas for the riots, an independent review was conducted to explore the causes. This pointed towards a lack of opportunities, unemployment, poverty and prevalence of the problematic use of stop and search (Croydon ILRP, 2012) in the area. Consequently, it can be said that the riots arose as a result of concerns over authoritarian discriminatory policing and economic deprivation (Williams and Squires, 2021). Arguably illustrative of public frustration with the dire economic reality as a result of successive state policies.

At a national scale, in response to the state's characterisation of the riots heavily involving gangs, it was estimated that only 8% of the those involved in the riots were clearly associated with gangs (Lewis et al, 2011b). Further research has evidenced that the state's attempt to lay responsibility upon gangs for the riots, involved a highly inaccurate characterisation (Hallsworth and Brotherton, 2011).

The state response to the rioters involved increased use of custodial sentences largely imposed upon youth (Lightowlers and Quirk, 2015). Furthermore, the following months witnessed the introduction of the Ending Gang and Youth Violence Strategy (HM Government/Home Office, 2011, see discussion in Chapter 5 on this policy). At the time, the then Prime Minister David Cameron focused national policy upon the prevention of gangs and the state's perception of gang culture (Densley, 2013; Hesketh and Robinson, 2023). Densley puts forward the assertion that the government presented gangs as the underlying cause for the riots in order to avoid attracting responsibility for their own actions in creating the economic conditions that arguably fuelled them (Densley, 2013). Consequently, the state's narrative took effect, and both the media and the public accepted it (ibid).

The analysis demonstrates that the state continually demonise youth, particularly ethnic minority youths, for criminality in order to absolve themselves of responsibility for the growth of underlying causes. The recent knife crime phenomenon provides a further example of this practice. The narrative involves a racialised depiction of knife crime offending placing blame

with black communities. A recent example of knife crime offending that quickly became racialised was the Southport Murders (relevant discussion on these murders in Chapter 1, § 1.0). Here within the immediate aftermath of the murders, misinformation by politicians, in mainstream and social media and through use of AI, provides a pertinent example of 'fake news' which quickly spread regarding the ethnicity and migrant status of the offender (Full Fact, 2024). The subsequent 'anti migration' far right riots are demonstrative of the continued racialisation of knife crime offending and more broadly the demonisation of migrants for the growth of structural barriers identified in section 4.2. This provides a pertinent example of the racialisation of knife crime.

William and Squires (2021, p. 203) point to how racist ideologies and the othering of demographics has transcended decades to remain prevalent:

"What is really interesting about racism as a set of ideas and political practices is that it is able to provide images of the other which are simple and unchanging and at the same time to adapt to changing social and political environment. Thus, contemporary racist ideas are able to maintain a link with the mystical values of classical racism and to adopt and to use cultural and political symbols that are part of contemporary society" (Solomos and Black, 1996, p. 210; Williams and Squires, 2021).

In Chapter 1, it was noted how the political economy of knife crime reaction had brought about the construction of a black urban underclass who fail to adhere to British cultural norms (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 18). Additionally, *"the phrase knife crime came to stand for a criminality that is distinctly depicted as involving the 'other', a threat stemming from outside of English civility"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 204). Furthermore, racist stereotyping and depiction of black culture as 'the problem' was used in an attempt to facilitate the spread of the media's coverage of street crime in order to disguise the racist connotations (Sveinsson, 2008). In this respect, Sveinsson argues that *"stating that black people have a criminal nature is not politically acceptable. Stating that black culture glorifies crime is. Yet both statements are saying the same thing: crime is endemic within the black population*" (Sveinsson, 2008, pp. 6-7).The effect of this characterisation is to attribute the offending to black culture and to shift accountability and responsibility to the black demographic (Gilroy, 2010). (See Chapter 1, § 1.0 for more expansive discussion on the state's moral panic on young people and in particular black male youth).

This thesis argues that the state has further perpetuated racist stereotypes in order to detract from underlying economic problems. For instance, Williams and Squires (2021) point towards the perpetuation of racist stereotypes such as *"gangsters, absent black fathers, dysfunctional families and hiphop music"* and *"drill music in police minds became the essential signifier of a*

lethal ethnicity" (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 204). A key example of how the state has racialised knife crime as a means to obfuscate from the growth of economic barriers is provided by their focus on music, particularly drill music, as a significant problem since 2021, on the basis that it promotes violence through lyrics (ibid).

However, the link between consumption of violent media and use of violence more generally has long been disputed, as evidence indicates there is no proven link between the two variables (ibid). For example, research has indicated that engaging with online violent content does not definitively cause violence to occur offline (Stuart, 2020a). Similarly, a five-year review of 549 drill songs between December 2013 and November 2018 and data of violent crime in London, observed that there was no evidence of causality between the drill music and incidence of violence (Kleinberg and McFarlane, 2020). An academic backlash arose in response to the assertion of a link between drill music and violence, through a public letter being published by *"49 Criminologists, social scientists and professional organisations"* who opposed the assertion (Fatsis, 2021).

For example, Williams and Squires (2021) and Fatsis (2019) have challenged the states' depiction of drill music, as a racist stereotype that associates younger black males (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 204) as dangerous offenders (Elliott-Cooper, 2021: pp. 156–158; Fatsis, 2019). Instead, it is contended that this sub-genre of rap provides an illustration of younger people giving a commentary of their lives. For some, it provides an art form method to communicate the challenges that they face, whilst also providing an avenue for potential rappers to have careers (Fatsis, 2019). Additionally, it is suggested that demonisation of this genre serves to divert attention from the underlying causes of serious violence. As such, the state focus on 'drill music' is a core component of moral panic, 'othering' black youths as criminal folk devils, whilst justifying draconian criminal justice polices against them.

Overall, this thesis contends that the state's racialisation of knife crime involves an attempt to divert attention from structural barriers to economic survival identified in section 4.2. The following section shall now analyse the explanatory potential of the identified economic structural barriers with regards to knife crime, shedding light upon the economic viability afforded by county lines and gangs.

4.3: The Relationship between Structural Barriers and Knife Crime Pathways, the Growth of Gangs and County Lines as Economic Alternatives for Survival

The previous section contended that the effects of austerity and the growth of economic structural barriers increased the marginalisation and social exclusion of those young men with the highest risk of facing violence. Previously discussed Government actions have led to the removal and/or lack of access to key safeguards such as education and employment (see

discussions in sections 4.2). This section explores the relevance of these structural barriers towards explaining the contemporary knife crime phenomenon. Within Chapter 3, § 3.1, there has already been an account of the nature, role, relevance and key debates with regards to gangs and county lines. Building upon this, this section revisits and develops some of the specific issues with gangs and county lines in relation to the opportunities they afford young men and boys.

County lines involves movement of Class A drugs between urban areas to more rural areas in the United Kingdom to an extent where there are numerous supply chains throughout the state (Harding, 2023, see earlier discussion in Chapter 3, § 3.1). County lines comprise the involvement of Urban Street Gangs (NCA, 2019) where organised crime networks have extended their drug dealing outside their urban locality to rural and coastal areas. The contemporary scale is of significant concern with identified deal lines mainly supplying cocaine and heroin (ibid), with London acting as the key location for exportation to other localities in the country (Blakeburn and Smith, 2020). Dealers tend to move and commute to different towns in order to facilitate the creation of new markets (Densley, 2013). With regards to the nature of involvement, in 2019, 91% of people were found to be male and the ages of those involved appeared to be on a declining trend (NCA, 2019).

County lines are increasingly being perceived as a 'effective business model' (ibid), where host towns possessing a regular customer base of drug users (Andell and Pitts, 2018), then expand to create further markets. Harding (2020b) has put forward different models to demonstrate the variance of differing states of evolution of local areas. "The Community Model, The Satellite-Hub Model, Market Consolidation and Expansion Model, Mark and Product Diversification Model" (Harding, 2023, p. 61). The shift in models is indicative of evolving businesses placing an emphasis upon the maximisation of facilitating financial gain (ibid). Within this evolution, there is a move from the mere commuting of drugs to the creation of 'localised dealing hubs' and, in turn, the hiring of 'user dealers' in further areas (Coomber and Moyle, 2014; Harding, 2020b; see further Harding 2023).

A significant area of concern is that county lines is extremely reliant upon the exploitation of younger people (Harding, 2020b; Harding, 2023), particularly to prepare and transfer drugs across supply lines. Indeed, the Home Office have recognised that gangs increasingly focus upon the recruitment of children who are perceived as vulnerable (Home Office, 2018c). The Home Office has also identified factors which are said to increase the vulnerability of the individual to exploitation through county lines. These factors include experiences of abuse, unsafe home environments, living in care, homelessness, economic hardship, associations with those with gang involvement, disabilities, mental health and substance abuse history

(Home Office, 2018c). Further research has identified the overrepresentation of children in care, becoming involved in county lines (Calouri et al, 2020). Calouri et al (2020) argue that care homes are failing to protect children that are being exploited by gangs in county lines networks. Overall, the issue of the exploitation of young people is of great concern; children are being groomed to carry drugs in order for the gangs to maximise profits in the county lines market (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023).

Within county lines there are key exploitative behaviours and practices such as debt bondage, cuckooing, gendered exploitation and financial exploitation (Harding, 2023). Young people within gangs can be robbed of drugs and money via staged robberies carried out by members in their gang in order to create a debt bondage. Consequently, the debt must be paid with interest and may require free labour, in turn, facilitating what can be described long term servitude to gangs (ibid, Kenway, 2021; Hesketh and Robinson, 2023). Additionally, it is argued that debt bondage is commonplace in county lines since it facilitates continued control of the young person to carry drugs for the gang to pay the debt (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023). Further practices include financial exploitation through use of bank accounts of young people in order to money launder the illicit financial proceeds (ATCM, 2018).

Cuckooing is a practice which involves the exploitation of someone else's home, normally affecting those who are increasingly vulnerable. Gangs utilise the property for drug storage and dealing (Harding, 2020b). There is also the gendered exploration of girls and young women carried out by men. Often involving, sexual violence and coercive control (Deuchar et al, 2018; Harding, 2023; Billinghurst and Factor, 2023; there is significant literature on the involvement of young girls in in county lines and their sexual abuse and exploitation (see e.g. Billinghurst and Factor, 2023). Overall, it is necessary to recognise that many of these exploitative practices are generally used in order to facilitate a more profitable business model (Robinson et al, 2018) This facilitates significantly higher profit margins through maintaining lower operational costs and increased generated income (Harding, 2023).

Despite the prevalence of exploitational practices, researchers have also identified the perceived benefits that young people construe from their own involvement in county lines. Accounts reveal that some young people perceived their involvement as providing *"adrenaline, brotherhood, excitement and financial gain"* (Harding, 2023, p. 68; Windle et al, 2020). A paucity of educational opportunities is further described as a key motivational factor for county lines involvement (Harding, 2023).

Notwithstanding this, Harding (2023) calls for a reframing of the narratives on the basis of exploitation and vulnerabilities in order to understand the victims of these practices. In light of their increased exposure to the range of exploitational practices discussed above. It is further

argued that there remain concerns about key structural factors and relevance with regards to *"the socioeconomic underpinnings of poverty, inequality, deprivation, neglected/disenfranchised neighbourhoods, de-industrialisation, dis-investment, budget cuts and endemic lack of hope and opportunity. These structural issues lie deep below the epidermis"* (Harding, 2023, p. 81). Consequently, contemporary research has indeed recognised the importance of key economic underlying causes and their relevance to the growth of county lines.

It is necessary to consider the role of the street gang and the subsequent evolution of their substantial involvement in the illicit drug market. As Chapter 3 noted, research carried out in Waltham Forest (Pitts 2007, 2008; Whittaker et al, 2018) has significant explanatory potential to examine the evolution of gangs in the same areas (Whittaker and Harvard 2023). Whilst Pitts (2008) identified the prevalence of youth gangs being a recent issue at the time, he also observed many engaged in other forms of criminality, such as street robbery, with only a few of the most dominant gangs engaging in the illicit drug market (see Chapter 3, § 3.1 for discussion on this issue).

However, a decade later it was observed that there had been an evolution of street gangs in Waltham Forest with a new focus on accruing finance through drugs. This observation has also been put forward by other research looking at different boroughs in London. For example, Storrod and Densley (2017) argued that accruing money was a significant motivational factor for gang involvement. In addition, various researchers have identified the role of violence and its usage to protect financial interests and ensure compliance (Pitts, 2008). Storrod and Densley (2017) observed that participants viewed money as a crucial motivation for gang membership, and consequently violence was utilised in order to safeguard and maintain interests in the drugs trade. Researchers have also observed that violence was regarded as a key method to facilitate and protect drug activity and territories (Whittaker and Harvard, 2023).

The financial motivation for gang membership also needs to be contextualised within an awareness of the growth of difficult economic circumstances. For instance, the historical issue of gangs in Glasgow in Scotland has been well documented with its regards to the socioeconomic status of those involved. For instance, Patrick's (1973) study on Glasgow gangs brought into focus poverty, unemployment and poor housing conditions that gang members encountered on a consistent basis, (see earlier discussion in Chapter 3 on gang violence in Scotland).

It is further asserted that the prevalence of gangs constitutes a symptom of broader socioeconomic issues such as quality of the education framework, limited legitimate

opportunities, sudden evolutions of the employment market, as well as the growth of the drugs trade (Pitts, 2023a). It is contended that the economy of the drug markets offered an escape since it acted as a *"pool of availability"* into which *"more and more young people were prepared to dive*" (ibid, p. 145). Indeed, Harding (2020b, p. 270) expressly argues that what makes county lines so distinct is existence of supply lines across the UK, offering attractive opportunities of 'employment' for younger people without any work experience.

Whittaker and Harvard (2023) further advocate that the economic motivation to join gangs in London became increasingly prominent due to the austerity policies. In their study, they point out that Waltham Forest and other London boroughs, faced significant cuts in funding from the government, culminating in limited employment opportunities and increasing economic deprivation (Whittaker and Harvard, 2023). In response to these issues, street gangs provide alternative illegitimate financial opportunities, which provide *"both economic and psychological security to young people who face increasing disadvantage*" (ibid, p. 46).

Participants in their study included former gang members who reiterated the following sentiments. For instance, one participant describing living on a deprived estate explaining *"How can we make money? We can't get no jobs, so you turn to drugs"* (Participant 24, Whittaker and Harvard 2023, p. 46). These views were reiterated by professionals engaging with these youths. For instance, one respondent expressed *"I think it's probably down to money…young people are struggling, and they don't see a way out, they don't see education as a key to help them forward"* (Participant 10, Whittaker and Harvard 2023, p. 46) and another professional viewed it *"as an escape from poverty, money is a big factor, especially with the younger kids"* (Participant 16 , Whittaker and Harvard 2023, p. 46).

The increased involvement in the drugs trade is not limited to gangs in London. Further research has been conducted to explore the issue of street gangs and the drugs trade, such as that in Merseyside (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023), renowned as a key entry point for international drug trafficking via its port (Hesketh, 2021). With regards to the nature of street gangs in Merseyside, it was recognised that there were two key categories of groups. Firstly, there were informal peer groups engaging in low level delinquency, tending to be present in places such as local shopping centres (Smithson et al, 2009; Hesketh, 2018); typically, with no hierarchy or organised structure (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023). On the other hand, there has been the growth of more organised, structured and hierarchical gangs engaged in the drug market (Smithson et al, 2009). Crucially within this, violence between these groups arose due to territory disputes.

There has been a clear increase in the involvement in the drug trade of young people from the most economically deprived localities in Liverpool (Hesketh, 2021). Hesketh (2021) points to

the effects of austerity in the last decade and overall lack of legitimate economic opportunities in Merseyside. Economic survival explanations have been put forward regarding the motivations of young people in Merseyside. County lines enabled some participants *"to provide financially for their families and purchase items that they deemed reinforce their status within the group"* (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023, p. 250). On the other hand, research has also uncovered the prevalence of agency in the actions of young people in Merseyside, particular noting that some of them expressed their enjoyment and satisfaction through engaging in county lines (Robinson, 2019).

Nevertheless, the researchers recognise the historical disadvantages the populus have faced throughout the 20th century due to the effects of industrial decline. High levels of poverty and unemployment have culminated in Merseyside having some of the most economically deprived boroughs in the United Kingdom. In particular, the trend of long-term employment coincided with a rise in organised crime where the supply of drugs focused on heroin and ecstasy (Hesketh and Robinson, 2023).

Historically and beyond England, there have been ethnographic studies of youth in South Wales engaging in gangs (e.g., Williamson and Williamson, 1981). The researchers examined the life trajectory of a youth group called the 'Milltown Boys' in a time period of close to 50 years. In their analysis, it was recognised that the demise of the labour market and pathways between school and employment in working class communities were significantly affected (Maher and Williamson, 2023) by political economic events. During the 1970s, deindustrialisation led to the closure of collieries leading to decreasing vacancies in local working-class communities (Merrell and Kitson, 2017), contributing toward the growth of poverty of those living in estates, which heavily relied upon coal mine employment in South Wales (Adamson and Jones, 2001).

These areas in South Wales now face considerable economic deprivation (Welsh Government, 2019). Various issues have been outlined such as *"unemployment running through the generations, high rates of chronic illness, run-down social housing estates, depopulation, family breakdown, underperforming schools, decaying amenities, poor transport and general community decline*" (Maher and Williamson, 2023, p. 213). Indeed, deindustrialisation has contributed to a significant shift in the labour market affecting the entire United Kingdom, but particularly young men in poorer areas. Reduced employment opportunities, particularly unskilled jobs, led to an increased attraction towards crime for those with little formal education (ibid).

This lack of opportunity has hindered youth transitions, where the trajectory of obtaining long term employment has ended up becoming increasingly uncertain, unpredictable and more

protracted, delaying legitimate and legal transitions to becoming independent (ibid). Arguably there is more reliability and certainty in the illegitimate transitions from low level teenage delinquency to more organised economic crime (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007). In this regard, Maher and Williamson (2023) argued that *"broken transitions have increasingly blocked legitimate opportunities for young people (especially, but not exclusively young men) who have been steadily and often systematically confronted with disengagement and social exclusion" (ibid, p. 227).*

Overall, in South Wales, despite the prevailing environment, the researchers argued that the media have exaggerated the extent of youth violence and argue that the vast majority of disadvantaged youth do not react in a manner which leads to crime. Rather they contend that the uncertainties regarding the life transitions of young people pose the most poignant risk for those 'on the edge' for whom gangs may have greater allure, some of whom may be already engaging in lower-level deviancy. It is said that these youth, already exposed to poverty, are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by county lines gangs and the organised drug trade (ibid). The gangs in county lines *"specifically target vulnerable 15–17-year-olds who display circumstances of poverty, family breakdown, interventions by social services, 'looked-after' status, school exclusion, frequent missing episodes, behavioural and developmental disorders and previous involvement in criminality"* (Maher and Williamson, 2019, p.215; NCA, 2019).

It is further argued that *"The parallels between legitimate youth transitions and gang membership are notable; both provide young people with social inclusion and recognition. Pathways into the gang are facilitated, or indeed impeded, by critical moments in young people's lives which push/pull young people away from legitimate transitions and towards alternative ones"* (Maher and Williamson, 2023, p. 227). If we expand upon the notion of push and pull factors, it has been argued that the expansion of county lines in England has stretched into Welsh cites (Glover Williams and Finlay, 2019). It is contended that the growth of county lines opens upon a range of illegitimate opportunities not previously available to deprived young people where there is a rejection of lower paid work and limited legitimate opportunities.

The prevalence of these issues is not limited to any particular ethnic demographic of the population; rather their impact can be seen across different ethnic groups. In studying the crime involvement of young black men, contemporary researchers have employed the field of critical race theory (CRT) in order to understand the racialisation of gangs.

"CRT is an academic field of inquiry, a movement and/or framework, rather than a theory, which has sought to examine the racialized experiences, structures, and outcomes of contemporary Western social democracies" (Lawrence and Hylton, 2022, p. 255).

Within this field, critical race researchers such as Patricia Williams have argued that youth gangs have been racialised by the state, and there has been a subjugation of the rights of young black men through their criminalisation preventing access to legitimate opportunities (Williams, 1991; see also (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al, 1995). Indeed, in the United Kingdom, it is argued that black youths have been prevented from accessing legitimate opportunities (see Miller 2023 for more on the explanatory potential of critical race theory).

There is also the argument that when studying the offending of black men, there must be a recognition of historical economic structural factors as well as discriminatory criminal justice practices, that skew the data (Agyeman, 2008). The interviewees in Palmer's (2023) study on black former gang members considered that their involvement with gangs and serious youth violence were associated with the disadvantages faced in their experiences in education, employment and with the criminal justice system. For instance, the presence of institutional racism within the education system acting as a significant barrier to their educational attainment (see further section 4.2). By contrast, engaging in crime was construed as a more appealing choice. This does not deflect from the fact that the extent of their involvement is exaggerated since as mentioned in Chapter 3, researchers have identified the prevalence a race-gang nexus where black people have consistently been equated with street criminality involving gangs (Williams, 2015; Nijjar, 2018).

Overall, institutional and structural racism evidenced in the state, media, education and criminal justice system facilitate an environment where black youths are depicted as deviant and 'other' which has particular implications for black identities and self-esteem (Palmer, 2023; Wilson, 1978). Building upon this, it is argued that media representation of black males (explored in Chapter 1, § 1.0 and Chapter 4, § 4.2) exacerbates negative perceptions within wider society. Consequently, it is contended that there needs to be recognition and investigation of this category as an adverse childhood experience and a possible risk factor (Palmer, 2023). The recent Black Lives Matter Movement has contributed towards shining a light upon a range of these issues and reiterated the continued presence of institutional racism (Abrams, 2023, see Abrams 2023 for further account of the significance of the movement in the UK)

Institutional racism has historical roots linked to the othering and exclusion of black people (ibid). In the USA there is increasing research on the historical repercussions of slavery and their effects upon subsequent generations of black communities (See Wilson, 2009; Crawford et al, 2006; Leary 2005). It has been argued that this history of oppression contributes towards the issues of lower self-esteem of some black people (Leary, 2005). Leary (2005) developed the theory of *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome* which illustrates the effects of slavery on the

psyche of black people through different generations across North America and Europe. It was argued that many people internalised perceptions of being inferior to the white demographic with implications for their identity and self-esteem.

Issues around self-esteem have also been examined in discussions around masculine identities and the importance of attaining status and respect (Leary, 2005; see also discussion on motivating factors in Chapter 3, § 3.2). Internalised attitudes of inferiority and the need to gain status and respect may have some explanatory potential with regards to black-on-black violence within economically challenged areas (Trotman, 2012). It has been argued that *"the negative and self-destructive behaviour we are witnessing may therefore be created by an internalisation of negative stereotypes which have been generated by the dominant culture"* (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). The historical legacy left by slavery has compounded this by restricting the opportunities for black children, which may contribute to the use of violence by some in black communities (Aird, 2015). It is argued that issues such as severe mental health problems, suicide and violence amongst the black community in the USA can be associated with the legacy of slavery (ibid). Whilst this research was focused upon Black African Americans, researchers in the United Kingdom also contend that the legacy of slavery, colonialism and institutional racism, is arguably applicable to the Black population in the UK (Palmer, 2023). The previous discussions have sought to provide an account of particular explanations limited to the small number of young black men involved in knife crime.

Additionally, the following discussions also demonstrate that knife offending is not limited to any particular ethnic demographic. Recent research carried out in Bradford has shed light on the growing involvement of British Pakistani gangs involved in the drugs trade (Qasim, 2023a). The opening decades of the 21st century have witnessed a rise in British Pakistani Muslim men arrested for drug dealing, predominantly Class A drugs such as heroin (Qasim, 2017). Qasim (2023a) notes that drug markets in Bradford, previously ran by those of African Caribbean descent, are now dominated by those of Pakistani ethnicity. One gang, 'The Boys', were said to engage in drug dealing since they perceived that there was an absence of legitimate means to generate an income (Qasim, 2023b); many young Pakistani Muslims have *"become embittered by their experience of poverty and lack of legitimate opportunity"* within such areas (Qasim 2023a, p. 395).

Drug dealing practices bear similarities to other business, such as an awareness of the market value of the drugs, the availability of desired stock, and marketing of the product with an awareness of the activities of competitors in the neighbourhood (Qasim, 2023a; Sandberg, 2008). Qasim (2023a) observes participant's' capacity to navigate through the principles of

supply and demand through successfully deviating between dealing different types of drugs, in light of their market value and availability.

It is observed that for young people becoming adults, there was this expectation to be financially independent and in certain instances to also provide for their families (Qasim, 2023a). 'The Boys' viewed selling drugs as a key pathway for financial gain and a method for obtaining status within their group, facilitating competition amongst them in this regard (Qasim, 2023a). Many of these young people also sought to obtain money to live a more desired lifestyle based upon materialism, to illustrate an image of wealth to their peers through expensive clothes, phones, cars and jewellery, increasing their street status (ibid).

A number of 'The Boys' stated that it was challenging for them to obtain legitimate higher paid jobs due to the prevalence of racism (Qasim, 2023a). Participants were of the view that media created a fear of Muslims which contributed towards employers being reluctant to hire them, or only if absolutely necessary (ibid). This finding aligns with other ethnic minority drug dealer's perceptions of facing difficulties in obtaining employment due to racism (Sandberg, 2008). It was also recognised that having a criminal record made seeking employment quite difficult (Qasim, 2023a). Overall, Qasim (2023a) argues that the key motivation factor for drug dealing concerned their economic circumstances. This argument aligns with the literature in other geographical areas previously discussed as Maher and Williamson (2023) noted in respect of South Wales:

"recent times have certainly slammed the door tighter on the possibility of discovering or re-discovering legitimate routes to adulthood", "Simultaneously, more doors are opening to widen illegal routes thereby, for some at least, dangling the promise of better prospects and less bleak futures. For those reasons, they have steadily become more attractive to larger numbers of marginalised and disengaged young people, even when that may require more affiliation to and compliance with different types of gang" (Maher and Williamson, 2023, p. 230). This thesis contends that these observations are also applicable to drug dealing and its economic viability.

In summary, it is clear from the research across different geographical locations that there has been a growth and expansion of drug dealing activities amongst gangs, particularly in terms of county lines and the exploitation of young men. Additionally, it is apparent that the economic structural barriers and the financial allure of county lines play a key role in limiting access to legitimate economic opportunities across different ethnicities. This was compounded for black youths due to increased historical exposure to economic structural barriers, through living in areas characterised by high rates of economic deprivation, exacerbated by structural and institutional racism which further limited educational and work opportunities (Palmer, 2023).

Overall, this Chapter has reiterated the importance of structural barriers such as poverty, educational and employment barriers, inequality and social immobility. Such factors have a significant explanatory potential in relation to knife crime. For some young men, when faced with educational and employment barriers, the economic opportunities afforded in the knife crime environment via joining gangs, the drug market and county lines may seem alluring, whilst others are coerced into knife crime pathways. The following Chapter draws on this analysis in considering which forms of law and policy changes might work most effectively to address the underlying causes of knife crime.

Chapter 5: A Political Economy Perspective on Challenges Facing Knife Crime Prevention Policy and Policy Implications

5.0: Chapter Overview

This chapter seeks to provide an illustration of the political economy of reaction to knife crime, established in Chapter 2 § 2.3. The chapter will examine contemporary prevention policy, in particular, the main enforcement and non-enforcement methods. The agendas, ideologies and inconsistencies driving the state's prevention policy, will be explored, to ascertain if the state's depiction of a public health policy is truly an accurate characterisation. Finally, the efficacy of prevention policy will be examined, highlighting key challenges and putting forward recommendations for enforcement and non-enforcement interventions.

Section 5.1 shall firstly provide an account of the contemporary policies prior to the public health approach, recognising literature which sets out its ideological underpinnings, then considering its application in Scotland before considering its introduction in England and Wales. Section 5.2 will begin to examine the extent to which a public health ideology is actually evidenced through an examination of its implementation.

Building upon this, the evaluation in section 5.3, will consider uncertainties around knife crime data, examples of incorrect and inconsistent applications of public health ideology, the evidence base for interventions, and the efficacy of the multi-agency approach, and potential shifting of responsibility onto state bodies. There is also an exploration of the effectiveness of a range of non-enforcement interventions and methods such as the use of early intervention programmes, counselling, school programmes, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and Violence Reduction Units (VRUs).

In support, section 5.4 shall explore the effectiveness and issues around enforcement methods being employed including the detrimental effects of the state's financial cuts and the reductions in police numbers. Alongside, prevailing issues with authoritarian policing such as stop and search, Serious Violence Reduction Orders, Knife Crime Prevention Orders, increased surveillance, custodial sentencing and challenges in achieving effective community policing and focused deterrence. Recommendations for reform include the need to tackle underlying economic causes and to increase the use of non-enforcement interventions.

5.1: Contemporary Knife Crime Prevention Policies, the ideology of the Public Health Approach and the shift towards it in England and Wales

It is firstly necessary to consider what have been the prominent policies in the last decade. It should be recognised that the focus of analysis in the main, is upon the current public health approach policy, with the coverage of earlier policies being briefer (for more detailed accounts see Williams and Squires, 2021; Pitts 2023b).

In 2009 the Home Office launched the Tackling Knives Action Programme (TKAP) (a programme from 2009 to March 2010), focusing upon reducing youth knife crime in 10 police force areas in England and Wales through a range of enforcement, education and prevention initiatives. The initiatives received significant funding consisting of £14 million over a three-year period (Williams and Squires, 2021). Whilst the approach was commendable for its emphasis on providing legitimate pathways for young people such as education, overall, it was criticised for being poorly focused, conflating knife carrying for protection and knives used in the commission of gang activity (Pitts, 2023b).

In 2011, the coalition government acknowledged the role of gangs as an underlying cause of youth violence, providing the foundation of their *Ending Gang and Youth Violence Strategy* (Home Office, 2011). The government report had the following recommendations:

- *"Providing support to local areas to tackle the problem"*
- *"Preventing young people becoming involved in violence in the first place, with a new emphasis on early intervention and prevention"*
- *"Pathways out of violence and gang culture for young people wanting to make a break with the past"*
- *"Punishment and enforcement to suppress the violence of those refusing to exit violent lifestyles""*
- *"Partnership-working to join up the way local areas respond to gang and other youth violence"*
  (Home Office, 2011)

Additionally, in the same time period, there has been a recognition of the importance of the family unit through a focus upon troubled families. From 2010 until 2016 the government introduced their Troubled Families Teams Initiative focusing upon families which met their criteria: *"Involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, had children not in school, had an adult out of work and on benefits, caused high costs to the public purse"* (Pitts, 2023b, p. 500). Goals of the initiative included improving safeguarding, child welfare, school attendance, job seeking and preventing anti-social behaviour (See Pitts, 2023b for further discussions of these initiatives). Albeit there is debate concerning the overall effectiveness of this initiative in terms of achieving these desired outcomes with the engaged families (NIESR, 2016).

Returning to the *Ending Gang and Youth Violence Strategy,* it can be credited for its acknowledgement of issues such as gangs, whilst also demonstrating an awareness of placing an emphasis on prevention methods such as early intervention, family and schooling and the benefits of multi-agency responses (Home Office, 2011; HM Government, 2015). A network of advisors and experts were provided to support local areas at risk and money was allocated for early intervention programmes (Pitts, 2023b). Furthermore, it should be recognised that overall, the Coalition government placed a greater emphasis upon the role of gangs as the underlying cause of youth violence (Home Office, 2011).

However, within the time period of the implementation of this strategy, the rate of knife crime continually increased (see Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1, §1.0). Furthermore, evaluation of its first two years observed that the local partnerships taking part were not uniform in relation to their definitions of a gang nor in agreement about the most suitable evidenced based strategies required for interventions (Disley and Liddle, 2015). Arguably, this may be due to initiatives being ineffectively implemented within this time period, due to government cuts in public spending through the introduction of the emergency budget (Stanley, 2014). Indeed, a prominent critique for the overall ineffectiveness of this policy remains the dwindling and sudden end of government funding and the effects of austerity (Pitts, 2017; Pitts, 2023b). It should be noted that a recurring policy feature is underfunding. Pitts (2023b) reiterates the notion that various crime prevention policies have lacked effectiveness due to underfunding, which inevitably affects both the efficacy of enforcement and non-enforcement interventions (an issue expanded upon in § 5.3 and 5.4).

For instance, the strategy seemed to place an emphasis upon the collaboration of a range of agencies in order to support vulnerable children (Williams and Squires, 2021). However, there was a failure to recognise issues within these agencies such as understaffing, over working and limited resources (Roberts, 2021). A key critique is "*no mention of the withdrawal of EGYV funding and the government's intention to pass this work over to cash-strapped local authorities and/or the voluntary sector"* (Pitts, 2023b, p. 504), which is indicative of an historic shifting of the responsibility from the state (this issue shall be expanded upon in subsequent sections).

Furthermore, a further critique of this policy is that whilst it may have demonstrated an awareness of socio-economic factors and their influences upon gang involvement, it did not pose any solutions for these underlying issues (Williams and Squires, 2021). Instead, the state focus has historically been more on individual rational choice rather than addressing the structural factors directly. For instance, despite emphasising the need for multi-agency cooperation to support young people deemed 'at risk', *The Ending Gang and Youth Violence Strategy,* utilised language in its report largely focused on individual rational choice (Williams and Squires, 2021). Their description and narrative of 'boy X' at risk of gang involvement and navigating through a range of pathways and interventions, placed an emphasis upon individual decisions, rather construing the economic as a structural barrier (see Williams and Squires, 2021 for more expansive account of this narrative). Additionally, whilst the policy highlighted the relevance of economic factors, no clear recommendations were made to tackle them. Rather the focus has been upon managing the individual's responses to economic structural factors, rather than tackling the underlying causes directly.

In 2016, a letter sent by the Home Office to employees for the EGYV was erroneously uncovered. Whilst the Home Office attempted to proclaim that progress had been made *"in tackling gang and youth violence issues"* it indicated that funding for the programme would end (Pitts, 2023b). Instead, the government outlined their "Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation, a Refreshed Approach" (Home Office, 2016). This appeared to set out a range of appealing priorities regarding reducing knife crime through tackling county lines, the exploitation of young people and children, early intervention programmes and providing legitimate pathways through employment and education (Pitts, 2023b). In recent times, the aforementioned challenges in all of these areas have reduced the efficacy of these measures (ibid, a notion further explored in subsequent sections).

Following on, it is necessary to consider the ideologies of the public health model, its application in Scotland and in turn the beginnings of its introduction in England and Wales.

What is the Public Health Approach Model? An analysis of its theoretical underpinnings and its implementation in Scotland.

The public health approach has been evident in youth violence literature in the 21st century. For instance, Silvestri et al (2009)'s review of knife crime literature looked at the feasibility of public health approaches. In that review, it was proposed that the approach should entail primary, secondary and tertiary aspects. The primary areas would consist of services which are aimed at the entire population, the secondary services would be focused upon individuals at risk of committing violence. Finally, the tertiary aspect would provide services for those who have caused or inflicted injury (Silvestri et al, 2009; Bellis et al, 2012; Neville et al, 2015). McNeill and Wheller (2019) had argued that the range and variety of risk factors and motivations meant that solely focusing upon criminal justice approaches would be insufficient. Any response needs to be multi-faceted and involve early intervention methods and multi-agency collaborations. In light of this, the public health approach has been recognised as being the leading method to tackle violence (Bellis et al, 2012; Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; Frisby-Osman and Wood, 2020; Patel, 2019; Gwata et al, 2024).

Consequently, the approach focuses upon reducing violence through identifying and diagnosing the causes of a crime, of which the risk factors are appreciated as being 'cross-cutting', in that they overlap into different categories such as societal, community, relationship and individual risk factors (Bellis et al, 2012). Drawing from WHO research, Bellis et al (2012) puts forward examples of each category in relation to violence. In this sense, a holistic approach is envisaged. According to their analysis, societal risk factors for violence constitute *"economic inequality, gender inequality, cultural norms that support violence, high firearm availability, and weak economic safety nets"* (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018, p. 15*)*. Community risk factors include *"poverty, high unemployment, high crime-levels, drug trade, inadequate*

victim care services". Relationship factors such as "*poor parenting practices, marital discord, violent parental conflict, low socioeconomic household, delinquent peers"*. Individual risk factors include *"victims of child maltreatment, psychological/personality disorder, delinquent behaviour, alcohol consumption, drug use"* (ibid).

As part of a public health response, it is appreciated that using early prevention is key, for example, prevention methods used with children can help to provide an effective response to tackling the 'cycle of violence' that is prevalent amongst certain communities (Williams and Donnelly, 2014). School interventions are used with youths at risk of violence and therapeutic programmes are employed for youths with behavioural problems (Welsh et al, 2014). Moreover, extensive research involving 50 systematic reviews on developmental prevention of adolescents and children found that increased investment in this area is justified due to its positive effects (Farrington et al, 2017). It is reiterated that the public health ideology requires a focus upon mental health since the issue of youth violence requires an awareness of this issue (Frisby-Osman and Wood, 2020; Neville et al, 2015)

To surmise, the public health approach's ideology consists of four defined stages. Firstly, through defining the problem through its scale, characteristics and negative effects of violence . Secondly, finding out why violence occurs through identifying the causes of violence, risk factors, protective factors, and the factors which can be impacted by the use of interventions. Thirdly, finding out what works to prevent violence by designing and evaluating interventions which have the capacity to reduce violence. Finally, implementing effective and promising interventions (WHO, 2014; Williams and Squires, 2021).

The interventions are divided into three key areas consisting of primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary interventions are aimed at everyone in a community, consisting of early interventions aimed at children including those at primary school, educating and raising awareness of knife crime. Relevant authorities also seek to decrease knife availability, whilst providing support to those at high risk of becoming involved in knife crime and targeting underlying causes such as inequality and economic deprivation (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). Secondary interventions specifically target those who are high risk individuals with a heightened risk of being involved in knife crime offending in the future (ibid). Such approaches involve particular knife crime programmes and interventions tailored towards this group. Tertiary interventions are specifically focused upon people who have already committed knife crime offences with the purpose of seeking rehabilitation, desistance and breaking the cycle of recidivism. In turn, the combination of the approaches and principles underpinning this policy seeks to gradually reduce the number of children entering the criminal justice system.

It is also necessary to consider the theoretical relationship between criminal justice approaches and the public health approach. It is argued that in order to facilitate effective crime prevention, there is a need for both approaches (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; Gwata et al, 2024). In particular, it is argued that public health ideologies have significant capacity to contribute towards the efficacy of criminal justice (Frisby-Osman and Wood, 2020). Some researchers have gone one step further to suggest that there is capacity for an integration of the approaches (Gebo, 2016). Nevertheless, a key caveat to the notion of criminal justice measures supporting public health ideology, let alone any integration, concerns the manner in which it is implemented. There are various issues with the implementation of the criminal justice approach in England and Wales which undermine the efficacy and identity of the current prevention policy and challenge its construction as a public health approach (this notion shall be expanded upon in the following sections, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4).

Prior to its application in England and Wales, proponents of the public health approach often pointed to the success of this model in reducing violent crime in Glasgow. Glasgow in its recent history was once labelled as the 'Murder Capital of Europe' (Fracassini, 2005; McLaughlin, 2019) due to its previously high record of rates of violence, homicide and long history of gang violence (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). The Scottish public health approach consisted of practitioners and agencies from various fields working with one another in order to *"diagnose the problem, analysing the underlying causes, examining what works and developing solutions" (*McNeill and Wheller, 2019, p. 3). The approach was also based upon prevention through focusing upon the entire population within Glasgow whilst also inherently targeting those at higher risk, and those who have committed offences for more tailored interventions (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022).

Furthermore, in Scotland this approach involved the police, social services, youth community centres, probation teams, NHS organisations, and voluntary organisations, all working with one another (ibid). In recent times it has also been appreciated that there has been a reduction in rates of violence due to the efforts of Scotland's Violence Reduction Unit in Glasgow (McNeill and Wheller, 2019; Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). As a result, its model has inspired a national approach being implemented across England and Wales. Before exploring this initiative in greater detail, it is first necessary to appreciate the magnitude of the scale of violence across Scotland that the VRU intended to tackle. In terms of the history of violence in Scotland, in the years of 2000 to 2009, adult emergency hospital admissions for assault by sharp instrument of a knife, reached a peak in 2002 (McCallum, 2011). This is alongside a long-term reduction in Violent Crime in Scotland between 2007 to 2017 (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018, see Figure 5.1). Although, in terms of the reliability of youth violence data in Scotland,

it should be appreciated that data on youth violence in Scotland had been inconsistently collected (Fraser et al, 2010).

Figure 5.1: Non-sexual violent crimes in Scotland between 2007 to 2017 (Source: Grimshaw and Ford, 2018, originally from Scottish Government, 2017b)

[Image redacted, third party material]

In terms of explanations behind the previously high rates in Scotland, Bannister et al (2010) found that in economically deprived areas, younger people tended to create 'territorial identities' when they were faced with social and economic restrictions. Therefore, these young men were building their social identity within the context of a delinquent group. This also led to patterns of group rivalries within these economically deprived areas. This gang rivalry behaviour in Scotland was most prominent in Glasgow, as a result the Scottish VRU initially focused on this city.

The Scottish Violence Reduction Unit has created a variety of intervention methods which focus upon preventing violence at earlier stages of the youth's development. Rehabilitation, criminal justice methods are also used in an attempt to reduce the rates of violent offending, to change attitudes and behaviours in individuals and communities. In terms of the initiatives put forward by the Scottish VRU, in Glasgow, the VRU carried out the 'Community Initiative to Reduce Violence' (CIRV) in the years of 2008-2011 focusing upon East End of Glasgow (Williams et al, 2014). This initiative is a clear example of 'focused deterrence'. This involved sessions at Sheriff Court for 'at risk' participants being offered services by both criminal justice and voluntary agencies. In addition, gang members could be temporarily excluded from the CIRV project if they violated their promise not to carry weapons or commit violence (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018).

Separate from the CIRV project, there was also an increase in enforcement methods such as increased sentencing and police stop and searches. However, it has been argued that it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of these methods considering the fact that the CIRV project was also occurring, thereby this is an area which requires further analysis (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). In following up this initiative the Scottish VRU began to expand its approach throughout Scotland and put forward a strategy comprised of primary, secondary and tertiary intervention, alongside enforcement and criminal justice methods, enabling changes in attitudes (see Grimshaw and Ford, 2018 and McNeill and Wheller, 2019 for further discussions on role of Scottish VRU). Particular primary, secondary and tertiary interventions used in a public health approach to tackling crime shall be unpacked later in this chapter.

Overall, the data demonstrate that the Scottish public health approach seemed to work since violent crime was at its lowest in Scotland in 41 years during the year of 2017 (Linden, 2018). In support, it has been demonstrated that there has been a reduction in violence in Scotland from the time period of 2007/08 to 2016/17 (Scottish Government, 2017b; see Figure 5.1 above).

Moving Towards the Implementation of the Public Health Approach in England and Wales

In terms of the implementation of public health initiatives in England and Wales, it is argued that it was beginning to grow in political traction post 2010. However, its earlier implementation was often hindered by an unwillingness to move away from a predominant focus upon criminal justice methods. For instance, the Coalition government in 2012 introduced the Health and Social Care Act 2012, alongside the Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF) which also included serious violence as a key issue. The following quote surmises the potential hope and vision for policy change from over a decade ago, towards public health responses in tackling violence: *"with the new public health system emerging, we have a unique opportunity to ensure that approaches to tackling violence move from a historically punitive system based within criminal justice to a preventative approach that utilises all the assets of government and civil society"* (Bellis et al, 2012, p. 61). Ultimately, post-2011, the '*Ending Gang and Youth Violence'* policy had incorporated some public health approaches, whilst still supporting use of certain existing criminal justice methods, such as harsher sentencing. In this time, there began to be a greater appreciation of the positive effects of public health initiatives such as hospital counselling schemes, and the potential of educational programmes delivered in schools (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018).

In July 2018, the Youth Violence Commission (2018) published a report supporting the adoption of the public health approach for England and Wales. During this time, the Youth Violence Commission also began to encourage the need for a 'national public health model' which provided greater funding and new initiatives for early childhood centres (The Youth Violence Commission, 2018). In July 2019, the Home Affairs Select Committee also advocated for the approach (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019). Further endorsements of the approach were found in the Local Government Association and the College of Policing.

To surmise, in 2018 it was argued that the growing support for the public health approach in terms of research and independent bodies, did not match policy implementation, due to continued emphasis upon predominantly criminal justice strategies (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). At the same time, the Conservative government's *Serious Violence Strategy* (HM Government, 2018; Home Office, 2018a) followed the HM Government report in 2018, and emphasised the importance of underlying causes such as the use of drugs and county lines

including drug gangs, which have a significant impact upon the increase of serious violence (HM Government, 2018). The report highlighted that although drug use has remained stable, the drug market in the UK has undergone changes, which in turn, have contributed towards the rise in violence (ibid). The report discussed the following changes: new psychoactive substances being introduced into the market, the increase in youths becoming involved in the drug market, and the increase in both use and purity of crack cocaine (ibid).

In addition, the government's former 'Serious Violence Strategy', acknowledged that the 'vulnerable population' comprised of children in care, children excluded from schools, and homeless adults, had been on the increase since 2014 (HM Government, 2018). Therefore, it can be conceded that the government began to recognise this vulnerable and younger population through previous government policies such as the Serious Violence Strategy having previously acknowledged socio-economic factors such as economic deprivation, poor educational attainment, gangs and growth of county lines, as examples of knife crime causes (HM Government, 2018; Home Office, 2018a).

In addition to this, whilst the strategy published in 2018 focused on drugs and gang violence, the government also came to appreciate the role of public health initiatives, although they retained overall emphasis on criminal justice interventions. More recently, the government has shifted away from this 'Serious Violence Strategy' terminology and begun to refer to the 'Public Health Approach' as the more suitable term that describes their violence prevention policy (House of Commons, 2021a).

Nevertheless, this policy is arguably demonstrative of the early beginnings of the public health approach. In relation to policy implementation, the Violent Crime Strategy sought to improve the accountability of public bodies such as education, policing, health and social services, on the protection of young people vulnerable to knife crime (House of Commons, 2019a). In this pursuit, the London Metropolitan Police and Violence Crime Task Force (VCTF) was set up, along with the London knife crime strategy (MOPAC, 2017). The *Serious Violence Strategy* was rooted in a 'multi strand approach', within which different agencies would be led by the Serious Violence Taskforce. The latter put forward the following funding initiatives: £11 million for an Early Intervention Fund, £1 million for a community fund to specifically tackle knife crime, £1.3 million for a national media campaign, £3.6 million to the National County Lines Coordination Centre to focus upon the county line drug markets (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). Moreover, at this time, there were further initiatives focusing upon mental health, trauma, and knife sale regulation (Pepin and Pratt, 2018). Although, this partnership/multi-agency approach was broadly well received, the difficulties of reduction opportunities and inequality increases were noted (Middleton and Shepherd, 2018).

A £100 million *"Serious Violence Fund"* was created in 2018, 18 Violence Reduction Units were introduced across England and Wales costing £35 million. These focused upon identifying risk and protective factors for violence and also collating evidence for crime prevention methods (Middleton and Shepherd, 2018). The current approach also involves promoting 'partnership working; in order to tackle the identified risk factors (Eades et al, 2007; McVie, 2010; Sethi et al, 2010; Foster, 2013; and Williams et al, 2014) and ensuring the collaboration of relevant bodies and stakeholders in prevention and intervention methods, for instance, through the use of Youth Offending Teams. This is supported by legislative developments such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act 2022 which seeks to put forward a *"legal duty upon local public services to work together in serious violence partnerships"* (PCSC Act 2022, Part 2, Chapter 1). Existing enforcement mechanisms include harsher custodial sentencing, Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs), Serious Violence Reduction Orders (SVROs), stop and search, focused deterrence and community policing. By contrast, non-enforcement interventions include the use of the Violence Reduction Units (VRUs), Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), knife amnesties and range of others approaches (e.g., school-based, counselling, therapy and hospital based).

On a theoretical front, it can be argued that perhaps the current public health approach puts forward an array of appealing promises in terms of effectively tackling knife crime in England and Wales. It appears to recognise socio-economic problems and seeks to treat these as underlying causes of knife crime. However, the recent re-emergence of deterrence theory conflicts with the public health ideology of reform and rehabilitation. Additionally, in Chapter 1 it was recognised that the state driven moral panic on knife crime in part is being utilised to justify the use of authoritarian policing practice. For example, harsher sentencing, stop and search, increased surveillance, KCPOs, and SVROs are key punitive enforcement methods which shall be explored.

Therefore, whilst the public health approach places emphasis upon early, primary, secondary and tertiary intervention, these sit uneasily alongside contemporary methods of punishment and enforcement interventions based upon deterrence, which have also been introduced within the public health era. As such, it must be questioned whether this formulation can truly be construed as a public health ideology.

5.2: Can England and Wales be said to have had a Public Health Approach to Knife Crime?

In the previous section, it was indicated, that the government has espoused a public health approach in terms of rhetoric. In practice, however, there has been an increase in authoritarian policing including expansion of authoritarian police and state powers via SVROs, KCPOs,

increased use of section 60 searches, surveillance technology and custodial sentencing. Consequently, it has been suggested that the 'so-called' focus on public health may be something of a 'Trojan Horse.'

Even in terms of rhetoric the adherence to a public health approach would appear questionable. For example, Pitts (2023b) remarks that just as with the Ending Gang and Youth Violence policy in 2012, the precise identity of the model itself is in question. He contends that: *"what the model actually was remained unclear. Was it just a metaphor, or did its proponents really believe that violence was a communicable disease, or was it, in fact, a melange of hastily assembled albeit underfunded and unrelated, elements masquerading as a strategy"* (Pitts, 2023b, p. 510). In addition, *"surveying the plethora of different initiatives re-badged as a Public Health model, it is difficult to identify the differences between them and that other contemporary shibboleth, Multi-Agency working"* (Pitts, 2023b, p. 511). In reality, the state's adherence to a public health ideology, evidenced through implementation, is questionable given that many so-called public health initiatives remain underfunded and/or recycled.

Certainly, the House of Commons Committee's report on the public health policy was stern in its critique, asserting that the solutions offered did not adequately address the problem of knife crime (House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019). Whilst noting the lack of ambition to achieve long-term prevention (ibid). It was argued that the government needs to consider *"what sustained and coherent preventative measures should look like, and how to ensure that public funding is diverted towards the most effective approaches"* (ibid).

For example, the notable absence of any plan for data collection, to further develop the evidence base to understand the number of young people affected (ibid) and the knife crime risk factors, is notable. Whilst the importance of the latter was emphasised, there was no new data or empirical testing, rather the existing data base was simply accepted (ibid). This is of particular concern since the first requirements of any public health approach requires an understanding of the problem and why it may be occurring (WHO, 2014). This is further compounded by a lack of performance indicators to measure the effectiveness of government policy. Pitts (2023b) points to the fact that the former government minister at the time, Sarah Newton, did not provide any substantial information regarding the government's estimation of the numbers of younger people as victims and/or perpetrators. A core tenant of the public interventions and, in turn, implementation of such interventions (WHO, 2014). Overall, it was contended by the committee that they *"fail to see how the Government can get a grip on this problem or pursue a public health approach without a clear understanding of the size and location of the populations most at risk, so that it can target resources effectively"* (House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019, p. 69). An additional critique of the ideology

concerns an ignorance and lack of awareness of the key differences between the transmission of a disease in contrast to the criminal rational choices made by a person (Pitts, 2023b).

Indeed, it is argued that there is a lack of appreciation of the importance of the collection of information and producing evidenced based strategies (Williams and Squires, 2021). In 2019, the Home Affairs Select Committee when analysing the current policy, stated that *"it alludes to a public health-based strategy, but it is not yet a public health-based strategy"* (House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019). The Youth Violence Commission in 2019 also contended that the government was using the public health terminology without fully understanding the requirements for long term crime reduction. Furthermore, with regards to the four stages of the Public Health Approach set out by the World Health Organisation (see Chapter 5, section 1.0), Williams and Squires contend that *"In light of these precisely defined stages, it is clear that very little resembling a public health strategy for addressing serious youth violence, including knife crime has been progressed very far in the UK"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 334).

A complicating factor in supposed use of the public heath approach, has been the inaccurate depiction of knife crime as a predominantly youth, particularly black youth, issue. In an earlier part of the thesis, this depiction was highlighted as a racist stereotype, positioning young black men as 'other' and criminally deviant. This moral panic serves to distort the data, as it has long been recognised that *"younger member males of black and minority ethnic groups are far from being the majority perpetrators of knife violence"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 335). Indeed, systematic literature reviews of knife crime have not found any firm association between ethnicity and perpetration (Haylock et al, 2020; Browne et al, 2022).

Both of the main political parties arguably bear some responsibility for the state's racialisation of knife crime; New Labour and the Conservative-led coalition both had roles to play (see Chapters 1 and 4). This has culminated in Amnesty International warning that the term 'knife crime' has become interchangeable with 'black criminality' and this erroneous characterisation has instead perpetuated racial discrimination in the criminal justice system (Amnesty International, 2018).

This representation undermines a key requirement of the public health approach, namely the necessity to establish an accurate understanding of the nature and extent of the problem (WHO, 2014). This hinders the efficacy of policies based on an inaccurate picture of the scale and nature of knife crime. As earlier identified in Chapter 1, there is significant evidence that knife crime occurs in a range of different settings, including domestic contexts. Indeed, deaths in domestic violence cases are most commonly due to knives (Cook and Walklate, 2020) where a significant proportion of victims are women. Yet there is an absence of either state

focus on this, and a paucity of contemporary research examining the efficacy of domestic violence knife crime related interventions. Contemporary researchers reviewing the efficacy of community based- interventions, argue that they *"may result in overlooking a distinct subset of knife offenders and a valuable dimension of the issue of knife crime interventions"* (Wilkinson et al, 2024, p. 16). Consequently, the failure to acknowledge the variety of knife crime settings and variance in offenders and victims, has seriously hindered understanding of the issues.

Prior to the general election in 2024, the former Conservative government unsuccessfully sought to introduce the Criminal Justice Bill 2024, seeking to continually expand authoritarian measures such expanding police searches of private property (Gov.uk, 2024a). The creation of a novel offence category of "*possession of a knife or offensive weapon in public or private with intent to use unlawful violence",* with a four-year maximum custodial sentence (ibid), was also proposed.

Following the election of a new Labour government in July 2024, it is important to consider the potential impacts of 'Labour's Action Plan to Cut Knife Crime' (Labour, 2024a) and sections of their manifesto on crime prevention 'Take Back our Streets' (Labour, 2024b). What is immediately apparent is their phrasing of knife crime perpetrators as being predominantly teenagers (Labour, 2024a). The analysis in Chapter 1 demonstrated that whilst some overrepresentation of younger people aged 10 to 24 exists, there is also overrepresentation of other age demographics, such as those between 25 to 39 (Williams and Squires, 2021; Williams, 2023). It must be recognised therefore that knife crime impacts a wide variety of victims and offenders. Consequently, the phrasing of the Labour Manifesto on knife crime is heavily problematic since it continues to stereotype younger people and frame the archetypal perpetrator as being a teenager. In doing so, it bears a close resemblance to New Labour ideologies applied in the past.

Overall, the Labour government commits to halving knife crime in a decade through resorting to New Labour rhetoric by being *"tough on knife crime and tough on the causes of knife crime"* (Labour, 2024a) through their five-point action plan, as outlined by Home Secretary Yvette Cooper (Nevett, 2024). Firstly, there is an ambition to impose *"tough consequences for carrying a knife",* through increasing the use of tagging, behaviour contracts and support of custodial sentences in the more severe instances of knife possession (Labour, 2024a).

Secondly, there is an ambition to focus upon early intervention, and mention of targeted programmes with tailored support to meet needs of younger people, although specificities are not provided. There is also mention of an increased presence of youth workers and plans for mental health support (ibid). Thirdly, reducing the presence of knives through sale restrictions,

banning Zombie knives, and increasing criminal sanctions for sellers. The current government have imposed an amnesty on zombie knives which involves £10 compensation for each knife surrendered (Gov.uk, 2024b; Schofield, 2024).

Fourthly, the government seeks to end the exploitation of young people through creating a new offence of child criminal exploitation, to identify and tackle county lines (Labour, 2024a). The prominence of County Lines was discussed in Chapter 4, § 4.3. Finally, there is ambition to create a *"new cross-government coalition to end knife crime"* which seeks to involve political leaders, community leaders, families of victims, young people, sports bodies and tech companies (ibid). This will inform government policy development and evaluation. Correspondingly, there is ambition to inform *"community led solutions"* (ibid), without substantive detail. It will be important to challenge possible attempts to further divert responsibility for tackling the issue away from the state and onto local communities.

Whilst measures on zombie knives are welcome, it is important that this does not detract from an understanding of the commonality in the types of knives used, and the overall moral panic. The media focus on zombie knives may exaggerate their usage and obscure from the much wider range of weapons involved (e.g., see Schofield 2024; Green et al, 2024). However, since 2022 the government have begun to collect data on the type of knives used in murder. *"It reveals 244 homicides in England and Wales involved sharp instruments in the year ending March 2023. Of these, 14 involved machetes, seven involved zombie knives and three involved swords. Kitchen knives were the most common type of sharp instrument used to kill. They were used in 101 homicides"* (Green et al, 2024). Nevertheless, in the current proposed Crime and Policing Bill with regards to knife crime, there is only mention on the restriction of sale of samurai and ninja swords (Nevett, 2024). The state focus on these weapons together with the media's fixation upon these particular knives, represents a distorted picture.

Further proposed Labour policies will be examined including a focus on particular non-enforcement and enforcement interventions. Recommendations will be made with awareness of how conflicting ideologies, inaccurate state depictions and state driven agenda, limit the overall effectiveness of policies.

5.3: Challenges and Recommendations for Non- Enforcement Prevention Methods and Policy

The current section shall consider the following areas and methods of policy in turn. Violent Reduction Units (VRUs), Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), broader state policy/spending on interventions, analysis of the range of interventions, the use of multi-agency responsibilities, the efficacy of the serious violence duty and the need to tackle economic underlying causes.

Firstly, considering the role of VRUs**,** Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) constitute a multi-faceted agency created by the government which collects data, locates the underlying causes of crime and in turn assesses interventions employed to tackle the crime (McNeill and Wheller, 2019). There are 18 VRUs across England and Wales. There is a particular focus upon Sadiq Khan's VRU in London since a significant proportion of knife crime is focused upon and occurs in the capital. It is contended that the London VRU utilises a range of practitioners from local government, police, health and probation services in order to prevent violent crime and to tackle underlying causes (Wieshmann et al, 2020; Gwata et al, 2024).

The London VRU so far has published reviews on violence in London and the supposed causes and recommended interventions (VRU, 2020). For instance, it has argued for increased localised policing and acknowledged the growth of the drug market and the competition between rival gangs. In recent years, the London VRU has looked at community-based crisis intervention and trauma support for young people (VRU, undated a). There is recognition of the role of poverty and austerity cuts in relation to higher knife crime neighbourhoods in London (VRU, undated b). There is also research exploring the potentially negative effects of police use of knives in social media posits (VRU, 2021a). The London VRU has created a framework to understand the role and interaction of situational and behavioural factors and their explanatory potential in relation to homicide, emphasising the importance of mental health, drugs, alcohol, gang involvement and social media (VRU, 2022a).They recently conducted research considering children and young people's use of violence and abuse of their parents/carers (VRU, 2022b).

The London VRU has also produced a report in 2020 outlining the suitability of responses (VRU, 2020). For instance, they recommended the use of primary interventions which address the root causes of violence such as individual skills-based programmes, parent-based training, school-based bullying programmes and mentoring. Secondary interventions which prevent violence prior to its occurrence include policing hot spots, knife interventions and situational crime prevention. Tertiary interventions which respond to prior violence include restorative justice, cognitive behavioural therapy for offenders and prison education programmes (ibid). Consequently, the London VRU has undertaken a range of contemporary research exploring the causes of knife crime offending whilst also considering the efficacy of responses.

It appears that a temporary decrease in knife crime was due to the lockdown, with rates beginning to increase once restrictions were lifted (ONS, 2023a). Nevertheless, in national review of VRUs impact in 2021 the Home Office found that *"serious violence funding, reducing violence and VRUs appear to be contributing to this"* (Home Office, 2022a), a finding reiterated again in their recent review of the VRUs in 2023 (Home Office, 2023b). In 2023, the latest

Home Office Review (Home Office, 2023b) found that *"VRUs showed signs of maturing and becoming embedded in, and recognised as leading and coordinating, local responses to prevent violence."* (Home Office, 2023b).

Despite this, reductions are also arguably due to other successful tertiary interventions. For example, in Scotland legitimate opportunities provided through the 'No Knives, Better Lives' (NKBL) initiative also led to a reduction in knife crime possession offences and violence (Skott and McVie, 2019). In contrast, and for no explicable reason, not a single VRU has investigated whether a causal link to the reduction in knife crime can be established (Browne et al, 2022). Furthermore, as already alluded to, there are various complicating factors regarding the efficacy of the evidence base for interventions, for example, the constraints of shorter deadlines (Wilkinson et al, 2024). It follows that questions can be raised regarding the viability of the VRUs in developing effective interventions, given the current position of research can be as expressed as only a "*few studies investigating the perceptions and experiences of young people who are/have been involved in knife carrying and knife crime combined with empirical data*" (Wilkinson et al, 2024, p. 17).

Additionally, it is important to recall the state's advocated remit for the VRUs: *"The Violence Reduction Units are specialist teams, together the police, local government, health community leaders and other key partners tackle violent crime by understanding its root causes. The new units will be responsible for identifying what is driving violent crime in the area and coming upon with a co-ordinated response"* (Gov.uk, 2019). This thesis contends that there are limitations regarding the supposed objective capacity of these units with regards to examining the efficacy of government fiscal policy and its ability to tackle underlying causes. There is only limited recognition of the role of poverty and austerity cuts in relation to higher knife crime neighbourhoods in London (VRU, no date, b). The London VRU has produced a report in 2020 outlining the nature and drivers of violence in London (VRU, 2020) which noted the importance of economic conditions. However, this thesis proposes that the VRUs have not fully reiterated the significance of the underlying economic conditions facing the United Kingdom, nor understood the role of the state in creating and exacerbating economic conditions, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 4 of this thesis. VRUs must ascertain youth perceptions of these economic structural barriers and how in some instances these may translate to knife crime.

Operating in parallel to VRUs, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) are government created teams which exist within communities with the purpose of providing primary, secondary and tertiary interventions which are generally in deprived urban areas (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). When engaging with children who have committed knife crime offending or who are at

risk of committing it in the future, YOTs often use the 'Child First Approach' which is based upon three key components. Firstly, relational practice through establishing relationships of trust between the YOT workers and children prior to implementing any interventions. Secondly, putting forward an individualised approach involving tailored responses to the specific needs of a child. Thirdly, recognising and responding to trauma through putting forward therapeutic programmes in order to identify the context and possible causes for their offending (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). Overall, the YOTs employ a range of interventions focused upon children consisting of diversionary activities, strength-based approaches, and other interventions. Diversionary activities include providing activities which address particular interests of children such as youth clubs, arts and sports, thereby enabling young people to develop interests which can assist them in avoiding criminal or delinquent activity in the pursuit of desistance (ibid). However, it has been recognised that cuts due to austerity have impacted the ability of YOTs to provide diversionary activities (ibid).

Strength-based approaches involve mentoring, assigning mentors to specific children, separately from their originally assigned YOT Officer, in order to provide them with a positive role model who may have experienced similar circumstances. As such, it has been argued that mentoring can play a significant role in achieving desistance (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). There are also the use of knife crime programmes focusing upon children who have committed knife crime offending, to reduce their likelihood of reoffending. These programmes consist of group interactions where the risk of knife crime is highlighted. Whilst YOTs do have their own programmes, these are heavily influenced by the model put forward by the Youth Justice Board's (YJB's) Knife Crime Prevention Programme (KCPP). YOTs also use other intervention through involving external parties such as health awareness interventions, aftermath interventions, community involvement and family involvement (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022).

There have also been community and educational interventions which are aimed at tackling knife crime throughout the state. These are not solely early interventions since they can also be applied to people of all ages and people at different positions in the criminal justice system. These interventions are aimed at *"changing attitudes and behaviours towards knives"* (McNeill and Wheller 2019: p. 4; Silvestri et al, 2009). These interventions involve building of emotional communication skills, conflict resolution, activities to divert people at risk, such as sports and other educational opportunities (McNeill and Wheller, 2019). Early intervention and prevention methods, include programmes which are aimed at children aged 13 and older which aim to change perceptions towards violence (ibid). In addition, there have been recommendations to extend these programmes to children from the age of 8, since we are witnessing an increase of children beginning to carry knives (Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice, 2018a).

The early intervention programmes adopt a range of methods often centred on the use of child skills training, which involves teaching anger management and social and emotional skills. In addition, assisting parents may take the form of training them to help them improve the behaviour of the children (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). Furthermore, after school programmes and educational programmes are provided, as it has been appreciated that they have the potential to reduce youth involvement in violence (England and Jackson, 2013), but there is a lack of evidence which demonstrates the effectiveness of awareness raising programmes in schools. For example, in two boroughs in London it was found that primary schools were missing intervention opportunities which is indicative of limited engagement (Waddell and Jones, 2018).

Certain primary intervention methods such as educational programmes in schools, through providing sessions on knife crime, have been suggested as having a potential impact upon the attitudes and perceptions of students in relation to knife carrying and offending (England and Jackson, 2013). Tertiary strategies focusing directly upon providing support and services such as educational opportunities and housing, to knife crime offenders who decide to cease offending and carrying of knives (Williams et al, 2014), have been found to have a significant impact upon the reduction of crime (Browne et al, 2022). William et al's 2014 study compared two groups in Glasgow, only one of which received the support and services, in turn the rate of knife carrying was significantly lower in the group that was provided with the support.

Expanding upon this controlled study, William et al's (2014) methodology may have been effective in reducing offending due to a focus upon tackling the inherent risk factors of the group such as mental health issues and previous victimisation. However, there are potential limitations with Williams et al's (2014) study. For instance, the participants voluntarily referred themselves to the study, demonstrating a willingness to engage and leave the offending lifestyle, potentially demonstrating difficulties in engaging with groups who lack motivation. Secondly, the participants in this study constituted gang members in Glasgow, therefore indicating that it is difficult to make a comparison with gang members in London due to regional and sub-cultural differences. In addition, it is also difficult to make comparisons with knife carrying youth not involved with gangs (Browne et al, 2022).

In terms of clinical/therapeutic programmes, there is a lack of literature which looks at the effects of hospital-based counselling in the context of knife crime involved adolescents. Nevertheless, the report from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) looked at the effectiveness of the RedThread service and their youth violence intervention programme in hospital emergency departments. Engaging with youth violence victims admitted in London,

it found that almost half of young people that engaged in this intervention had a reduced involvement on violence in the following months (Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, 2018)

Consequently, YOTs have an important role regarding the implementation of interventions. It should be recognised that YOTs rationally prioritise youths who have committed offending (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). However, primary interventions which are targeted at all children are also necessary to foster positive social identities (England and Jackson, 2013). A further issue is that YOTs are inevitably limited to mainly focus upon tertiary interventions, due to their inherent purpose and limited resources (ibid). Therefore, further work is necessary on the employment of primary and secondary interventions which focus on the general population and youths at risk of knife crime offending. Yet, this task cannot be solely left with the YOTs, and there has been recognition that there needs to be a broader primary approach of raising awareness in schools of the risk of knife crime and identifying children at risk at an earlier age. This would essentially require further involvement in primary schools and family interventions (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). However, a key obstacle facing a potential successful implementation of these initiatives constitutes the previous public health cuts from 2015-16 which have been detrimental in reducing knife crime offending in recent years (Cattermole et al, 2018).

It should be noted that a recurring policy feature is underfunding. Pitts (2023b) reiterates the notion that various crime prevention policies have lacked effectiveness due to underfunding. Additionally, the efficacy of existing interventions is significantly undermined by spending reductions. For instance, with regards to substance misuse and addiction, the issues concerning decreased funding have repercussions of the successful implementation of policy measures. For instance, Boris Johnson's 10-year drug strategy announced in 2021 involved increased funding for drug treatment, tackling over 2000 supply lines and impose mandatory drugs tests of those arrested (Pitts, 2023b). However, it is argued that this policy was insufficient in tackling the previous reductions in drug rehabilitation services during the era of the Cameron government (Pitts, 2023b).

Returning to challenges facing the YOTs, importantly, a key finding from research interviews with YOT employees is their perception that the service and staff were inadequately prepared for the scale of violence and subsequent trauma and fear faced by younger people (Williams and Squires, 2021). This stems in part from service providers lacking a competent understanding of the phenomenon, no doubt hindered by the paucity of training on the issues faced by staff (ibid).

Additionally, when analysing the role of the VRUs and YOTs in the design and implementation of interventions, this also needs to be contextualised with an awareness of broader state

actions regarding their national policy and spending on interventions overall. Lessons can and should have been learnt from the implementation of the selective public health initiatives under the Serious Violence Strategy. In particular, the manner in which the Youth Endowment Fund was spent by the state. Despite the government reiterating their belief in interventions targeted at young people with a supposed commitment of over £200 million to be spent over a decade (Bath, 2019), it chose to relinquish responsibility for implementing the fund to two private companies called Impetus and The Private Equity Foundation (PEF).

One of the major criticisms levied at both private companies is that they relied on an existing evidence base which was focused on reducing youth crime generally, rather than being specifically tailored towards knife crime (Pitts, 2023b). The government lacked awareness of the numbers of young people that these programmes intended to reach; the relevant government minister being unable to provide any clarification on this issue to the House of Commons Committee (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2019; Pitts, 2023b). This is of significant concern given the argument being made that violence can be effectively prevented through the use of positive interventions (Hassan, 2018).

Undoubtedly a core requirement of the public health approach concerns the collection of data in order to inform effective interventions (WHO, 2014), so continued reliance upon existing contested evidence bases is a matter of some concern. It is vital that these evidence bases are updated to reflect new research focused on knife crime in order to determine the effectiveness of intervention methods in reducing its prevalence (Armstead et al, 2018). Chapter 3, § 3.1 of this thesis sought to ascertain the range of knife crime risk factors, within this analysis there was a reliance upon systematic literature reviews such as that carried out by Haylock et al (2020). However, Haylock et al (2020) in their own reviews pointed to the lack of empirical research studying these risk factors in the United Kingdom; a problem reiterated in further reviews (i.e. Browne et al, 2022).

Indeed, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding examining the effectiveness of interventions, of which there are limited contemporary examples (e.g. Wilkinson et al, 2024), despite a range of different community-based interventions throughout England and Wales. The Youth Endowment Fund may have put forward government research, e.g., 'YEF toolkit' and 'YEF evidence gap maps' (YEF, 2021; YEF, 2024). However, these reviews have *"more widely focussed on serious violence crime and weapon use rather than specifically considering the evidence for interventions on educational tools and teachable moments in health-related settings"* (Wilkinson et al, 2024,p, 3). It is further contended that these reviews *"provide limited evidence of knife crime interventions specifically"* (ibid). Expanding upon this, the YEF toolkit provides ratings for a range of both enforcement and non-enforcement interventions, with

focused deterrence rated ‘high’ and stop and search rated ‘moderate’ (YEF, 2024), demonstrating the lack of success achieved with focused deterrence, not necessarily due the model itself, but challenges in its implementation (see Chapter § 5.4 on focused deterrence challenges). Additionally, with regards to stop and search, there is a clear lack of acknowledgement of its discriminatory usage (see discussion on enforcement methods in following section).

There is a need to recognise research that has reiterated the importance of psychosocial maturity (PSM) in reducing capacity/motivation to engage in knife crime (Wilkinson et al, 2024), stressing a growth in cognitive competence *“temperance, responsibility and perspective”* (Wilkinson et al, 2024, p. 2*,* see also Schaefer and Erickson, 2019). Evidence suggests that experiencing ACEs and trauma can significantly impact mental health (Haylock et al, 2020) and in turn detrimentally affect the development of cognitive competencies (Drury et al, 2017). ACEs increase the likelihood of developing serious mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (ibid). Consequently, there is linkage between experiences of ACEs, trauma and mental health and cognitive competencies applicable to PSM. In relation to this, when developing interventions, it is argued that:

“The integration of these factors into a comprehensive public health approach is key to reducing violent crime and promoting the well-being of young individuals and communities alike” (Wilkinson et al 2024, p. 3).

Furthermore, whilst there needs to be an emphasis upon mental health support, it is recognised that interventions are needed in a range of different areas such as diversionary activities which are recreational, but also providing employment and educational opportunities (Wilkinson et al, 2024). This thesis has previously reiterated that interventions that provide educational, employment and housing opportunities have been found to be more effective in achieving a reduction in knife carrying (Browne et al, 2022). Notwithstanding, the reviews in this area are limited due to the paucity of studies on knife crime interventions (Wilkinson et al, 2024), particularly around effectiveness. In a supposed public health era based on the interpretation of data and the evidence base to ensure interventions are designed, and tailored to be as effective as possible, such deficiencies are indefensible. Additionally, when exploring the importance of mental health interventions, these need to be contextualised within an awareness of mental health national services provided through the NHS, as the current ‘NHS Long Term Plan’ includes an emphasis upon the significance of mental health of young people (NHS, 2019; Gwata et al, 2024).

In light of the analysis of knife crime risk and motivational factors in Chapter 3, fear and status were identified as to two key motivations for knife possession (Foster, 2013). It is therefore

contended that certain targeted interventions focused on the identity development of children may be beneficial (Traynor, 2016), drawing on education and the creation of new opportunities which can facilitate the formulation of alternative non-violent identities (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). This would seem apt given that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) including poor quality relationships, mental health and trauma have been associated with violent offenders (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022, see earlier discussions in Chapter 3, § 3.1). ACEs should therefore be at the centre of secondary and tertiary interventions aimed at children, in order to address the key motivational factors for knife crime offending.

Turning to the efficacy of multi-agency working and the introduction of the serious violence duty - the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 *"Introduces a serious violence duty on specified authorities to work together to prevent and reduce serious violence (including domestic abuse and sexual offences)"* (Home Office, 2022b). Furthermore, "*The Serious Violence Duty will require local authorities, the police, fire and rescue authorities, specified criminal justice agencies and health authorities to work together to formulate an evidence-based analysis of the problems associated with serious violence in a local area, and then produce and implement a strategy detailing how they will respond to those particular issues. Prisons, youth custody agencies and educational authorities may also need to work with these core partners"* (Home Office, 2022d).

This legal duty also requires 'local public services' to work together in a 'serious violence partnership'. This duty amended the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, resulting in an obligation being placed on the Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) to consider 'serious violence' whilst developing strategies to tackle crime. This resulted from the Home Office's Consultation in 2019 on 'serious violence: with a new legal duty to support multi-agency action' (Home Office, 2019). In addition, the PCSC Act 2022 requires the police, local authorities, and clinical commissioning groups to carry out Offensive Weapon Homicide Reviews in instances where the adult's death involves the use of an offensive weapon (Home Office, 2022b). Overall, this serious violence duty imposes a social responsibility on various agencies to tackle these issues. The agencies shall also work with the VRUs in planning strategies in response to violence.

This method appears to be in line with the overall public health approach ideology since there is an inherent focus upon understanding the circumstances surrounding serious violence in order to inform future prevention of homicides. Various units in local areas have been established in accordance with this emphasis upon multi agency (Gwata et al, 2024), e.g., the Islington Integrated Gangs Unit Team (Greer et al, 2019), the Westminster Integrated Gangs Unit (Young Westminster Foundation, 2021).

However, a key issue and critique surrounding the serious violence duty and multi-agency approach concerns the state attempt to pass on responsibility for knife crime prevention to public bodies, arguably to detract from key underlying causes explored. For instance, it is argued, *"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"* (Williams, 2023, p. 10). This shift of responsibilities from the state to local authorities, public bodies and agencies through the guise of 'Serious Violence Duty' being placed on multi-agencies, subverts a commitment to tackle the underlying causes directly. In 2019, as part of an effort to save on policing costs, new legal obligations were created for a range of public sector bodies (Pitts, 2023b).

Additionally, GPs and hospital emergency staff became legally obligated to report any injury considered as suspicious (HM Government, 2019). Additionally, those working in social services and teachers were also placed under the obligation to *"report danger signs such as truancy and serious misbehaviour"* (ibid). The scope of the obligation and potential to excessively criminalise young people is indicative of a continued demonisation of youth, whilst diverting focus from economic underlying causes. Indeed, whilst the multi-agency collaboration has significant potential, it has been continually hindered by state actions aimed at shifting accountability for policy implementation. Nevertheless, this thesis recognises the potential of the multi-agency approach, since there are:

"several prevention and intervention programmes, which emphasise the necessity for health-care settings, schools, local law enforcement and communities to collaborate for successful embedment of anti-knife carrying and anti-knife crime" (Wilkinson et al, 2024, p. 17).

Following on, in light of the state's knife crime moral panic on young black men, those seeking to contribute towards the evidence base regarding developing knife crime interventions, must be mindful of perpetuating racial stereotypes. For instance, although Coid et al (2021) produced some useful explanations regarding knife crime motivations, the interviewee sample was disproportionate in its focus on young black males. It is argued that care should be taken to ensure that interviewee samples need be more inclusive and fully representative of the variety of individuals affected by knife crime (Williams and Squires, 2021).

Furthermore, it is underlined that there are key differences between the public health models applied in Scotland in comparison to England Wales with regards to the development of interventions. For instance, in Scotland, Operation Reclaim in 2004 sought to facilitate the creation of youth centres in Glasgow in order to create an environment to provide opportunities for sport, education and recreation (Williams and Squires, 2021). At the same, Operation Phoenix was used in order to facilitate the participation of youth to engage in these activities.

In addition, there were efforts in this operation to improve relations with the police. In comparison, in London various initiatives attempting to involve the police have failed on the basis of lack of police trust (see section 5.4) and youth centres have been on the decline (see Chapter 4, § 4.2), although recent government rhetoric appears to commit to an increase in the number of youth centres (Labour,2024b).

A further key difference includes the role of the hospitals. As stated earlier to better understand knife crime, we must address how the statistics are generated (Williams and Squires 2021). Chapter 1, § 1.0 discussed the contention regarding state data particularly around the extent of involvement of younger people. A key argument for the use of hospital data has been that the collection of data by hospitals and emergency departments can provide a more accurate picture of the prevalence and nature of knife offending, including the type of knives that are being used. Conveyance of such information to relevant agencies (Shepherd and Brennan, 2008) including Violent Reduction Units, might better inform the development and design of interventions (Wilkinson et al, 2024). Yet insufficient progress appears to have made in this pursuit (Ponsford et al, 2019).

An important issue here concerns the issue of anonymity. In Scotland, an emphasis was placed on health practitioners being able to reassurance individuals with assurances of confidentiality, to avoid deterring individuals from seeking medical assistance (Ransford and Slutkin, 2017). Therefore, the release of hospital data did not include any personal information, rather only demographic information which aided researchers, e.g., in the development of interventions. In contrast, in England and Wales, this confidentiality-based approach is not followed, rather hospital staff are placed under pressures to report these incidents (Morris, 2019). They are further required to provide personal information, in particular contacting the police if an individual arrives with a knife wound (Williams and Squires, 2021). Such requirements may potentially limit hospital attendance to those with the most severe wounds. This raises some doubt about the accuracy of hospital data on wounding which, when considered alongside the deficiencies on police statistics, tends to undermine the very premise of any public health model, namely the ability to define the extent of the issue (Carnochan and McCluskey, 2010). As such, it is argued that a political economy approach that focuses on the role of the state within knife crime may provide new and improved insights on its causes, nature and extent.

As argued in earlier chapters, a pollical economy perspective can highlight the state construction of the problem, including the data sets on which it relies, and how both serve to bolster a racialised moral panic about youths, whilst detracting attention from the state's role in generating economic factors that encourage knife offending of some people. Instead, the

construction of the knife crime problem leads to increases in authoritarian policing, much of which garners public support. For instance , it is argued:

"focusing primarily upon the visceral, bloody and brutal act itself, rather than the broader context in which it occurs, 'knife crime', along with other transformed expressions of cultural racism, has produced major blind spots in our appreciation of the criminogenic power of racism. Broad theoretical research and debates often fail to connect with the detailed and specific forms, that race and racism take in national and local contexts (Solomos & Back, 1996: 203). And we are left with simple 'crimes' which offer opportunity and justification to the police and authorities, more than they address causes of poverty and violence. They called for the crisis, above all, to be policed , and so it was." (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 221).

The question remains as to how this response may be addressed by the incoming Labour government. Certainly, they have identified certain economic challenges in their ambition to *"Break down barriers to opportunity",* entailing the introduction of free breakfast clubs at primary schools, improvements to the recruitment of teachers, modernising the educational curriculum to improve employment prospects, and increasing the number of apprenticeships (Labour, 2024c). Moreover, there appears to be some recognition of the impacts of poverty, inequality and lack of suitable employment opportunities, with pledges to tackle child poverty, homelessness, and a commitment to ban the use of zero-hour contracts (ibid). Overall, the extent to which Labour is truly committed to address these issues, remains to be seen, and perhaps some measure of scepticism is justified given the recent removal of the winter fuel payment to pensioners with its associated risks to the health and lives of the elderly (Lavelle, 2024). Nevertheless, in light of the recent announcement of the budget, considering some relevant pledges. There is to be an increase in the minimum wage for over 21s and 18- to 20-year-olds (Peachey, 2024).The education budget is set to increase by £2.3 billion, there is an intention to increase public spending upon education, a £1 billion increase for educational special needs and disability and £1.4 billion dedicated towards the maintenance and rebuilding of more than 500 schools across the country (Jeffreys, 2024; Seddon, 2024).

However, there are omissions in terms of setting out specifics for how the educational and employment barriers shall be tackled as promised in their manifesto, see relevant discussions above on Labour (2024c). Additionally, with a tax increase of £40 billion, half of which is to be paid by businesses (Wheeler, 2024), it has been acknowledged by Chancellor Rachel Reeves, this may affect salaries (Hooker and Hoskins, 2024), an observation reaffirmed by the Office for Budget of Responsibility (OBR, 2024).

Furthermore, the OBR have also predicted increasing rates of inflation and interest rates in the short term (Hooker, 2024; OBR, 2024, see the OBRs latest report for more expansive discussion and evaluation of the economic impact of the budget). Consequently, the extent of what these changes will achieve remains to be seen regarding their impact on the cost of living.

Overall, to truly understand the extent to which some young people are involved in knife crime, and if so, why, policy makers must look beyond conventional data and resources. In particular, there needs to be an understanding of how the underlying causes may manifest in knife crime explanations. Certainly, the concept of criminal subcultures has long been used by researchers to explain the involvement of young people in crime, through the transition into adulthood (Rutherford, 2002; Squires and Stephen, 2005; Maher and Williamson, 2023). However, as previously explored in Chapter 4, § 4.3, the course of these youth transitions has become increasingly unreliable and uncertain (Maher and Williamson, 2023). Notwithstanding this, policy makers must consider how limited economic opportunities, exacerbated by social exclusion and racial discrimination, can influence some young people to engage in crime, through limited choice, coercion and exploitation. Consequently some *"young people could become trapped in low-paying and dangerous contraband economy roles and later, exploited in what became known as county lines"* (Williams and Squires, 2021 p. 294).

As reiterated above, the solutions to this, extend beyond mere crime prevention policy, requiring broader socioeconomic change to remedy key issues, including barriers to transitioning into adulthood and becoming self-sufficient. Clearly this necessitates an awareness of the state's actions in facilitating the growth of such barriers (see Chapter 4, § 4.2), within the contextual dominance of neoliberalism economic systems, deindustrialisation policies, growth of the service sector, and overall decline of lower and unskilled employment opportunities for younger people. In particular, there needs to be an appreciation of the role of class, since the uncertainties of youth transitions (Maher and Williamson, 2023) are primarily affecting working-class people, many of whom have been increasingly excluded by the state's neo liberal economic policies (Williams and Squires, 2021). In addition, to the fact that ethnic minorities more broadly face significantly disproportionate exposure to economic structural barriers.

In light of this, any attempt to address these developments must also demonstrate how they are racialised (Palmer 2023), disproportionately affecting young black people (see Chapter 4, § 4.2). Despite this, there is a lack of research on the risks of increased exposure of young black people to structural economic barriers and the role of associated interventions (ibid). Research that depicts black youths as being criminogenic and responsible for the large proportion of youth violence, is prioritised over youth violence prevention policy, that

recognises and responds to the demonisation of black youths and their communities (ibid). Any exploration of the significance of economic barriers created by state actions, must be contextualised within an awareness of the impact upon the black ethnic demographic. In support, it is argued that *"the long-term effects of consequences of deindustrialisation on young working-class people, especially black and mixed-race young people require further interrogation, acknowledging that the shifting economies cause new challenges to which emerging generations must adapt"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 295).

Interestingly, these considerations are missing from the state's public health approach to knife crime, which contradicts any claims to have an effective understanding of who is committing the violence and why it is occurring (WHO, 2014), hindering the development of suitable interventions. In contrast, this thesis has argued that there must be a focus upon reducing inequality and economic deprivation, key underlying causes for knife crime (Haylock et al, 2020; Grimshaw and Ford, 2018), for the smaller group of young offenders, from the overall totality of knife crime perpetrators. Whilst the public health approach in action is concerned with the cross-cutting of risk factors with regards to violence (Bellis et al, 2012), the emphasis on economic deprivation and poverty has been insufficient.

Prevention policies demonstrate only partial awareness of the economic factors, particularly broader fiscal policy changes and how they affect knife crime prevention policy development and implementation. Underlying causes are largely neglected in terms of amelioration.The responsibility for this lies not only with the Home Office and the Criminal Justice System but extends to incorporate economic, fiscal and welfare policies, which are all interrelated. Whilst the public health ideology may seek to identify and diagnose the causes of violence, it is impractical to treat those causes, univariately through crime prevention policy and criminal justice agencies. There are a plethora of issues pertaining to the underlying causes. Yet these issues continue to persist, primarily because government fiscal policy and cuts in public spending have served to reinforce the structural barriers and simultaneously lowered the amount and quality of legitimate opportunities. Given that public health approaches are usually focused on tackling the root causes of a problem, such inconsistencies are problematic (Bellis et al, 2012; WHO, 2022; Wilkinson et al, 2024).

Consequently, in line with the arguments of this thesis's political economy of knife crime perspective, the public spending reduction measures imposed in the era of austerity and the growth of the structural barriers have significant capacity to hinder interventions implemented in the public health era.

5.4: Challenges and Recommendations for Enforcement Prevention Methods and Policies

The persistent lack of funding for prevention initiatives has had significant detrimental impacts upon non-enforcement interventions (see discussions in previous section). Such is also the case with enforcement methods, for example, the tackling of county lines has been consistently hindered by inconsistent state funding on prevention policy and in particular policing. Pitts (2023b) points to the fact that post 2010, the police were overwhelmed by the substantial spread and development of county lines throughout the state. Yet, in 2010, there were broader cuts to the whole criminal justice system (Williams and Squires, 2021; Crawford and Keynes, 2015). The police faced significant cuts via government reductions in spending, it was anticipated that *"the government's projected 25% cuts in UK policing budgets could lead to the loss of 14,000 officers; and this turned out to be an underestimate*" (Pitts, 2023b, p. 506). In subsequent years, there was a national reduction of 17,000 police officers (Williams and Squires, 2021). In response, police commissioners raised significant concerns regarding their capacity to achieve crime prevention as a result (Halliday, 2015).

In 2019 the former Prime Minister, Theresa May, reduced the Ministry of Justice budget by £2 billion, resulting in police officer numbers falling by 20,600 (Full Fact, 2019; Pitts, 2023b). Consequently, this has left the police unable to investigate all of the crimes reported to them due to insufficient resources (ibid). Such reductions (and earlier cuts to policing the coalition government) have contributed to the growth in county lines and knife crime. There would seem to be considerable state confusion of the relationship between police numbers and the effects upon crime reduction (Weaver and Pidd, 2020). Notwithstanding, it is argued that the persistent cuts to policing budget and the subsequent reduction in policing numbers, have had a significant detrimental impact on the efficacy of recent crime prevention policies (Squires, 2024).

Unfortunately, willingness to increase policing numbers is often associated with an appeal to penal populism, rather than a focused crime prevention and response method. Historical penal policy over the last 40 years in the United Kingdom has been driven by 'penal populism' and 'popular punitivism' (Cavadino and Dignan, 2013). Penal populism can be understood as a process where politicians use punitive crime prevention policy measures due to their perceived popularity in society in order to secure their own political standing, rather than the pursuit of effective crime prevention (Dobrynina, 2017).

For example, Pitts (2023b) gives the example of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson promising to recruit 20,000 police officers by the end of year 2022. At the end of 2021 Boris Johnson made the audacious claim of a government intention to demolish over two thousand

county lines gangs as part of his overall 10-year drug strategy (see above section 5.3). However, Pitts refers to this policy as a 'dead cat' which constituted a sensational new policy designed to divert attention from accusations of malpractice. Moreover, the recruitment of 20,000 officers was a paltry figure in relation to the sheer number of officers that had been lost, as outlined above, and which had arguably facilitated the rapid growth of county lines. Labour have recently pledged to increase their recruitment of police officers (Labour 2024a; Labour 2024b), time will tell if this shall come to fruition (see above Chapter 4, § 4.1). Notwithstanding police numbers, the state has remained committed to authoritarian policing prevention methods, including continued reliance on stop and search as the most popular knife crime enforcement method, despite recognition of its limitations in reducing crime (McCandless et al, 2016).

Historically, the expansion of stop and search also needs to be contextualised within an awareness that it is indictive of a *"focus on 'law and order' in times of political difficulty"* (Pitts, 2023, p. 513). It is argued that post 2015, the Conservative Party underwent a period of instability where five Prime Ministers came to hold power (Squires, 2024), it is contended that this contributed to inconsistences in relation to overall crime prevention policy (ibid). Squires (2024) argues that under Boris Johnson in 2019, the Conservative government returned to its focus on 'law and order' explaining the punitive direction of prevention policy. Consequently, there shall now be a consideration of the efficacy and issues in relation to the range enforcement prevention methods being used.

Firstly, the leading prevention method used by police is 'stop and search' (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). This is a suppression method that is used to tackle knife crime, through the police power that enables police to detain and search an individual for weapons, drugs and stolen property, if the police officer has reasonable grounds for suspicion of that person, under section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. Stop and search can also occur without reasonable grounds under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 in certain cases such as the belief of a risk of serious violence occurring. Section 60 was increasingly used in 2008 as a predominant method in London Metropolitan Police's Operation Blunt 2, this in turn had the effect of significantly increasing the rate of stop and search in that year (McCandless et al, 2016). Overall, stop and search is a primary policing method that is relied upon by forces across England and Wales. Furthermore, it appears that this method shall be increasingly used following the passage of the recent Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which has increased stop and search powers.

The state's main argument for this, is their assertion that stop and search has the effect of reducing knife crime through two main effects. Firstly, through removing knives from the

streets, and secondly through creating an environment of deterrence since potential offenders will be aware there is an increased risk of being caught (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; Home Office, 2018b).

To determine the efficacy of stop and search, various studies have been carried out. Firstly, researchers have looked at a former peak of knife crime in 2008/09 and have linked this to reduced stop and searches occurring in the same time period (Thornton, 2018). However, Grimshaw and Ford (2018) suggest that it is difficult in practice to establish potential positive effects since the frequency of stop and search tends to rise or decline in response to the rate of knife crime at the time. Some evidence demonstrates that an increase in the 'everyday level' of police activities such as stop search has the effect of reducing crime (Boydstun,1975; Bradford, 2011). Notwithstanding, overall, there appears to be only limited evidence which demonstrates that increasing police activity reduces crime. In an analysis of 10 years in London, it has been demonstrated that stop and search has only a 'marginal' deterrent effect on violent crime (Tiratelli et al, 2018). Indeed, a Home Office study looking at the effectiveness of stop and search in relation to knife crime did not find any statistical significance with crime reduction, even after controlling for other factors in the study (McCandless et al 2016).

Furthermore, a College of Policing report evaluated 10 years of Metropolitan Police data and found a weak relationship between stop and search and targeted crimes (Quinton et al, 2017). The report concluded that there is only limited evidence which supports the effect of stop and search on the reduction of crime (ibid). Additionally, Grimshaw and Ford (2018) examined Home Office (2017b) data which surmised, that in 2016/17, 7097 arrests were for offensive weapons, arising from stop and searches in England and Wales (Home Office, 2017b). 32,852 stop and searches were for offensive weapons in this year, and there were 303,845 overall recorded stop and searches in 2016/17 for all items, including drugs. Consequently, researchers such as Hales (2016) argue that stop and search is an inefficient tool for taking knives from those involved in knife carrying.

Overall, it would appear that there is an ignorance demonstrated by the state regarding research on the effectiveness of this method (Andell, 2023). Interestingly, a Home Office evaluation of Operation Blunt 1 observed that despite the significant increase in stop and searches carried out by the Metropolitan Police and their use of s60 (McCandless et al, 2016), it did not lead to an increase in arrest rates. Despite, this there is increased government support for the expansion of stop and search and associated powers through the continued use of s60 searches and the introductions of SVROs which should also be explored.

In this regard it is argued that the state has not sought to exclusively examine the efficacy of stop and search with regards to achieving crime prevention. Instead, the Home Office have

prioritised conducting research to uncover public perception on the supposed effectiveness of stop and search, with almost half of the 5000 participants strongly agreeing with the notion that it was considered an effective crime prevention and detection method (Home Office, 2014). Knife crime recording practices, via the additional offence of aggravated possession, may help facilitate the illusion that stop and search, is effective (Williams and Squires, 2021).

It is important to recognise the negative effects of stop and search. In Chapter 1, § 1.0 , a continuing controversy around use of stop and search was discussed, namely that black people face a significantly greater likelihood of being stopped by the police in comparison to the rest of the population (Bradford, 2017; Home Office, 2017b), with the most recent data in year ending March 2024, demonstrating that the disparity rate is 5 times greater (Gov UK, 2024c). It should be recognised that this prevention method has been heavily criticised since the 1970s on the basis of there being racial profiling (ibid). Research has uncovered historical use of this method in neighbourhoods with black and ethnic populations, of which a number of police operations have targeted black youth on the premise of suspected involvement in gangs and youth violence (Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Williams, 2015). It has been argued by some scholars that there is a history of *"disrespectful policy practices"* which influence the conduct between police and racialised youth (Delgado and Stefancic, 2007).

Over-policing of black communities has a long history; the painting of knife crime as a Black crime post 2006, has arguably been utilised to justify the over policing of black communities (Williams and Squires, 2021) on the basis that it was in the interests of black youth. Indeed, the media, continually perpetuated this assertion, the use of stop and search is to protect those deemed most at risk of knife crime victimisation (e.g., Bailey, 2006, see earlier discussion in Chapter 1, § 1.0 on this issue). Black men have become increasingly targeted by police through stop and search despite the existence of evidence available at the time which indicated that the majority of knife crime carriers were white men (TPHQ, 2004).

This discrepancy over the use of S1 PACE has been prevalent over many years, but there is also considerable contention over the use of s.60 searches. It is argued that use of s.60 demonstrates *"twice the rate of racial disproportionality compared with s.1 searches"* (Williams and Squires, 2021, p. 183). The disproportionate level of stop and search and institutional racism within the police is now broadly evidenced (Macpherson, 1999; Palmer, 2023). Although section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 provides police officers with the right to carry out a search in instances where they suspect serious violence might be carried out (Andell, 2023). The practice of this power has enabled the police to continue to target and discriminate against ethnic minorities (ibid).

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has asserted that stop and search practices have been utilised in discriminatory and illegal instances (EHRC, 2010), with the London Met Police being observed to have been acting illegally with regards to section 44 searches. Following this observation, Williams and Squires (2021) suggested that the Metropolitan police reduced its use of section 60 searches in anticipation of a further legal challenge, in relation to a specific search mechanism instead (a fact inadvertently revealed by the former Deputy Met Police Commissioner in a letter accidentally disclosed). Therefore, it can be recognised that the Metropolitan Police themselves were aware of potential illegality and discriminatory usage of this method. Despite this, from 2017 onwards there has been an increase in section 60 searches.

It is concerning that the Home Office continues to allow increasing numbers of officers to carry out such searches in the absence of requiring reasonable grounds (Home Office, 2022e). Studies have found that reasonable grounds for conducting the search were not clear in at least 1 in 6 searches, and it has been argued that this can entrench perceptions of unfairness (Keeling, 2017). In London, the Metropolitan Police Service has used this approach to a greater extent compared to other police services across the country and it has been argued that this approach has been relied upon far too heavily and there has been a lack of focus on methods such as neighbourhood policing .

It is the use of stop and search that has had a negative impact upon numerous social groups and police/community relations (Keeling, 2017). In the UK, this is indicated by numerous research studies on the effect of stop and search upon trust in police, in poorer deprived neighbourhoods. The extent to which people and communities provide information to the police is dependent upon whether they have a fair perception of police and how they exercise powers (Bradford, 2015). The increased use of stop and search post-2007 has been severely criticised for causing irreparable damage to police and community relations (Williams and Squires, 2021).

The broader effects of this practice on individuals and communities also need to be recognised. For instance, there is research which found that aggressive stops and police violence contributed towards PTSD (Geller et al, 2014). In turn, there is the capacity to inflict a collective trauma through demonstrations of police hostility to particular groups (McGuffey and Sharpe, 2015). In addition, research suggests that if a person's interactions with the police are perceived to be unfair, this reduces a young person's faith in police, resulting in hostile attitudes to policing, a lack of respect for the law, and even, in some cases, the viewing of crime and violence as a viable option to achieve their goals (Jackson et al, 2012).

To surmise, despite its continued usage and growth of implementation, it can be said that stop and search methods have very little impact upon knife crime prevention (McNeill and Wheller, 2019) and inversely leads to distrust of police and law enforcement and the legal system. Indeed, this is connected to over-policing of the black community and negative consequence of labelling young black men as criminally deviant (Palmer, 2023). Additionally, it has been argued that stop and search is ineffective in tackling knife crime since it does not address the risk factors and underlying causes of offending and may have the opposite effect of potentially increasing offending (McVie, 2010). Specifically, research has demonstrated that previous victimisation or experiencing trauma increases the likelihood of committing knife crime. Overall, there are significant concerns about the prevalence of institutional racism, racial stereotyping and discrimination with regards to the policing of black communities (Miller 2023; Palmer, 2023).

Indeed, a key barrier to effective policing concerns the continual prevalence of these issues which hinders the overall efficacy of prevention policy. Despite the MacPherson Report many years ago, institutional racism continues to fuel 'policing of the crisis' as a racialised response to the state depiction of the knife crime phenomenon, through authoritarian and often unaccountable policing. Overall, the lack of integrity of the police as an institution hinders capacity to effectively facilitate more suitable crime prevention methods based upon community trust, particularly, within black communities, e.g., focused deterrence and neighbourhood policing (see later discussion on these methods in current section.

Nevertheless, authoritarian and discriminatory policing continue to shape enforcement methods for knife crime such as the use of Serious Violence Reduction Orders (Home Office, 2023a), which further expand stop and search powers**.** These orders are currently being piloted and have recently been introduced through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022; legislation which expands police stop and search powers. These orders can be made by a court in relation to any person over the age of 18 who has been convicted of a knife crime offence, allowing the individual to be stopped and searched (Home Office, 2023a). However, there is yet to be convincing evidence produced which assesses the effectiveness of this method. Nevertheless, it is argued that these orders and overall expansion of police stop and search powers, demonstrate increasing punitive and authoritarian police powers (Williams, 2023).

In support of this assertion, the use of SRVOs have been linked to the issue of ethnic disproportionality through use of the recent Live Facial Recognition (LFR) technology by the Metropolitan Police (Fussey and Murray, 2019 (Fussey and Murray, 2019). Concerns have been raised regarding the lawfulness of such technology (Andell, 2023) and possible racial

discrimination by operators of the system (Facial Working Group, 2019). It is contested that broader surveillance places a disproportionate degree of focus upon disadvantaged neighbourhoods who are targeted based upon ethnicity and race (Emple and Sprague, 2017). It is argued that the use of SRVOs facilitates more frequent stop and searches in ethnically diverse areas, which in turn, can lead to increased and disproportionate use of surveillance of the black demographic (Andell, 2023). The extent of surveillance in knife crime prevention is a changing and novel landscape which requires close attention.

This is further associated with the notion that police databases on gang members are mainly comprised of black or other ethnic minorities, although the majority of those convicted of serious violence are white (Williams and Clarke, 2016). It remains unclear as to why these police databases on gang members are predominantly composed of particular ethnic minorities (out of proportion to their existence in the overall population), when in fact the majority of those convicted of the serious violence offences are white.

Further enforcement and policing methods include the emergence of the Knife Crime Prevention Orders through the Offensive Weapons Act 2019. On 5th July 2021, the Metropolitan Police started a pilot in London of knife crime prevention orders for an initial period of 14 months (now extended beyond this date), with the intention for these powers to be implemented across England and Wales. The overall aim of the orders is to prevent high risk individuals from harming others and to also support earlier intervention methods that give people opportunities outside of crime, along with protecting those vulnerable to exploitation by gangs (Home Office, 2021a). KCPOs are court orders which the police obtain from the courts to be imposed upon youths as young as 12, where the police believe that they are involved in carrying knives, alongside those who have also been convicted of knife crime offences (Home Office, 2021b).

Courts can issue KCPOs to people with or without a conviction. Normally, police will inform individuals that they are seeking a KCPO from the court for them. Yet, section 16 of the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 allows for the KCPOs to be given without notice if there are exceptional or urgent circumstances. A KCPO has many effects, consisting of curfews being imposed, use of social medial being restricted, travel restrictions, as well as bans from carrying knives. In addition, there are also further conditions such as requirements to attend educational courses, sports clubs, counselling, anger management, mentoring and drug rehabilitation (ibid). Furthermore, in relation to youths aged under 18, applications are made to the Youth Court, and Youth Offending Teams are involved where there are KCPOs being given to children. It should be noted that the results of the pilot have not yet been released, demonstrating that there is continual debate over their effectiveness in reducing knife crime.

Nonetheless, at this stage, this thesis contends that the use of KCPOs appear to build upon the state's criminalisation of younger people with consistent references to schools and Youth Offending teams (Williams and Squires, 2021). The consequences of breaching orders may involve invoking custodial sentences under section 142 of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Act 2012 (which created the offence of aggravate possession). This offence imposes mandatory custodial sentences for second offences of 6 months for adults, and 4 months for those aged 16 and 17. In addition to this, use of cautions for knife possession were limited (Ministry of Justice, 2016). The consequences of these measures ultimately led to an increased number of those convicted facing custodial offences (ibid). Additionally, at this stage they have been criticised on the basis that they are used to *"explicitly target children, unduly affect Black children, and are disproportionate, stigmatizing and restrictive"* (Hendry, 2022, p. 382).

In the study of KCPOs, Williams and Squires (2021) have argued that they are a contemporary manifestation of ASBOs that were introduced at the start of the 21st century. ASBOs constitute *"An order containing conditions prohibiting the offender from specific anti-social acts or entering defined areas and is effective for a minimum of two years"* which can be issued against anyone over 10 years *old* (ibid, p. 9). ASBOs became a prominent policing method utilised against youth, increasing from 104 utilised in 1999 to 4122 being used in 2005 (Berman, 2009). Furthermore, breaches of ASBOs often led to custodial sentences (Squires and Stephen, 2005). The contention regarding the usage of this early enforcement intervention method concerned the criminalisation of anti-social behaviour, which was not regarded as prosecutable crime prior to 1997, and the disproportionate excessive use of punitive measures via custodial sentencing. Overall, KCPOs need to be contextualised within an awareness of the historical increased criminalisation of younger people. This is a key concern which runs at odds with the rehabilitative ideologies of a purported public health approach.

Overall, these practices are indicative of a state attempt to focus enforcement prevention in a discriminatory fashion, against the younger demographic, in particular, young black men. Arguably, this has also arisen due to mischaracterisations by the media, reflected in the implementation of overall prevention policy (Haylock et al, 2020). Knife crime researchers have warned that any enforcement policy must not be used in a way that targets and discriminates between particular groups, due to stereotypes regarding ethnicity and gender (Haylock et al 2020; Williams and Squires, 2021). Yet, enforcement interventions are illustrative of these patterns and such interactions may detrimentally affect the psychosocial maturity (PSM) of a young person and hinder their attainment of future opportunities (Schaefer and Erickson, 2019).

Turning to the issue of custodial sentencing being increasingly used as a prevention method. There have been changes to knife crime sentencing in the pursuit of deterrence through harsher and increased severity. Knife crime possession offences involving prison sentences for longer than 6 months have been increasing from 2009, with a corresponding decrease in community sentences and cautions (Ministry of Justice,2018b). From 2013 the number of knife crime possession charges have increased, along with an increase in use of a sentence or immediate custody. Effectively, a prison sentence is now the primary punishment for this offence (ibid).

The Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 established a 'two strikes' rule where those over 18 who have been convicted of knife carrying on more than one occasion, obtain a sentence of 6 months to 4 years. In relation to adolescents aged 16 and 17 who have been convicted more than once of knife carrying, they are to be handed a minimum 4-month detention, and also receive a training order (ibid; Grimshaw and Ford, 2018).

In general, it is unclear if the harsher sentencing has the intended deterrent effect upon the rate of knife crime possession offences, moreover the effects of harsher sentencing have been challenged in multiple research studies (Mews et al 2015; Barnett and Fitzalan Howard, 2018). In addition to this, as the prison population of younger offenders has increased due to the harsher sentencing, the prisons and probation services have also questioned the current safety at these prisons and describe young offender institutions as reaching a crisis (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2017, 2018 and 2022; Ministry of Justice,2018c). Contemporary issues with prisons such as severe overcrowding, absence of prison spaces and subsequent early release of prisoners, demonstrates the dire circumstances of our current prison system (House of Commons, 2024f).

This inclination of policy towards harsher sentencing is arguably problematic. At the surface level, this policy will gain public traction due to the emphasis on deterrence and the harsher sentencing rhetoric. However, these initiatives are concerning since they enunciate the rhetoric of penal populism and popular punitivism. An increase in custodial sentencing (and indeed longer custodial sentencing) has resulted in an increased prison population (Cavadino and Dignan, 2013). While traditionally associated with the Conservative Party, the approach of the New Labour government (1997-2010) seemed also to endorse this approach, shifting away from their previous welfarist stance. Overall, Labour rhetoric does not provide any indication that views towards increased use of custodial sentencing are shifting (Labour 2024a; Labour 2024b).

This is of concern since it has been found that increased custodial sentencing is ineffective in reducing reoffending, in contrast to youths aged 10 to 18 provided with non-custodial

punishments such as community interventions and victim reparation (Marsh et al, 2009; McNeil and Wheller, 2019). For instance, in 2021 *"Juvenile offenders given youth cautions or released from custody had differing proven reoffending rates, at 22.8% and 66.7% respectively"* (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Additionally, there are concerns in relation to the racial discriminatory use of custodial sentencing since scholars have argued that deviance and crime have continually been racialised, which is also reflected in use of punishment (Miller, 2023; Phillips et al, 2019). For instance, the pursuit of excessively severe punishment to satiate public demands built on stereotypes (Cox, 2018; Gilroy, 2008). This is illustrated by the fact that Black and Asian men are more likely to be given longer sentences in comparison to others (Prison Reform Trust, 2024), and that black people constitute 12% of the prison numbers despite being only 4% in the population (House of Commons, 2024c).

In contrast, alternative ideologies and methods of non-custodial punishment are also being considered as punishments, such as community supervision, community surveillance, and restorative justice, which are increasingly becoming incorporated in our criminal justice system (Hobson et al, 2022). It is suggested that these have the potential to reduce offending since the victim may become less likely to pursue retribution from the offender, or exercise retaliatory violence (Strang et al 2013; Livingstone et al, 2013). Restorative justice aims to bring together the opposing parties, focusing on those impacted by the event (Rossner 2017). Programmes bring victims and offenders together in an a controlled environment in order to address the problem and discuss possible future directions (Hobson et al, 2022).The positive outcomes include an inherent focus upon *"supporting victims to understand and overcome the harm they have experienced; help offenders to appreciate the impact of their actions and in doing so consider their wider offending behaviour; and, where available, engage communities to support both victims and offenders in moving forward"* (Hobson et al, 2022, p.1).

Due to these benefits, there have been calls for its use as an alternative to punishment for certain knife crime offenders (Youth Select Committee, 2019) since it arguably has the effect of reducing recidivism for youth violence (Hobson et al, 2022). However, it is argued that restorative justice initiatives have been inconsistently applied by the police (Banwell-Moore, 2022) and not consistently employed by Youth Offending Teams when handling young offenders (Hoyle and Rosenblatt, 2016).

An additional contemporary enforcement method in tackling violence is known as 'pulling levers' otherwise known as 'focused deterrence', inspired through use in the United States (Braga et al, 2018). It entails an inherent criminal justice focus upon those deemed to be at risk of offending (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; McNeill and Wheler, 2019), where there is more targeted strict enforcement with repeat offenders. This approach was also used in Scotland

by their Violence Reduction Unit, which was said to impact upon knife carrying in Scotland (Williams et al, 2014). This approach consists of multi-agency working where there is extensive involvement between the practitioners, social services and law enforcement. There is also analytical work used to identify the offenders and common behaviours. The creation of a variety of interventions in relation to knife crime offenders is used to enable them to access relevant services, and to develop criminal justice approaches. Finally, there are also examples of effective communication with potential knife crime offenders. These include 'warning and advice', making the individuals aware that they would be subject to criminal justice punishment if they engage in this form of offending, along with offering opportunities to those at risk of offending, i.e., jobs, education (ibid). Overall, it has been argued by researchers McNeill and Wheller (2019) that prevention and intervention approaches appearing most effective, include the US 'Pulling Levers' approach since it seeks to focus on the underlying root causes of violence (ibid).

Consequently, the approach has been piloted in London, although without any encouraging conclusions. For instance, the London Pathway's initiative in 2009 sought to reduce gang violence in 3 boroughs in London. Yet, the initiative was poorly implemented, for instance, the police ended up dealing with many individuals who had no criminal convictions (Dawson and Stanko, 2013).

In follow up, in 2014, the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) was piloted in London 'Operation Shield', using aspects from the ceasefire model in the USA that focused upon communities collectively calling for an end to violence within their communities, as well as providing opportunities to leave the gang (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). However, this approach involved a lack of community involvement and increasing opposition to the initiative since it was perceived as a form of collective punishment, which the community resisted. It was further contended that "*Police activity appeared uncoordinated, with unrelated strands of operational response. Community involvement was halting, amid signs of resistance*." (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018, p. 18). It was further contended that the emphasis and rhetoric of perceived punishment mitigated any positive effects of the programme. Overall, an evaluation of the operation found that there was no clear impact upon the behaviour of the targeted individuals and the violence in the piloted boroughs (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018). In light of the aforementioned issues, the Centre for Social Justice in 2018 criticised Operation Shield, on the basis that it did not sufficiently follow the focused deterrence model. Furthermore, there has been a review of 12 examples of earlier deterrence interventions in London focusing upon reducing youth and gang violence, and the review could not confirm that the desired impact upon behaviour was achieved (McMahon, 2013).

Additionally, in relation to the three London Boroughs used for a pilot of a focused deterrence method inspired by Scotland (Davies et al, 2016). The pilot studies did not find any effect on violent offence rates in these boroughs. However, it is argued that this may have been due to omissions and weaknesses in the implementation of the approach since the pilot demonstrated that there needed to be *"mutual understanding, cooperation, and support from all agencies"* (McNeill and Wheller, 2019, p. 3). Davies et al (2016) further argues there needs to be a consideration on whether the USA Pulling Levers approach is directly applicable to the UK due to differences in rates of crime and the extent of gang involvement (ibid), consequently there is a need to account for these differences.

Overall, further considering the reasons behind the failure of the focused deterrence in England and Wales, the studies discussed above demonstrate that focused deterrence initiatives which attempted to provide diversionary activities, employment and education have failed in London, due to lack of police trust and poor relationships with local communities. Consequently, it is necessary to raise awareness of the negative repercussions for police collaborations with non-enforcement interventions (Wilkinson et al, 2024). There are also clearly police implementation challenges in carrying out focused deterrence in England and Wales due to police racial bias concerning gang identities. For instance, in relation to London, it has been demonstrated that the that there has been racial basis in the overrepresentation of black people in the Metropolitan Police Gangs Matrix database (Scott, 2017). The effect of this racial bias prevents an effective pulled levers approach since it results in discrimination and the inevitable alienation of communities. Additionally, any implementation of focused deterrence requires an awareness of institutional racism (Gaffney et al, 2021).The YEF have argued that a key caveat concerning the focused deterrence approach concerns the clarity in ensuring that individuals in communities are chosen on the basis of their offending and not racial stereotypes. It should not be utilised as a method for justifying excessive stop and searches of ethnic minorities (ibid). See Grimshaw and Ford 2018, McNeil and Wheller, 2019; Gaffney et al, 2021, YEF, 2024 for further discussions on the efficacy of focused deterrence and issues in its implementation in England and Wales.

Overall, despite the aforementioned issues discussed above, this thesis recognises that there may be potential in focused deterrence with the Youth Endowment Fund, providing the method with a 'High' rating (Gaffney et al, 2021; Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). If we compare with the focused deterrence initiatives carried out in Scotland (see relevant discussions in section 5.2), it has been argued that there is sufficient evidence for this approach being worthwhile (Braga and Weisburd, 2011). In their GVI there was a significant emphasis upon providing pathways out of gangs, facilitating police trust and implementing consequences for those involved. However, despite its potential, its effectiveness depends upon the manner of its

application, since the discussions above have demonstrated a range of issues in its application in England and Wales. Consequently, any potential is dependent upon the manner and awareness of the aforementioned challenges currently hindering its effectiveness in England and Wales.

Additionally, despite, the YEF's 'High Rating' (YEF, 2024), it is conceded that there needs to be further evaluations of focused deterrence interventions in the England and Wales, in light of local issues, to identify their effects on reducing crime and in particular reducing the involvement of those engaging in gangs and county lines. (Gaffney et al, 2021). Beyond this, there is also a further need to recognise that the state's focus on punitive crime prevention measures, detrimentally counters and contradicts the theoretical underpinnings of a public health ideology, whilst eroding trust in policing. This is a key component for any focused deterrence initiative to be successful.

The generic policing model of community policing is also being used to tackle knife crime. This is a form of policing where the aim is to facilitate cooperation between the community and the respective police force since this makes it easier for the police to protect potential victims and identify potential offenders (HMIC, 2008). This is mainly demonstrated through a method known as neighbourhood policing which began in 2005, involving police officers and PCSO groups who focused upon patrolling a specific area. In 2003 to 2005 this method was piloted through the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP) leading to a national roll out of neighbourhood policing in 2005 (ibid). Overall, it has been argued that this model of policing facilitates police trust in communities, through the police developing relationships and gaining understanding of potential offenders of crime (Olisa, 2021).

Expanding upon the benefits of the approach, a review in policing in 2008 had reiterated its importance, focusing upon a partner-based strategy with regards to community policing (Flanagan, 2008). It was construed as a facilitation of 'policing by consent' which has significant crime prevention potential, especially in areas with higher levels of crime, where public trust and consent in policing were already quite difficult (Longstaff et al, 2015). A community policing strategy would facilitate more effective intelligence gathering which would generate more effective solutions (Turley et al, 2012). In terms of the effectiveness of this method, it was considered to be a contributing factor towards the reduction in crime in London during 2011, along with a positive public perception of this method (Higgins, 2018). Clearly the method would appear to have a positive impact in facilitating public trust in the police. It is hoped therefore, that greater use of this policing method can be further employed in the future. It has also been argued that neighbourhood policing facilitates the effectiveness of alternative policing methods such as stop and search targeting important high-level criminals. Due to it

strengthening community relations in high crime neighbourhoods, facilitating understanding and support within communities, for non-discriminatory use of policing measures (Higgins, 2018).

In 2004, the government at the time set out its ambition for effective neighbourhood policing throughout England and Wales, with the Safer Neighbourhood Policing being implemented in London in that year. Ambitious claims were made for the presence of neighbourhood policing teams (Olisa, 2021). The Home Office reiterated that engagement of local communities with the police was dependent upon their perceptions of having positive interactions with the police, and that their concerns would be addressed (Olisa, 2021).

However, it needs to be recognised that there are a range of issues which have hindered its implementation and efficacy. The overall efficacy of neighbourhood policing has been historically undermined by policing cuts. In the time period of austerity, the reduction in policing personnel led to the end of the National Neighbourhood Policing Strategy (NPS) (Williams and Squires, 2021). In 2010, Home Secretary Theresa May began to effectively dismantle the extent and efficacy of the programme through limiting its capacity. For instance, scrapping the previous NPS commitment of police officers needing to spend 80% of their time on patrolling neighbourhoods, (Travis, 2010), effectively removing a key component of the NPS. The police warned neighbourhood patrolling would likely reduce and this in turn would impact crime prevention (Williams and Squires, 2021). Consequently, it is argued that *"there was no dispute that once the Neighbourhood Police Teams were withdrawn and high visibility policing scaled back as cuts and competing police priorities began to take effect, gun crime, knife crime and gang-related violence all appeared to tick upwards once again"* (ibid p. 224). In addition, *"The rolling back of a national new neighbourhood policing strategy was widely interpreted as the catalyst for a resurgence of youth violence, gang activity and knife crime*" (ibid, p. 334). Overall, the current state of neighbourhood policing provides cogent evidence of a less effective criminal justice system, due to state actions in undermining its practice (Squires, 2024).

The effectiveness of community policing has been questioned, given that police culture may influence police interactions with those from ethnic minorities (Olisa, 2021). In particular, a key issue concerns the history of racial discrimination, stereotyping and institutional racism within the police (Palmer, 2023). The current state of affairs has reached a point where black communities are reluctant to report crimes to the police due to lack of trust (Palmer, 2023). Furthermore, a key characteristics of neighbourhood policing involves patrolling and maintaining a street presence. It has been observed that some police officers were fearful of patrolling particular neighbourhoods (Foster et al, 2005). Consequently, the police would often adopt methods involving increased police presence in these areas in response to small events;

such examples of overreaction led to aggressive interactions with black youth (ibid). Reiner refers to this as the police treating these groups as 'police property' (Reiner, 2000; Olisa, 2021). This police behaviour in turn culminates in a response amongst black youth illustrative of resentment and opposition to them (ibid). The marginalisation of black communities by the police (Olisa, 2021) results in an overall distrust of the organisation.

Overall, a key barrier to achieving effective community policing concerns the significantly damaged relationship between predominantly ethnic minority communities and the police. Youth from ethnic minorities have an increasing likelihood to be perceived as suspicious by the police based on stereotyping (Keeling, 2017). This means they face increased likelihood of being placed in custody compared to their white counterparts (Holt et al, 2019) and have a higher likelihood of facing prosecution, rather than being given a warning (EHRC, 2016). These issues are collectively informing a lack of trust in the police and the broader criminal justice system (Gwata, 2024). Consequently, in order to reap the benefits of community policing in crime prevention, there needs to be renewed commitment to tackle racially discriminatory police practices .

With regards to the future of neighbourhood policing, Labour have made their ambitions clear in seeking to put forward a 'neighbourhood policing guarantee' in which there will be a supposed hiring of *"thousands"* of police officers (Labour, 2024b). Labour's manifesto appears to reiterate the significance of this policing prevention method. Furthermore, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has recently announced a range of supposed major policing reforms (Gov.uk 2024d) involving increased funding for the police, including intended resources for increased neighbourhood policing (ibid).

There is further recognition of lack of community trust in policing (ibid) and the importance of restoring trust. Despite this, there is a lack of government awareness concerning the prevalence of authoritarian policing measures, their discriminatory usage and detrimental impact upon trust in police. Consequently, the continued usage and expansion of police powers are of considerable concern in limiting the efficacy of other methods of prevention such as neighbourhood policing.

A further policy approach involves use of knife amnesties**,** whilst these are non-enforcement interventions, they are primarily organised by the police, accordingly they are explored in the current section. Police forces across the UK frequently declare 'knife amnesties' which provide opportunities for knives to be discarded at set locations without repercussions. The current police data on amnesties has indicated that their effect upon knife crime is either *"limited or short term"* (Metropolitan Police Service, 2006). For example, limitations of knife amnesties include the fact that they do not provide any information about the motivations for knife carrying

or the overall availability of knives on the streets (Eades et al, 2007). Notably, there is an absence of evidence on whether knife amnesties reduce crime. The Metropolitan Police carried out an assessment of 5-week national knife amnesty in 2006 and observed a *"marginal decrease"* in knife crime lasting for 8 weeks (Metropolitan Police Service, 2006). However, in this assessment, the MPS could not establish if other non-police interventions may have contributed towards this marginal decline (Eades et al, 2007). Accordingly, knife amnesties, otherwise referred to as knife surrender initiatives, are limited in terms of their effectiveness in relation to reducing crime (Gaffney et al, 2022). Consequently, it is argued that police amnesties have little positive impact upon knife crime reduction (McNeil and Wheller, 2019; Browne et al, 2022).

In determining the effectiveness of these particular methods of reducing and preventing offending, various studies have examined the impact of the current methods and approaches being used. Firstly, primary interventions such as Operation Blade and the Tackling Knives and Serious Youth Violence Action Programme (TKAP) have included commonly used methods such as stop and search and non-enforcement interventions such as knife amnesties. However, research has demonstrated an ineffectiveness of both Operation Blade and TKAP (Ward et al, 2011) since they did not have a significant effect upon any reduction in knife crime (Browne et al, 2022). Consequently, the argument has been made, that methods such as stop and search, knife amnesties and mass media campaigns are ineffective at prevention (ibid).

Overall, however, this thesis contends that a continuing issue concerning the prevention policy appears to the discriminatory use of prevention methods against black ethnic minorities (see earlier discussions on racialisation of knife crime and gang involvement and discriminatory policing). This thesis contends that these prevention practices contribute towards the racialisation of the knife crime phenomenon. The state-driven moral panic on knife crime is being utilised to justify the inclusion of authoritarian policing practice. For instance, harsher sentencing, stop and search, increased surveillance, KCPOs, and SVROs were discussed as key examples. Consequently, the racialisation of knife crime prevention policy in order to achieve state desired policy outcomes is a pressing problem which requires investigation. It is therefore necessary to contextualise the analysis above on prevention policy within an awareness of the state's construction of the knife crime moral panic, as a means to facilitate the introduction of punitive measures discussed.

Additionally, in section 5.1, it was noted that the public health ideology is perceived to support enforcement measures rather than hinder it (Frisby-Osman and Wood, 2020; Gwata et al, 2024). This section has demonstrated that some law enforcement measures have the capacity to support public health ideology., e.g., community policing, focused deterrence, non-custodial

sentencing. Overall, however, the state's punitive, discriminatory and ineffective use of criminal justice measures summarised in the previous paragraphs, clearly demonstrates that criminal justice measures are not being effectively utilised to support public health ideologies.

In light of the analysis above, it is clear that the current prevention policy is not entirely reflective of a public health ideology. It has been demonstrated that there are contradictions, inconsistences and omissions with regards to the overall framework being utilised. Consequently, it is inaccurate to label the policy as a public health approach, despite the state's continued usage of this terminology. It remains to be seen if the recently elected Labour government will continue to facilitate penal populism or whether an alternative approach will be pursued. As part of the latter, there should be a consideration of key policy recommendations necessary for both enforcement and non-enforcement interventions, in order to improve the effectiveness of crime prevention strategies.

Chapter 6: Conclusion Chapter

6.0: Chapter Overview

This chapter seeks to review research findings from the thesis to see whether the overall aims and objectives have been met. Section 6.1 will revisit the research aims and provides an analysis of the key findings of the thesis, outlining their explanatory potential and the overall contribution to the knife crime literature and policy development. Section 6.2 will provide a consideration of limitations to the research and future research and policy directions.

6.1: Discussions and Findings

This thesis has argued that the political economy concept has significant explanatory potential to the study of knife crime. Chapter 2 provided a brief history of the political economy lens and its application to the study of crime more generally. Particular attention was focused on *The New Criminology* and the social theory of deviance which employed the political economy concept. For the purposes of this thesis, it was argued that this theory in itself was insufficient to explain knife offending; adaptation was necessary to provide a contemporary socioeconomic knife crime perspective. Two perspectives were outlined as being relevant, namely a 'political economy of knife crime act' and 'political economy of knife crime reaction.' These interpretations of the concept informed the focus of study, the design of research aims, objectives and questions.

In formulating the political economy perspective, the first research aim was to understand how 'Knife Crime' is defined and understood within government, policy and media. In short, a political economy perspective on knife crime can help us to expose the lack of attention afforded to the role of the state in its depiction of the problem, and its contribution to creating factors relevant to knife crime. A political economy interpretation of the knife crime act, *"requires an examination of the extent and nature of the Act itself, informed by the state's depiction*" (Chapter 2 of thesis, § 2.3). This further requires an examination of the reaction to the depiction of the offence, (political economy of knife crime reaction perspective) to *"analyse the state's depiction of the offence, evaluating the extent of its accuracy, and the agendas driving its depiction*" (ibid).

Consequently, Chapter 1 provided an examination of the state definition of knife crime, focusing on potential distortion of the extent and nature of the problem. It explained how the state has generated a moral panic around knife crime as a racialised youth problem. Four central demographic factors were highlighted as key in the state's depiction namely age, race, gender and socioeconomic background. In contrast to the state depiction, it was shown that knife crime occurs in range of different settings, across different age groups, and different ethnic groups. The continued state focus on young black men forms part of a legacy where

the state has historically made use of the media to facilitate moral panics against this minority group as perpetrators of street criminality. This focus has particular benefits in driving populist prevention and reaction policies which have facilitated more punitive prevention methods and hasher custodial sentencing. Simultaneously, the state has created (or failed to address) economic structural barriers which act as key underlying causes in involvement of young people in knife crime. Racialised depictions of offending are linked to the growth of racism, xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment: the recent far right riots are indicative of anti-migrant sentiment and the othering of ethnic minority groups as criminals.

Whilst acknowledging that youth involvement in knife crime has been exaggerated, it is nevertheless clear that youth knife is a significant social problem. As such, the second research aim was to examine key explanations behind their involvement. In addition to explaining state depictions of the extent and nature of the problem, including who the perpetrators are, *"there is a need to examine the range of explanations for offending such as underlying causes and motivations. Within this account, placing an emphasis upon the economic whilst also appreciating that it is part of a complex interplay with other domains/categories of explanations; such as individual, cultural, psychological, relationship, peer-group, community and social."* (Chapter 2, § 2.3).

Chapter 2 sought to illustrate how the notion of political economy can be used as a valuable tool to better understand the reasons behind young peoples' involvement in knife crime. The chapter illustrated how the concept has been applied in a general sense to explain crime and delinquency, analyse various forms of offending behaviour and crime more generally, ranging from classic sociological works such as *Anomie* (Merton,1938), its emergence within radical criminology more generally during the 1970s (Taylor et al, 1973; Hall et al, 1978) and more contemporary accounts of its relevance to the current moral panic surrounding knife crime specifically (Williams and Squires 2021; Williams, 2023). It was argued that political economy can be a particularly useful explanatory tool not simply because of its inherent focus upon structural economic factors, but also because it considers them as "*part of a complex set of interdependencies with individual, moral, cultural, and other social dimensions."* (Reiner 2012, p. 2).

Three significant advantages were identified in developing a political economy of knife crime. Firstly, such a framework provides a more complete understanding of current prevention methods and provides a more expansive account of necessary policy recommendations. Secondly, it provides a contemporary account of the key socioeconomic issues facing youth in recent times, including understanding the role of the state in the exacerbation of these

problems. Thirdly, it provides better insights into the allure of gangs and county lines which are perceived as viable illegitimate alternatives for economic survival.

In accordance with the second research aim, Chapter 3 examined a range of explanations for youth knife crime offending including underlying causes, risk factors and motivational factors which act as the evidence base for this study. It was demonstrated that there is no single underlying cause of knife crime perpetrated by young men. Rather, it can be attributed to a range of risk factors within five domains of society, the community, the individual, the peer group, and relevant relationships. It was found that the economic challenges that young men face within these settings, and the failure of the state to address them, act as important explanatory factors which are often underplayed in dominant narratives.

Specific economic risk factors that can act as underlying drivers of violence include inequality, deprivation, emergence of gangs and drug markets. Economic inequality is positively associated with knife crime which is arguably explained by the lack of social capital that offenders have, as well as a lack of trust in policing and government, in economically deprived communities. Material inequality often contributes towards the lack of legitimate opportunities which leads to some younger men carrying out self-destructive behaviours, including offending, particularly within such areas. Economic risk group factors often interact with peer group risk factors, spurring the emergence of gangs with social territorial identities generating group rivalries. The growth of gangs and the drugs market, including county lines, has opened viable economic opportunities within such areas, which are arguably much more lucrative than the unsecure employment opportunities afforded to those who are unskilled (see Chapter 3, § 3.1).

The chapter also identified four primary motivational factors; protection, self-presentation, utility and economic factors (see Chapter 3 § 3.2). These motivational factors often overlap and interact with risk factors and underlying causes. Whilst the thesis has made clear that there is no single motivational factor for knife crime, it argues that there is a need to consider economic influences within all four key motivational categories. A high emphasis is placed upon the importance of exposure to economic structural factors, albeit to differing extents. Exposure to economic structural factors is associated with a range of different offending motivations (see Chapter 3, § 3.2).

In accordance with the third research aim pertaining to examining the importance of economic structural barriers, Chapter 4 explored the socio-economic reality facing younger males in their pursuit of economic self-sufficiency and/or the cultural goals of success. Within this account there was a particular focus upon the factor of economic self-sufficiency, also identifying the economic cultural goals of success on a spectrum including poverty at one end, moving towards economic survival, then onwards towards wealth attainment and social mobility. The

idea of economic success for younger people in the state can largely be construed as achieving economic independence, long term financial security, and stability (although materialistic ambitions also play a role; Qasim, 2023a).

Key economic structural barriers were discussed, including poverty, economic deprivation, unemployment inequality, social immobility, educational challenges and lack of legitimate opportunities. The account illustrated the scale of these whilst also exploring the role of the state in exacerbating these problems (for example, through austerity). Black ethnic minorities communities are disproportionately exposed due to structural and institutional racism, within schooling, policing, prosecution and other public organisations (Miller, 2023; Palmer, 2023). Notwithstanding this, the involvement of young black men in knife crime has been highly exaggerated due to a moral panic generated by the state and through media.This state inspired moral panic on knife crime obfuscates attention from their accountability with regards to the growth of underlying economic causes. It was observed how, during the 2011 riots, the state quickly disregarded social unrest around state policies and policing as factors, instead choosing to depict the riots as being due to a youth criminal gang culture illustrative of a feral underclass. Despite evidence, demonstrating that the spread of the riots was influenced by concerns about economic deprivation and discriminatory policing (see § 4.2). A similar pattern has been utilised in relation to black urban youth through the racialisation of knife crime.

Structural barriers and economic hardships can embed a perception that illegitimate pathways offer more certain and immediate opportunities than traditional legitimate pathways. Moreover, many young people involved in these practices are victims of exploitation and coercion by those older and higher in the hierarchy, meaning that it is an inaccurate characterisation to blame young men themselves for the growth of these pathways. Rather, as Harding (2023) argues, there is a need for narratives to be reframed to emphasise the exploitation and coercion of young people. While the vast majority of young men do not resort to knife crime, those that do come from a range of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In light of the state's exaggerated and distorted focus on black young men, it is apparent that ongoing institutional racism, 'othering', and the exclusion of black people continue to act as important explanatory factors for the involvement of some of this demographic in gangs (see § 4.3).

The fourth research aim concerned understanding the nature and effectiveness of the knife crime policies and methods through examining the role of state. Punitive and populist policies placing an emphasis on crime reduction, policing, and sentencing are often used by the state to divert attention from their role in these problems, during times of controversy to reinforce a sense of 'law and order'. This helps explain how, in recent times, we are witnessing a preference towards an expansion of authoritarian punitive criminal justice measures against

younger people such as increased youth custody and further expansions in police powers via stop and search, KCPOs, SVROs and increased surveillance.

Current approaches to prevention where scrutinised in Chapter 5. Here it was argued that prevention policies labelled under the 'public health' banner are generally vague and contradictory in nature. They do not adhere to a public health ideology, as fundamental errors and inconsistences are evident in the way that are formulated. A fatal flaw concerns state reliance upon the existing evidence base of largely official and skewed statistics, which result in an inaccurate and largely racialised picture of the nature and scale of knife crime. This reliance must be challenged by contemporary research as it undermines and contradicts the requirements of an evidence-based public health framework, which can only be effective where it is based upon independent and systematic data analysis (WHO, 2014).

A further problem with the current so-called public health approach has been austerity and a general lack of funding for frontline services. The implementation of austerity measures by the consecutive Conservative governments resulted in reduction in police numbers, directly impacting neighbourhood policing and the effectiveness of other crime prevention and diversion initiatives. Despite the potential and benefits of neighbourhood policing and focused deterrence measures, the rolling back of neighbourhood policing and overall lack of community trust creates difficulties, undermining the effectiveness of crime prevention generally. The outsourcing of diversion services to private companies and other organisations, and the focus on youth crime more generally rather than knife crime more specifically, reflects how burdens and responsibilities have shifted away from central government, through placing legal obligations upon a variety of organisations and people. As it currently stands, policy is being used as a 'Trojan Horse' in order to aid in the expansion of authoritarian punitive criminal justice measures against young men (particularly young black men), as evidenced through the rise in expanded police powers via stop and search, KCPOs, SVROs, increased surveillance, and a rise in youth custody rates.

In terms of developing effective alternatives, at a political level the policy focus needs to shift away from punitivism towards an evidence-based public health approach. Public funds need to be reinvested in frontline services including community policing and focused deterrence and diversion initiatives. Exposure to risk factors can result in the development of motivational factors, which in turn can serve to engender or reinforce violent identities. As such, youth intervention measures need to focus upon the development of non-violent identities through addressing issues of fear and status as well as providing education and employment opportunities. In line with the political economy perspective, social and cultural factors must also be considered when thinking about the social identify formation of children. As such, the

role of ACEs, trauma, poor mental health, psychotic disorders and home environments should be at the centre of secondary and tertiary interventions. A renewed emphasis also needs to be placed upon restoring youth economic transitions via legitimate pathways such as education, apprenticeships and employment and a commitment to a genuine evidence-based public heath approach in order to tackle the root causes of knife crime.

6.2: Limitations and Future Directions

Despite demonstrating the significant explanatory potential of the political economy knife crime perspective and the policy recommendations outlined above, this thesis has limitations. A key criticism of the political economy has been its apparent insufficient focus on policy recommendations and its capacity to achieve them due to the distance between researchers (including the subsequent shift of radical criminologists) and policy makers. This thesis has mitigated this criticism through highlighting key issues with regards to the current prevention policy, examining its efficacy through identifying key problems which might be improved through a consideration of a political economy perspective and putting forward a range of recommendations in this regard, for both non-enforcement and enforcement interventions.

A further critique of the concept has been the realistic feasibility of idealistic recommendations posed by the political economy in its application to crime, such as the need to end poverty. However, this thesis reiterates that tackling the presence and growth of economic structural barriers should not be construed as impossible. Left realism has provided many influential works regarding knowledge gathering, data collection, victimisation surveys and explanatory frameworks for crime prevention such as the square of crime (explored in Chapter 2, § 2.1). Notwithstanding, this thesis has argued that there has been too little attention paid in the square of crime to the role of the state. In order to address this, there is arguably a need for the resurgence of radical criminology via the political economy perspective, in holding the state accountable for their inaccurate depiction of knife crime, their demonisation of youth, and to prevent attention being paid to their own role in failing to address the growth of poverty and economic structural barriers. In order to properly understand knife crime, the role of the state must assume a central focus.

Despite the state's exaggerated depiction of knife crime, this thesis has argued that the offence is not predominantly youth based. The current moral panic does not negate the reality of that some young people are involved in knife crime as offenders and victims. In order to explain this, the thesis has put forward a political economy of knife crime, including circumstances surrounding actions and reactions. Issues around youths that have been explored include possible rationalisations for offending, as well as knife crime risk and motivational factors. Although knife crime is frequently depicted as an act of young

economically disadvantaged male offenders in public places, any new strategy for tackling knife crime needs to encompass the full range of knife crime offenders and victims, including women and girls and older people across a variety of public and private spaces. Further research needs to examine these other domains of knife crime, since they remain relatively under explored, in part due to the state's fixation on youth.

Likewise, the impact of economic factors is not limited to the most economically deprived; the relationship between relative deprivation and crime is a phenomenon that affects all social classes (explored in Chapter 2, § 2.1). Despite the literature focusing on the economically deprived due to their increased exposure to economic structural barriers, there are likely younger people that are not economically deprived also engaging in gangs and county lines. There is a paucity of research which specifically explores middle class involvement in knife crime which means that it is difficult to get a sense of its scale or nature. As the public health model requires a comprehensive picture to develop effective interventions, this is also an area that future research could usefully consider.

Overall, this thesis does not claim to have put forward a 'complete' or 'finished' explanation of contemporary knife crime offending. Rather it provides a contribution to an ever-growing research area by informing the discussion through use of an alternative criminological theoretical lens. Consequently, it should also be appreciated that while the factors discussed have emerged as salient issues from existing literature, it is not claimed that they are exhaustive. This thesis has identified a range of contradictions and inconsistences in existing knife crime prevention policy and there is a need for further research to continue to build a new evidence base, to inform future policy. With Labour now in power, the future remains uncertain with regards to policy trajectory, underlining the need for current knife crime research to keep the spotlight fixed upon the actions of the state.

A critique of economic determinism can be levelled against structuralist perspectives, including the political economy. Economic determinism concerns the notion that structural economic factors are fundamentally acting as the determining forces for criminal behaviour, whilst downplaying the role of other factors such as relationship, individual and community (Reiner, 2012). This thesis has not suggested that economic factors operate in a deterministic way, rather that they may interact with certain social and cultural factors discussed above. As such, certain populations are exposed to higher risk factors, and the findings of this thesis align with contemporary research on youth gangs, county lines and knife crime, all of which point towards the importance and growth of economic structural barriers and their capacity in influencing the motivations for young people to engage in these pathways. Consequently, this thesis leans towards a structuralist perspective which appreciates individualism through

recognising the relevance and importance of rational choice, albeit from limited options. Nevertheless, the main focus is upon macro-level structural factors since these have arguably been long neglected. The state's continued focus on rational choice in their prevention policies and lack of recognition of the economic structural factors, necessitates a political economy perspective. Ultimately the lens of research into the problem of knife crime must continue to be widened to challenge the state's depiction, to expand our understanding, and to fully inform a renewed public health approach.

The political economy perspective has sometimes been criticised for placing insufficient focus upon the victim. In this thesis, the reality of victim experience has been acknowledged with regards to the level of serious harm inflicted upon victims, families, and communities. Additionally, there has been significant discussion of the relevance of the victim/offender overlap since many young people using knives in gangs and county lines environments are susceptible both to offending and victimisation. This is another pressing social issue which warrants further research and analysis.

This thesis has made the preliminary argument that structural barriers limit access to traditional legitimate means to economic attainment which (in part at least) explains recourse to involvement in the illegitimate drug market and financial opportunities within gangs. The structural barriers to economic survival require further exploration in terms of their nature, extent and most importantly how they are understood and interpreted. Further research is needed into how possible reactions to inequality, youth unemployment, poverty, and social immobility lead to knife crime pathways for some younger people. There is significant scope for further analysis and development of these factors in light of the fact the majority of poorer young people do not react to these factors in a manner which leads to deviancy, and those that do, are often exploited and coerced.

Overall, future research on knife crime should focus on the plight of the small minority of economically deprived younger men most at risk of knife crime offending, their economic goals and aspirations and why they feel the need to pursue illegitimate pathways to achieve their goals. Fundamentally, the answers to these questions have the capacity to significantly inform the effective design and implementation of primary, secondary and tertiary socioeconomic based interventions, mentoring and diversionary activities. Furthermore, when examining the structural barriers with regards to young black men, the relevance of institutional racism in exacerbating their exposure to structural barriers must be recognised. New research has the potential to shed further light upon these issues through engagement with critical theories and empirical research with young black men.

For researchers and policy makers alike, there is a compelling need to better understand the economic explanations behind the increased knife crime offending of younger men. The findings of this thesis have reiterated the importance of the economic in its various roles in influencing the existence and growth of this phenomenon. Future research into knife crime must consider economic factors as underlying causes and how increasing exposure to social and cultural risk factors exacerbate their effects.

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